



SIBELIUS

Belshazzar's Feast

Overture in E • Scène de Ballet • Wedding March
Cortège • Menuetto • Processional



Pia Pajala, Soprano

Turku Philharmonic Orchestra
Leif Segerstam

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957): Belshazzar's Feast

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Jean Sibelius was the most significant figure in the formation of national identity in Finnish music, to the extent that since 2011 Finland has celebrated a Flag Day on 8th December (the composer's birthday), also known as the 'Day of Finnish Music'. The seven symphonies and *Violin Concerto* lie at the centre of Sibelius' œuvre, surrounded by tone poems often concerning a Finnish folklore narrative, such as the famous epic, the *Kalevala* – the inspiration for his popular *Lemminkäinen Suite*. He was also prolific, however, in other genres, not least in songs for voice and piano (which number over a hundred), incidental music (for thirteen plays), chamber and choral works, and even an opera. Despite this significant body of work, after the composition of *Tapiola* in 1926, Sibelius produced no large-scale works for his remaining thirty-one years – a period often referred to as the 'Silence from Järvenpää'.¹ Supporters say that this dearth was the result of over-stringent self-criticism, which shut down his creative faculties; critics blame a comfortable lifestyle supported by a state pension and refer to the composer's notorious consumption of alcohol, which he once described as "my truest friend". Sibelius did not stop composing altogether during this time, but focused on writing smaller-scale compositions and revising and adding to some of his earlier works, an example of which, *Processional*, is heard on this recording.

The theatre played an influential rôle in Sibelius' musical development, especially during the first decade of the twentieth century: soon after *Kuolema* (1903) came *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1905), followed by *Belshazzar's Feast* (1906) and *Swanwhite* (1908). *Belshazzar's Feast* was written for the Swedish Theatre to accompany a play by Sibelius' friend, the journalist, poet and playwright Hjalmar Procopé. Its composition interrupted progress on the *Third Symphony*, but elicited some of Sibelius' most beautiful writing for the theatre, and although it is by no means as well known as *Pelléas et Mélisande*, it is nevertheless a work of considerable quality.

The play concerns the intrigues at the court of Babylon: a Jewish woman, Leschanah, is sent to Belshazzar's court to assassinate him. She waits for him, clasping a dagger, but Belshazzar is enchanted by the woman and takes her to his palace. After the opening *Oriental March*, which seeks to evoke the colours and atmosphere of an Eastern procession, comes an exquisitely tranquil *Nocturne*, depicting Leschanah in the king's palace at night, with a seductive flute melody that casts a soporific spell upon the listener. In the distance Leschanah hears *The Song of the Jewish Girl*, a hauntingly beautiful number, whose accompaniment comprises gently oscillating octaves in muted strings, sympathising with the singer's desire to return to Jerusalem. The action shifts back to Leschanah who, distracted from her intended mission, wishes to usurp the king's previous favourite, the slave girl, Khadra, and persuades him that she must die. A great feast is arranged at which Khadra is to dance for the final time. The music bustles with excitement but then cuts off abruptly upon Leschanah's arrival, after which Khadra begins the first of her dances, the *Dance of Life* (a dialogue between flute and clarinets) followed by the more macabre *Dance of Death* (clarinet in low register), where she receives a fatal snakebite.

The famous 'writing on the wall' then appears: "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin" ("numbered, weighed, divided"), interpreted by the prophet Daniel as a foretelling of Belshazzar's death the coming night. At this point, Khadra's strength fails as she attempts to dance the *Dance of Life* once again (the music for this, the sixth number, uses the music of the fourth, but played slower). Despite the prophecy of the 'writing on the wall', Leschanah has now fallen in love with Belshazzar, and no longer wishes to slay him: the slow-moving yet impassioned music of the seventh number reflects her dilemma. Meanwhile, the king is anxiously awaiting his death and consults his adviser, Aspenasi, for which Sibelius includes hushed strings, while the clarinets play music derived from Khadra's *Dance of Life*. At last,

Leschanah resolves to fulfil her duty, and after the king is briefly reminded of Khadra by an abbreviated version of the *Dance of Life*, the *Dance of Death* returns, as his assassin stabs him with her dagger, and is herself killed by his Jewish advisor, Elieser.

The *Overture in E* and *Scène de Ballet* began life not as self-contained works but as the first two movements of a symphony – Sibelius' first attempt at symphonic writing. He wrote to his future wife, Aino, relaying his plans for the symphony, which was to be in three or four movements (including an overture for the first and a Ball Scene for the second), and which took its thematic inspiration from a well-known Finnish folk-tune. Come April, however, Sibelius suddenly interrupted its development, claiming his grasp of the symphonic form was unsatisfactory. With the aid of his copyist, he wrote out the first two movements, and sent them to the conductor Robert Kajanus. Several days later, the composer was plagued by doubts and asked Kajanus not to perform them. This request, however, was ignored, and Kajanus programmed the overture alone in a concert on 23rd April, sending a congratulatory telegram to Sibelius the following day. Unfortunately both the critics and the public were less than enamoured with the work, and when Kajanus repeated the overture in another concert several days later – this time including the *Ballet Scene* also – the latter caused an even more hostile reaction.

