

Sibelius' Seventh

Extended Essay Subject: Music

To what extent did Sibelius write his Seventh Symphony as a one movement compression of traditional symphonic form?

Word Count: 3152

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Introduction

Research Question: To what extent did Sibelius write his Seventh Symphony as a one movement compression of traditional symphonic form?

As an aspiring composer, I have been wildly inspired by the works of Finnish composer, Jean Sibelius (1865 – 1957). Even as I try to find my own unique voice in my own compositions, I still find myself mesmerized by the incredibly Romantic (although writing music into the 20th century era) and introspective style of the pieces written by Sibelius. However, in many music textbooks, I have found that Sibelius is rarely viewed as a very significant and influential composer for his time (yet his importance is sometimes mentioned from a historical perspective, as his nationalistic pieces helped give Finland a sense of identity while the country pushed for independence from Russia in 1917¹). Perhaps this is to the fault of my own reading selections, but in light of my deep admiration, I've tried in recent times to find the cause of my appreciation – and reasons why Sibelius may have profoundly influenced and inspired the music and composers after him.

Despite my favorite piece written by Sibelius being his Second Symphony, Op. 43, I have chosen to study his Symphony No. 7 (*In einem Satze*²), Op. 105, in this investigation. This piece sets itself apart with one very important characteristic – the whole symphony is written in one movement. This piece was originally titled “Fantasia sinfonica” but Sibelius made a bold decision

¹ United States, Congress, Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs. “A Guide to the United States’ History of Recognition, Diplomatic, and Consular Relations, by Country, since 1776: Finland.” history.state.gov/countries/finland.

² “In einem Satze” translates from German to “In one movement”

to rename it after its public premiere on March 24th, 1924³. It was one of the first, if not the first, one-movement symphonies throughout history.

This investigation will aim to determine to what extent Sibelius' Seventh Symphony shows symphonic form in an analysis of the entire work chronologically. The first step is to analyze how 'traditional' symphonic form developed in the early Classical period, and discuss how some of these standards may have changed in later eras (Chapter 1). From there I will then analyze the Seventh Symphony and connect its structural elements to the parts of symphonic form previously mentioned (Chapter 2) – this is where the overall question can be directly addressed. Finally, a brief portion of this investigation will be the discussion of Herbert von Karajan's interpretation of the symphony in which he divided Sibelius' Seventh into four separate sections for a concert with the Berlin Philharmonic (Chapter 3).

³ Sirén, Vesa. "Seventh Symphony Op. 105 (1924)." Edited by Donald Adamson. Translated by Käännöstoimisto Martina, *Jean Sibelius - The Music*, www.sibelius.fi/english/musiikki/ork_sinf_07.htm.

1. An analysis of the evolution of symphonic form

The definition of a symphony seems to change throughout history, but the most agreed upon definition (and the definition that will base further judgement on) is that a symphony is a large-scale work, often written for orchestra in several movements.

On the structure of a symphony, Jean Sibelius told his son-in-law, Jussi Jalas, in 1939:

The framework of a symphony must be so strong that it forces you to follow it regardless of the environment and circumstances: [it is] an 'ethical necessity'.⁴

Yet even with that sentiment in mind, Sibelius had also been quoted for saying the following to the writer of his biography, Santeri Levas, sometime late in his retirement:

It is often thought that the essence of [a] symphony lies in its form, but this is certainly not the case. The content is always the primary factor, while form is secondary, the music itself determining its outer form. If sonata form has anything that is lasting it must come from within.⁵

I interpreted these quotes not to disagree with each other, but rather show the development and contrast between the Classical composer's mindset and the mindset of the Romantic/20th Century composer.

1.1 The early Classical symphony; origins in Vienna

By the mid-18th century, it was becoming common knowledge that Vienna was developing into a cultural hub, and that musicians would be exposed to the most opportunities there. At around

⁴ Sirén, Vesa. "On Music and Composition." Edited by Donald Adamson. Translated by Käännöstoimisto Martina, *Jean Sibelius - In His Own Words*, www.sibelius.fi/english/omin_sanoin/ominsanoin_16.htm.

⁵ Levas, Santeri. *Sibelius: A Personal Portrait*, Translated by Percy M. Young, London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1972, pp. 82-83.

the same time, it was also evident that the symphony was evolving out of Baroque-Era dance suites (which did not necessarily have three or four movements) and the *sinfonia*, an Italian overture form. This type of composition “was a three-section, fast-slow-fast structure. As an orchestral composition independent of operas, it emerged as three separate movements in the same order of tempi.”⁶ Haydn (1732 – 1809) and Mozart (1756 – 1791) were among the more famous composers that followed this Classical symphony form. From the mid-18th century to the early 19th century, the symphony would almost always follow the typical three movement “fast-slow-fast” structure. In the rare case of a four-movement symphony, a minuet or scherzo was added between the slow movement and the finale.

