



Sibelius and the *Kalevala*

Written by Stephen J. Trygar
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In the 19th Century, Finnish physician, philologist, and traditional Finnish oral poetry collector Elias Lönnrot collected Finnish poems, folklore, and myths of the oral tradition and compiled the *Kalevala* from his findings. Prior to the 18th Century, the *Kalevala* poems were popular amongst the people in Finland and Karelia. Most of the stories were only in the oral tradition, but the 17th Century saw a few folk poems being written down. By the 18th Century, these folk poems and myths began to fall out of favor due to the spread of European rhymed poetry spreading eastward. Lönnrot, seeing the treasures of his homeland disappearing, decided it was his duty to immortalize these stories that were so important to Finnish and Karelian culture.

Now, with the poems being officially written down, composers began to take advantage of them and setting the text to music or depicting the plot through operas, orchestral works, or other narrative-based/programmatic works. Jean Sibelius, Finland's most prominent composer, was among the most heavily influenced by the *Kalevala* and its poems. In his repertoire, Sibelius has twelve pieces influenced by the national epic in some way, and today I would like to share four of the most popular of those works. Many of the other works are smaller in size, taking a few lines of poetry to set to song. All the works below are orchestral works. While they all fit within a similar genre, they remain some of the composers most performed works outside his symphonies.

Kullervo, Op. 7 1891–92

Sibelius' early choral symphony *Kullervo* was only performed four times throughout the composer's lifetime. He refused to have the work published, but in 1957, at the end of his life, Sibelius gave permission to have it published posthumously. While the work was generally well received by the public, Sibelius' hesitation to publish the work may lie in the professional criticism and the controversial Finnish text. At the time, Finland was divided by Swedish nationalists, the Svecomans, and the promoters of the Finnish language and culture, the Fennomans. Since Sibelius' mother's native tongue was Swedish, the Svecomans targeted the young composer as a defector.

The work's program centers around the Kullervo cycle of the *Kalevala*. It covers Kullervo's story from his birth until his tragic death while specifically focusing on the accidental seduction of his biological sister and the battle he fights to atone for his crime. It is divided up into five movements; movements one, two, and four are instrumental, while movements three and five contain sung dialogue and utilize a male chorus as commentary.

I. Introduction: In this movement, Sibelius sets the stage by evoking the beautiful Finnish setting and the tumultuous and complex personality of Kullervo.

II. Kullervo's Youth: Kullervo's father and people have met devastation while at war with Untamo (Kullervo's uncle), but his parents still manage to give birth to him amidst the destruction. By three months old, Kullervo has grown significantly and vows to avenge the destruction of his father and his people. Untamo, worried for his own life and kingdom, attempts to kill the child. When murder is unsuccessful, Kullervo is given tasks that are designed to calm and busy him, but each task ends in making things worse for his evil uncle. Seeing that nothing has worked, Untamo sells the boy as a slave to the smith Ilmarinen. While enslaved, he goes to Ilmarinen's wife to ask for work. She sends him off to be a cowherd and she gives him a loaf of bread, which she has cruelly baked with a rock inside. Watching the animals in the field, Kullervo takes out his knife and attempts to cut into the bread. The knife hits the rock, and the knife breaks. Enraged, as the knife was the only keepsake he had from his lost people, Kullervo feeds the cattle to wolves and bears. He transforms the wolves and bears into cattle and brings them home. When he returns, Ilmarinen's wife approaches the herd to inspect Kullervo's work and to milk them. As she pulls on a teat of a cow, the herd returns to their original forms and attack the wife. She cries out to Kullervo for help, but he ignores her cries as she dies.

III. Kullervo and His Sister: Kullervo has returned home to his real family and begins working on their farm. Kullervo is hopeless and fails at every task he is given. His father sends him off to pay

taxes instead, and while on his journey, Kullervo meets three women. He attempts to seduce them with riches. He fails to attract the first two young maidens, but he successfully seduces the third. They sleep together and wake up side-by-side the following morning in his sleigh. They begin discussing their homes and their clans. As they talk, they realize that they are brother and sister. His sister, realizing the great shame she has brought upon herself and her family, jumps out of the sleigh and into a stream. She kills herself in the action, and Kullervo laments his crime and her death.

IV. Kullervo Goes to Battle: Kullervo prepares to do battle with Untamo. His mother begs him not to go, but he refuses and says that dying in battle is honorable. He hopes to both destroy Untamola and fall in battle to atone for his crime. He emerges from the battle victorious, but he has failed to die in battle.

V. Kullervo's Death: Kullervo has inadvertently stumbled upon the site where he raped his sister. He addresses his sword and asks it if it is willing to drink his guilty blood. The sword accepts, Kullervo points the sword at his heart, and he falls on it.

