

Jean Sibelius: *Lemminkäinen Suite*, No. 1, 2 & 4

As monarchies toppled across Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, peoples long suppressed sought to form new nations bound by common ethnicity, language, and culture. The revival of folk tales, poetry and myth played an important role in these nascent nationalisms. For Finnish speaking peoples, the epic poetry of the *Kalevala* preserved the founding myths of their culture. Long preserved in oral tradition, these stories were assembled into a single written narrative in the nineteenth century, when they became an important source of national pride. In 1893, Finnish composer Jean Sibelius, in a marvelous piece of fan fiction, sought to musicalize episodes from the *Kalevala* in a multmovement symphonic suite. While certainly “program music”—music with an accompanying narrative—Sibelius’s music is more impressionistic than literal. He once wrote “If I could express the same thing with words as with music, I would, of course, use a verbal expression. Music is something autonomous and much richer. Music begins where the possibilities of language end.”

Sibelius was a huge admirer of Richard Strauss’ programmatic music, especially of *Don Juan*, which followed the misadventures of the legendary lothario. As it turned out the *Kalevala* had a randy hero of its own in the character Lemminkäinen. In the first movement of Sibelius’s work, Lemminkäinen visits an island where all the men, strangely, are away for the moment. The women, “a thousand brides,” (and widows too) are quite happy to see him. After some revelry, the men return and our “hero” makes a quick exit. In the second movement, *The Swan of Tuonela*, Sibelius explores the fabled isle of the dead, Tuonela, located in the northernmost reaches of earth. Between this island and the land of the living flows a swift, black river where a mystical swan patrols the waters. Lemminkäinen is sent to kill the swan, but on his journey he’s felled by an arrow cast by an angry shepherd. Sibelius represents the swan in an unforgettable, haunting melody played on the English horn. Swans were held in particularly high regard by Sibelius. He wrote of his spiritual connection to the noble bird: “Millions of years ago, in my previous incarnations, I must have been related to swans...I can still feel that affinity.” While not programmed in today’s concert, movement three, *Lemminkäinen in Tuonela*, begins with the shepherd who shot Lemminkäinen throwing the hero’s body into the river. Angry to hear of the attempted murder of the swan, the son of the king of the underworld chops Lemminkäinen’s body into very small pieces. Not to worry, however—Lemminkäinen’s grieving mother travels to Tuonela, gathers the pieces, and resurrects our hero for further adventures. In the final movement, *Lemminkäinen’s Return*, our hero returns from battle and gets a true superhero welcome. Victorious and triumphant, Sibelius’s icy and noble music still dazzles us today.