It is laid out in one book, “The Cambridge Companion to the Symphony,” the four generic traits of symphonies that were written in Vienna: “1. A tendency to derive first-movement structures from binary form models, ... 2. An emerging recognition of the importance of key contrast and the vital role of cadential punctuation in achieving this; ... 3. A succession of three movements (fast-slow-fast) rather than four movements, ... 4. A presumed hierarchy of orchestral functions, in which winds are secondary to strings, and in which horn parts are often dispensable.”⁷ These traits seem to define Classical symphonies – but on the other hand, for example, many of Beethoven’s symphonies show the transition into Romantic era symphonies, which occasionally abandoning any of the four traits given above.

⁶ Miller, Hugh M, and Dale Cockrell. “The Classical Period.” *History of Western Music*, Fifth ed., HarperCollins, 1991, p. 129.

⁷ Irving, John. “The Viennese Symphony.” *The Cambridge Companion to the Symphony*, edited by Julian Horton, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 20–21.

1.2 Romanticism and structural freedom

In another chapter of one of my aforementioned sources, it is summarized how Romantic symphonies differed from the Classical symphony: “[Romantic] works entitled ‘symphony’ were composed by most of the major Romantic composers. Only in the broadest outlines did they follow the sonata cycle of the Classical symphony. Composers varied the number of movements, used more contrasting keys in the inner movements, and generally made the symphony a vehicle for expression rather than a formal design.”⁸ This directly supports the second Sibelius quote given at the beginning of this chapter. Sibelius would write his pieces with a form, but the driving factor in the development of the piece was nature of the melodies and content.

When assessing the extent to which Sibelius’ Seventh Symphony shows symphonic form, I found it clear that it needed to be judged on both Classical and Romantic standards. In other words, although written in the Romantic era, it would only be logical and thorough to view it in context of the ‘original’ Classical symphonic standards.

⁸ Miller, Hugh M, and Dale Cockrell. “Introduction to the Romantic Period.” *History of Western Music*, Fifth ed., HarperCollins, 1991, p. 164.

2. An analysis of Sibelius' Seventh Symphony

When dealing with a work as large as Sibelius' Seventh Symphony⁹, I realized that I would need to look at the entire piece, and recognized the different 'sections' of the piece – usually seen by tempo changes. Eventually, with all the elements of the piece laid out, the overall structure of the piece could be addressed as a single entity, and not as a collection of 'sections.'

2.1 The formal design

(i) m. 1 – 155

At the very beginning of the symphony, there is a slow introduction from m. 1 – 21. Here, Sibelius hints at some of the themes found later in the symphony while also showing the audience some of the tonal centers of the piece.

It is in m. 22 where one of the main melodies of the symphony is given, first only in the violas and cellos (Fig. 2a¹⁰). This melody repeats in m. 38 when the violins and basses also share the melody.

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Fig. 2a (m. 22 – 33)

This melody leads into m. 50, where the winds and horns arrive with the strings, which leads into a very extended cadence (with ascending string lines) into the C major climax and

⁹ Sibelius, Jean. *Symphony No. 7*, op. 105. 1924. Copenhagen: Wilhelm Hansen, 1925. Print.

¹⁰ In this figure, I reduce the viola and cello staves to a single staff, see Appendix A for the pages of the score from which this reduction came.

entrance of the trombone solo in m. 60. This solo (Fig. 2b¹¹) is a recurring theme in the symphony, and is sometimes referred to as the “Aino theme” (nicknamed after Sibelius’ wife, Aino Sibelius).

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Fig. 2b (m. 59 – 67)

After this climax subsides, Sibelius develops the melody over unsettling string and bassoon parts from Fig 2a in m. 71 – 106. It is in this development that he also introduces new melodies in the winds, which play a significant role in m. 107 – 155. Here, the horns echo a portion of the Aino theme and the strings pause from the chaotic, rushed themes from the measures before. The winds bring on a new character in the increasing tempo, one with an almost playful or anxious feel, but this is broken up by the reference in m. 119 by the horns and violas back to m. 93. The new playful themes ‘win over’ in the increasing speed, and lead to a meter change and key change in m. 134 (the piece shifts from a simple triple feel to a compound duple feel and shifts from C major to C minor).

With the meter and key change, second violins and violas maintain rhythmic subdivisions; this paired with the motives from the woodwinds show a significant transition in the piece, leading into the “Vivacissimo” in m. 156.