The initial symphonic intentions can be identified in the structure of the *Overture*, which is written in sonata form. The main theme is shaped in arch-like phrases, and the whole piece encompasses the same idiom as *Karelia*, composed several years previously. The *Ballet Scene*, on the other hand, adopts the form of a free rondo, portraying a vision of a chaotic dance. Like Ravel's *La Valse* (1919–20), the piece conjures up instances of the charm and elegance associated with the Viennese waltz, but with a somewhat sinister undercurrent, as if viewing the spectacle through a nightmarish lens. Consider, for example, the unsettled fugato section at 5:19, beginning with chromatic string writing, sparsely accompanied by castanets and triangle, followed by the *pianissimo* wild whirlwind strings at 6:42.

On 30th April 1905, a farewell concert was held at the Finnish National Theatre for Kaarlo Bergbom, who had been the theatre's director for 33 years, and for his older sister and colleague at the theatre, Emilie. The programme included two items by Sibelius: the song *Höstkväll*, and a lively, good-humoured new orchestral piece called *Cortège*, JS54, which played as a group of actors – dressed as characters from the Bergboms' most successful productions – processed before the guests. Thematic material from *Cortège* was to be re-used later in *Love Song* from Sibelius' *Scènes historiques II*, and in the final procession of his incidental music for *The Tempest*.

This practice of musical recycling is also evident in the *Menuetto in B flat major* of 1894, which began life as a piano miniature from Sibelius' student period in Vienna, but was later arranged into an orchestral piece (the version heard on this recording) and then re-orchestrated in a simplified version for use in the score of *King Christian II* (1898), incidental music for the five-act historical drama by Adolf Paul. In 1911 Sibelius wrote music for another of Paul's plays, *Die Sprache der Vögel* (The Language of the Birds), composing just a single musical number, *Wedding March*, whose title is something of a misnomer, as it is not particularly march-like in character. Its scoring is unusual in that it omits bassoons and horns but includes trumpets, trombones and an array of percussion instruments. As far as we know, it was not used for any stage productions.

In 1922 Sibelius became a member of Finland's newly constituted Masonic Lodge, for which he composed a collection of pieces first performed on 12th January 1927. This collection represents one of Sibelius' most enigmatic works, centring around a series of songs for tenor and harmonium, though it also comprises orchestral works, some of which require a male-voice choir. In typical Sibelian fashion, he later revised some of these pieces and added to them, including *Processional* (Op. 113, No. 6), which exists in versions for choir and orchestra, and for orchestra alone.

Dominic Wells

¹ Järvenpää was the town where Sibelius lived.

Pia Pajala



Photo: Eija Hartemaa-Kallinen

A graduate of the opera programme at the Sibelius Academy, Finland, Pia Pajala is a versatile performer known for her wide vocal range, powerful expression and extensive repertoire. In recent years she has perfected her vocal technique with Finnish opera singer Kai Valtonen and Stockholm-based Dorothy Irving. Pia Pajala has appeared in many operatic rôles especially in contemporary works. She has also worked with some of Finland's most respected conductors, including Sakari Oramo, Leif Segerstam and Santtu-Matias Rouvali, having performed as a soloist with such orchestras as the Turku Philharmonic Orchestra and the Ostrobothnian Chamber Orchestra. She has also appeared with the Tallinn Baroque Orchestra and the Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra. A renowned interpreter of Sibelius and Finnish classical music, she regularly performs with chamber ensembles. Further engagements include sacred works and appearances on concert stages at the Naantali and Turku Music Festivals, among others. She has also featured on radio broadcasts and recordings of the Finnish Broadcasting Company Yle.

Turku Philharmonic Orchestra



Photo: Seijo Ristimäki

The Turku Musical Society, which later formed the Turku Philharmonic Orchestra, was founded in 1790. As the oldest orchestra in Finland, the ensemble continues to develop and flourish under the baton of renowned conductors. Since 2012, the orchestra's 74 musicians have been under the artistic leadership of Leif Segerstam. The orchestra's resident composer is Mikko Heinö. Several of the Turku Philharmonic's recordings have won platinum and other awards. In 2009 the orchestra was awarded the EMMA Classical Album of the Year for the recording *Transient Moods* by Pehr Henrik Nordgren. The orchestra gives weekly concerts, often streamed live throughout the world, while its chamber music ensembles perform in the historical venues of Turku and the archipelago. The orchestra also organizes family concerts and performs in opera productions. The Turku Philharmonic is a pioneer in audience accessibility, providing access to concerts online in hospitals, residential care homes and schools.