Lemminkäinen Suite (Four Legends from the Kalevala), Op. 22 1895 (r. 1897, 1939)

Originally projected as an opera titled *Veneen luominen (The Building of the Boat)* in the style of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, the suite's story is based on the Kalevala's heroic character Lemminkäinen. The suite contains four movements, and the first two were removed after the work's premiere in April of 1896. The withdrawn movements would not be performed again, or published with the rest of the score, until 1935. He revised the score twice: first in 1897 and then once again in 1939. The movements remained in their original order until 1947 when Sibelius switched the positions of the second and third movements, making *The Swan of Tuonela* the second movement.

The Swan of Tuonela is the most famous movement of the suite and often performed on its own. It was the first of the four movements to be written, and its original purpose was to be the prelude to *The Building of the Boat*. The other three movements can stand alone as tone poems, but they are less frequently performed outside of the suite. When discussing the program of the *Lemminkäinen Suite*, I will keep it in the order that Sibelius left it in his final revisions.

I. *Lemminkäinen and the Maidens of the Island (Lemminkäinen and the Maidens of Saari):* Lemminkäinen sets sail for an island refuge. After three days, he arrives at the island and asks the women there if there is room for him on the island. They allow him to take refuge, and offer him a house to live in. He sings to the maidens, who quickly fall in love with him. All the maidens, minus one strong-willed woman, have granted Lemminkäinen their favor, but the lonely woman curses him instead. The men of the island return home from war, and Lemminkäinen flees the isle from their rage.

II. *The Swan of Tuonela:* The movement paints a transcendental image of a swan gliding along the surface of the black waters of the river Tuoni.

III. *Lemminkäinen in Tuonela:* Lemminkäinen is in Tuonela to shoot the sacred swan. He has been tasked to do this by Louhi, mistress of Pohjola, to prove his strength and worth before marrying one of her daughters. Märkähattu, a blind herdsman, kills Lemminkäinen before he can kill the swan by

conjuring up a sea serpent. The serpent tears apart Lemminkäinen's body and drags the parts into the river. Shortly after, his mother learns of his death, and she travels to Tuonela to retrieve the pieces of her dead son. Upon reassembling the parts of her son, she receives help from a bee, who brings honey back from the heavens. With the honey, Lemminkäinen is resurrected from the dead.

IV. *Lemminkäinen's Return*: Lemminkäinen returns to Pohjola to exact his revenge for the attack of his people. He is joined by his friend Tiera, and together they set sail for battle. Louhi sends a frost to the waters surrounding the boat, and they become stuck, stranded, and frozen. Lemminkäinen confronts Pakkanen (the personification of frost) and tells him his story. Pakkanen takes pity on the man, and he subdues the frost enough for Lemminkäinen and Tiera to not freeze as they walk on the ice towards Pohjola. They go off into battle, and after their adventures, Lemminkäinen returns home.

Pohjolan tytär (Pohjola's Daughter), Op. 49 1906

Sibelius' *Symphonische Fantasie* was originally to be titled *Väinämöinen* after the character in the Kalevala the tone poem centered around. However, Sibelius' publisher insisted that the work be titled *Tochter des Nordens*, a German translation of the work's final title. It is believed that the motif that depicts the maiden's laughter inspired Bernard Herrmann's soundtrack for the stabbing scene in Alfred Hitchcock's film *Psycho*.

Väinämöinen has set out on his journey home. He has been instructed by Louhi to not look skywards until he reaches home, but as he quickly travels, he hears a curious sound above his head. In the sky is a massive rainbow with a young maiden at the end of it weaving a cloth of gold. He calls to her, invites her to his sleigh, and asks her to be his wife. She replies that she will only leave with a man who is able to succeed in a series of challenges. The final and greatest challenge is to have a ship built out of the fragments of her distaff without touching or interfering with it. For three days, Väinämöinen works on the boat and the other tasks with many successes on the smaller ones, but on the third day, his ax's head is turned by a Hiisi. Attempting to use the ax, Väinämöinen accidentally cleaves a giant wound into his knee. He leaves the maiden to find anybody who will help him cure his knee while heading home. Nobody claims to be capable until an old man says he can mend the wound.

Tapiola, Op. 112 1926

Walter Damrosch, a German-born American conductor and composer, approached Jean Sibelius and commissioned him to write a tone poem for the New York Philharmonic Society. The result was a work based on Tapio, a forest spirit mentioned throughout the *Kalevala*. The piece was written in 1926 and then premiered in New York on December 26 that same year. *Tapiola* was the composer's last major composition, a full thirty years before he passed away.

Much like *The Swan of Tuonela*, the work focuses on musically depicting the personality and the image of Tapio rather than any story he is involved in. When asked by his publisher to provide a program for the piece, Sibelius responded by sending them an explanation in prose.

Wide-spread they stand, the Northland's dusky forests,
Ancient, mysterious, brooding savage dreams;
Within them dwells the Forest's mighty God,
And wood-sprites in the gloom weave magic secrets.
~Jean Sibelius to Breitkopf & Härtel for English editions.