(ii) m. 156 – 257

In this section of the piece, Sibelius has moved on from the slow themes from the introduction through the initial climax. However, there is still a high level of harmonic fluidity (even passing through keys that are distantly related), evident even in the first five bars of this section where the strings seem to go from g[#] harmonic minor to c harmonic minor.

¹¹ In this figure, I include only the trombone staff, see Appendix B for the complete page of the score.

From m. 156 – 207 the strings (usually in a unison manner) continue the chaos from the previous section with rapid ascending lines or alternations between notes. These phrases from the strings are usually only up to three measures in length, and typically followed by measure long interjections from the woodwinds. An example of this can be seen between the winds and the first violins in Figure 2c¹².

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Fig. 2c (m. 163 – 167)

This pattern continues until the entrance of the horns in m. 174, where the strings crescendo into a brief descending phrase. Yet it returns to the original pattern following that, and this development continues up to the shift in m. 208. Here the winds and horns stop completely while the strings (all sections in unison) continue with a long and slurred chromatic phrase that repeats through the “Adagio” in m. 222, slowing becoming scattered among the string sections and completely dying out in m. 241. More importantly, m. 221 marks the entrance of the Aino theme again, first in the trombone (like in m. 60), but soon echoed by trumpet 1 and the horns. Unlike its previous appearance, however, the theme develops in c minor rather than C major. It marks another peak of the piece, but changes the mood completely.

Towards the end of the Aino theme, in m. 236, the horns introduce a new melody, followed by a loud interjection from the winds (Fig. 2d¹³).

¹² In this figure, I reduce the flute and oboe staves to a single staff, see Appendix C for the pages of the score from which this reduction came.

¹³ In this figure, I include only the flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, and first horn staves, see Appendix D for the complete page of the score.

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Fig. 2d (m. 236 – 238)

After it is immediately restated, Sibelius returns to the compound duple feel and reintroduces the anxious theme originally from m. 109. Like the Aino theme, it sounds much more foreboding because it is now given in the key of c minor. The theme slowly dies away having changed the mood significantly, giving way eventually to the shift in m. 258.

(iii) m. 258 – 475

In m. 258, the piece returns to C major and a completely new theme is introduced. It is first presented in the winds in m. 262 – 263, but this theme eventually becomes the focus of much of the remainder of the piece. After the winds and the strings alternate with short motives in m. 266 – 284, the second violins and violas continue the eighth-note ostinato (sometimes pausing for a few measures, or sometimes being joined by the first violins) through m. 358. This ostinato is remarkably like the string patterns seen primarily in the first and third movements of Sibelius' Fifth Symphony, as he wrote this final symphony as an emotional culmination of his work as a composer. Above this, the woodwinds and first violins pass the new, cheerful melody between themselves, acting as a sort of development (in terms of sonata form). An example of this can be seen in Figure 2e¹⁴.

¹⁴ See Appendix E for the complete page of the score.

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Fig. 2c (m. 284 – 290)

Sibelius also reiterates the ideas from m. 246 following the motives in m. 324, but soon returns to the cheerful melody and string ostinato development from m. 343 to m. 399. During this, the piece also modulates out of the tonic key of C major to E \flat major. Following that, Sibelius starts to develop a different melody (which was first seen earlier, in m. 316, but only appeared briefly), which somewhat resembles the articulate figures from the winds in m. 162 – 207. The effect of this parallel is that the listener may recognize the continuity of ideas in the piece, much like how the Aino theme recurs throughout the piece. Ascending string phrases following the “Vivace” in m. 409 also seem to function similarly. These two themes develop into the climax in m. 446 – 448, which directly resembles m. 206 – 207.

After that intensity, the beginning of the “Presto” (m. 449) sets a much different, and steady feel. The piece once again returns to C major, and the strings carry a quarter note ostinato unaccompanied until the entrance of horns 1 and 2 with a slow ascending G major/C Lydian scale. This is repeated by bassoons and horns 3 and 4, and then the clarinets join in with the bassoons

and all four horns. This building on top of the repeated string patterns finally builds into the last 'section' of the symphony.

(iv) m. 476 – 525

At this point in the piece, the trombone plays the Aino theme for the third and final time – supported, but not echoed by the other brass instruments. Set in the same tempo as in the beginning, “Adagio,” the strings continue their ostinato, but ascend in pitch until m. 484 where they stay on the alternation between G and F♯ while the brass and winds push in volume and in harmony to the climax in m. 487.