Leif Segerstam



Photo: Seijo Ristimäki

Leif Segerstam is a conductor, composer, violinist and pianist with a prominent international career. He received diplomas from the Sibelius Academy in violin and conducting, won the Maj Lind Piano Competition in 1962 and gave his first violin recital in 1963. He rounded off his studies at The Juilliard School in New York, where he was awarded a conducting diploma in 1964. Segerstam was Chief Conductor and Music Director of the Royal Opera in Stockholm from 1970-72 and Director of the Finnish National Opera in 1973-74. Since then he has conducted in most of the world's leading opera houses, including the Metropolitan Opera, Covent Garden and La Scala. He was Chief Conductor of the Austrian Radio Symphony Orchestra from 1975 to 1982 and of the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra from 1977 to 1987, served as Music Director of the Staatsphilharmonie Rheinland-Pfalz from 1983 to 1989 and was appointed Chief Conductor of the Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra in 1988. In autumn 1995 he was reappointed Chief Conductor of the Royal Opera in Stockholm (until 2001) and became Chief Conductor of the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra. In autumn 2007 he stepped down to become the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra's Emeritus Chief Conductor. Since 2012 he has been Chief Conductor of Turku Philharmonic Orchestra. From autumn 1997 to spring 2013 Leif Segerstam was Professor of Orchestra Conducting at the Sibelius Academy. He was awarded the 1999 Nordic Council Music Prize for his work "as a tireless champion of Scandinavian music" and the Swedish Cultural Foundation's Prize for Music in 2003. In 2004 Leif Segerstam was awarded the annual Finnish State Prize for Music and in 2005 the highly esteemed Sibelius Medal. He has gained wide acclaim for his many recordings with different orchestras. While pursuing his conducting career, Segerstam has also produced an extensive oeuvre as a composer.

Belsazars Gästebud

5 Den judiska flickans sång

Text: Hjalmar Procopé (1868-1927)

Vid älvarna i Babylon jag satt
och gråt med mina bröder, dag och natt.
Och mina systrar rördes av min gråt,
av mina bröders myckna klagolåt.
Och Juda gråt och dotter Zion gråt
Jerusalem!
Vi sörjde all din forna härlighet.

Hur kan jag le, hur kan jag vara glad?
Jag är en fånge i de älvars stad.
En tårestöm har mina visor dränkt,
min harpa har jag i ett pilträd hängt.
Hur kan jag sjunga i de fängnas hus?
Jerusalem!
Hur kan jag glömma dig, du släckta ljus.

Jag vill stå upp. Jag vill stå upp och gå
med snabba fötter såsom markens rå.
Si, jag vill vandra genom öknars sand
och genom Edoms ogästfria land,
där farligheter lurar på var ort,
Jerusalem!
Hur lång kan vägen vara till din port?

Belshazzar's Feast

5 The Jewish Girl's Song

English translation: Andrew Barnett

I sat by the rivers of Babylon
And cried with my brothers day and night.
And my sisters were moved by my tears,
By my brothers' profuse lament.
And Judah wept and daughter Sion wept –
Jerusalem!
We mourned all your former splendour.

How can I smile, how can I be happy?
I am a prisoner in the town of rivers.
A stream of tears has drowned my songs,
I have hung up my harp in a willow tree.
How can I sing in the captives' house?
Jerusalem!
How can I forget thee, extinguished light?

I want to stand, to stand up and go
Swiftly, like the deer across the ground.
See, I will wander through the desert sand
And through Edom's inhospitable country
Where dangers lurk everywhere,
Jerusalem!
How long can the way to your gate be?

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Alongside the great symphonies and tone poems, music for the theatre played an important rôle in Sibelius's development. From exquisite nocturnal tranquility to the macabre 'Dance of Life', *Belshazzar's Feast* is an exotic tale of seduction and tragedy to which Sibelius responded with some of his most hauntingly beautiful writing for the stage. The early *Menuetto* and lively *Cortège* were considered good enough by the composer to be recycled for further stage productions, while the *Overture in E* and *Scène de Ballet* started life as Sibelius's first attempt at composing a symphony.

Jean
SIBELIUS
(1865-1957)

1 Overture in E major, JS145 (1891)	11:41	9 No. 6: Livets dans (Dance of Life) (Act III) 0:40
2 Scène de Ballet, JS163 (1891) Belsazars Gästebud (Belshazzar's Feast), JS48 (1906)	7:59	10 No. 7: Tempo sostenuto (Act IV) 3:15
		11 No. 8: Allegro (Act IV) 2:12
		12 No. 9: Livets dans (Dance of Life) (Act IV) 0:59
	21:28	13 No. 10: Dödens dans (Dance of Death) (Act IV) 1:17
3 No. 1: Alla marcia (Act I)	2:05	
4 No. 2a: Prelude: Notturno (Act II)	3:49	14 Die Sprache der Vögel (The Language of the Birds): Wedding March, JS62 (1911) 4:55
5 No. 2b: Den judiska flickans sång (Vid älvarna i Babylon) [The Song of the Jewish Girl] (Act II)*	3:25	15 Cortège, JS54 (1905) 6:49
6 No. 3: Allegretto (Act III)	1:00	16 Menuetto, JS5 (1894) 5:45
7 No. 4: Livets dans (Dance of Life) (Act III)	1:24	17 Processional, Op. 113, No. 6 (1938) 4:24
8 No. 5: Dödens dans (Dance of Death) (Act III)	1:22	

Pia Pajala, Soprano*

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The sung text and translation can be found inside the booklet,
and can also be accessed at www.naxos.com/libretti/573300.htm

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