

Total performance time: approximately 120 minutes, including an interval of 20 minutes

London Symphony Orchestra

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Vilde Frang violin

Antonio Pappano conductor

Edward Elgar (1857–1934)

Violin Concerto in B minor, Op.61 (1910)

52'

- i. Allegro*
- ii. Andante*
- iii. Allegro molto*

INTERVAL

Jean Sibelius (1865–1957)

Symphony No.1 in E minor, Op.39 (1899, rev. 1900)

38'

- i. Andante, ma non troppo – Allegro energico*
- ii. Andante (ma non troppo lento)*
- iii. Scherzo: Allegro*
- iv. Finale (Quasi una fantasia): Andante – Allegro molto – Andante assai – Allegro molto come prima – Andante (ma non troppo)*

Elgar and Sibelius were, roughly, contemporaries: Sibelius was born in 1865, eight years after Elgar, though he survived the British composer by more than two decades. The two works in this programme were composed within eleven years of each other – the Elgar in 1910, the Sibelius in 1899 – yet we find their composers at contrasting ends of their careers. Elgar's Concerto was to be his last big success, while Sibelius was just embarking on the first of his seven, mostly well-received, symphonies. What both works have in common, though, is an array of soulful melodies, which act as both anchor and memory, along with a full-blooded emotionalism and a commitment to subverting expectation.

Elgar's Violin Concerto is known for being one of the longest and most demanding in the repertoire, with the solo part constituting a kind of forensic examination of the violin's physical capabilities (Michael Kennedy writes that the soloist needs to be a 'virtuoso with stamina'). This is partly due to it being Elgar's own instrument, partly to the talents of Fritz Kreisler – who had put it about that he longed for Elgar to write a concerto for him – and partly to advice from W.H. 'Billy' Reed, the leader of the London Symphony Orchestra whom Elgar consulted throughout nearly the whole composition process.

Kennedy remarks that the concerto is a 'wayward' work. This is perhaps especially so in the first movement with its constant changes of tempo and dynamic markings, suggesting a very personal train of thought. And the personal element of the concerto has been much discussed, mainly due to the enigmatic inscription Elgar added (along with the dedication to Kreisler), originally in Spanish: 'Herein is enshrined the soul of', with five dots instead of a name. Elgar scholars generally agree that the dots represent the composer's close friend Alice Stuart-Wortley, daughter of the painter Millais, and whom Elgar nicknamed 'Windflower': several of the themes in the concerto are given the name 'Windflower'. But in not confirming either way, Elgar clearly enjoyed creating yet another musical 'Enigma'.

The Concerto has a passionate, sustained intensity, the first movement overflowing with themes – almost a mini-concerto on its own – and a languorous, ardent central section. The second movement, a touching Andante, is less dramatic but equally as lyrical, and something of a 'breather' before the startling third. While concerto finales are often more of a romp, with the emotional heavy-lifting – and solo cadenza – confined to the first movement, in Elgar's the soloist has to gird his or her loins for the most demanding music yet. The cadenza is even more unconventional, not heralded by the usual drumroll and a down-tools from the orchestra, but accompanied nearly throughout, often by an unusual 'thrumming' effect in the strings. It harks back to themes from the first movement, the soloist working them through against this mysterious, even eerie backdrop.

'How excited he was about the Cadenza' wrote Billy Reed. And the critics were excited by the whole piece, heaping praise onto it after the premiere, performed by Kreisler

and conducted by Elgar. In later years Kreisler found that, while still very much a virtuoso, he could not retain the stamina needed for the concerto and stopped playing it. The baton was taken up by the very young Yehudi Menuhin, who recorded it with Elgar aged only 16 (he became the co-dedicattee of the Concerto). Elgar was rightly proud of the work, which has the capacity to surprise those who believe Elgar was a stiff-upper-lipped Edwardian, hiding his feelings behind tweed suit and bushy moustache. As he wrote during its composition: 'I have the Concerto well in hand ... & it's good! Awfully emotional! Too emotional but I love it'.

Sibelius had attempted a symphony before his First; named after the Finnish hero *Kullervo*, he later withdrew it, so Symphony No.1 is his first true success at symphonic form. He was, though, hugely experienced in orchestral writing, and especially in creating imaginative textures and a kind of narrative coherence born out of his many tone poems of the previous years, several of which were based on Finnish legends. The symphony was inevitably influenced, up to a point, by the Russian symphonies (of Borodin and Tchaikovsky, for example), regularly heard in Helsinki concert halls at the time, which were characterised by high drama and an immersive, distinctive style of orchestration, yet frequently tinged with melancholy.

Yet even in his first symphonic attempt, Sibelius was following his own path. The work – like the Elgar concerto – can seem 'wayward' at times, with almost bewildering sequences of contrasts and textures, often building to a peak before teasingly withholding momentum. The opening is extraordinary: a timpani rumble, an isolated clarinet. Its lengthy melody (which supposedly influenced the famous *Godfather* theme by Nino Rota) recurs periodically throughout, most prominently at the start of the finale. A dazzling array of orchestral moments follows, including an atmospheric whirling in the low instruments, as higher wind and strings get caught in the flurry above. This leads to a rhapsodic, folk-like melody, which builds almost to a climax before retreating to another clarinet solo, this time duetting with harp. After another gigantic build, the movement concludes not with a bang but a hushed pizzicato.

The powerful, lament-like second movement revives the 'whirling' of the first, this time in the woodwind. Surging strings join in, along with noble-sounding passages for brass which closely resemble moments in his tone poem *Finlandia*, composed around the same time. Up next is a brief third movement – a somewhat wild scherzo, heavy on the timpani. Yet it is stilled at its centre by a pulsing, trilling 'Lento' passage. The opening clarinet theme returns in the finale, stirringly played by the strings followed by a sweeter version for woodwind. A bigger, bolder theme forms the climax of this movement with a Tchaikovsky-like moment in its emotional heft, yet the strident, almost dissonant interjections from the brass that follow are Sibelius' own. While the symphony seems to be heading for a crash-bang conclusion, the timpani really building up a head of steam, Sibelius once more surprises with a laconic final two chords, descending to a hushed *pianissimo*.