Out of this, the strings start a new ostinato on the ‘off-beats’ while the winds and horns seem to play some distantly related offshoot of original main melody of the piece (see Fig. 2a) in a much more somber tone. This happens from m. 487 up until the incredibly loud crescendo into the “Largamente” in m. 496 – the strings remain, reiterating the new theme given just before in the winds and horns. Right before the “Affettuoso” (m. 506), violas and cellos stop playing, leaving only the violins on the leading tones into the resolution – the resolution being one final iteration of the Aino theme, played by the horns.

In m. 512, flute 1 and bassoon 1 echo the theme from the introduction of the piece (m. 11 – 12), which finally goes into the final resolving cadence of the symphony. The cadence begins in m. 518 with the off-beat string ostinato, and even with the entrance of the winds and brass, does not fully resolve to C major until beat 2 of m. 525 when the strings move from the leading tone to the tonic.

harmonic ‘punctuation,’ but not necessarily involving traditional cadences (such as an imperfect authentic cadence, or half cadence). It is possible that Sibelius purposefully did not use traditional cadences to emphasize the strong move to C major at the very end. Sibelius’ use of key contrast is more apparent – the piece has the tonic of C major, but modulates to the parallel minor: c minor, and to the relative major of c minor, E \flat major.

The final trait of the Classical symphony is the hierarchy of instruments and their use in the work. This symphony does seem to favor that melodies are in string parts (this may be a result of Sibelius’ biases – his main instrument of study was the violin¹⁵), and the wind parts are mostly secondary to the strings by usually trading off melodies with the strings. The brass, however, are not entirely expendable (as described earlier), as the recurring ‘Aino’ theme is presented in the trombone or horns. Thus, this trait is mostly present in Sibelius’ Seventh Symphony, but not entirely.

¹⁵ Sirén, Vesa. “Music Becomes a Serious Pursuit.” Edited by Donald Adamson. Translated by Käännöstoimisto Martina, *Jean Sibelius - The Man*, www.sibelius.fi/english/elamankaari/sib_musiikkiharrastus.htm.

3. Significance of von Karajan's interpretation

While researching and working on this essay, my school band director told me about a recording of Sibelius' Seventh by the Berlin Philharmonic, conducted by Herbert von Karajan¹⁶. In this recording, the piece is broken up into four sections: m. 1 – 155, m. 156 – 257, m. 258 – 408, and m. 409 – 525. Although I believe that von Karajan deviated too far from the composer's wishes, his decision does have some importance. The fact that a respected conductor made the decision to break the symphony up shows that he believes it shows some sort of symphonic form. The breaks in the music from this recording occasionally line up with my own analysis, and roughly with significant tempo/melodic changes.

I decided to refrain from thoroughly analyzing the performance (mostly for the conciseness of my argument), but I found that it must be mentioned for its justification of my findings.

¹⁶ Berlin Philharmonic. *Sibelius: Symphony No.7 in C*, Op.105, Berlin.

Conclusion

Research Question: To what extent did Sibelius write his Seventh Symphony as a one movement compression of traditional symphonic form?

It is evident that Sibelius certainly did not write his Seventh Symphony with the intention of it being a compression of Classical symphonic form – by firsthand account (evident by the second quote in Chapter 2) and by formal analysis. Yet even if he did not write it with that intention, the piece still seems to exhibit two of the four defining traits of a Classical symphony – instrumental hierarchy and importance of key contrast.

On the other hand, the piece does seem to fit the form of a Romantic era symphony, as it has a unique form and it serves as a vehicle of expression. Sibelius wrote this symphony as a glorious culmination of all of his previous symphonies, and it finds itself suitably as his last. It is one of the first times in history that such a work, being one movement, had been distinctly given the title of ‘symphony.’ The musicologist Veijo Murtomäki said in 1990:

*The seventh symphony (...) is something new and revolutionary in the history of the symphony ...*¹⁷

Sibelius likely influenced the composers after him with his symphony in one movement, as compositions like Barber’s Symphony No. 1 and Shostakovich’s Symphonies No. 2 and 3. Hence, Sibelius’ Symphony No. 7 is undoubtedly a prolific and important work, perhaps even pushing to redefine what ‘symphonic form’ is.

¹⁷ Sirén, Vesa. “Seventh Symphony Op. 105 (1924).” Edited by Donald Adamson. Translated by Käännöstoimisto Martina, *Jean Sibelius - The Music*, www.sibelius.fi/english/musiikki/ork_sinf_07.htm.

Appendix:

Appendix A – m. 17 – 40

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Appendix B – m. 59 – 67

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Appendix C – m. 156 – 168

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Appendix D – m. 236 – 238

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Appendix E – m. 284 – 290

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Audio Recordings:

1. Berlin Philharmonic. *Sibelius: Symphony No.7 in C, Op.105*, Berlin.