

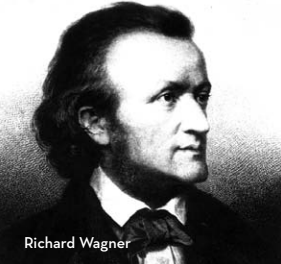
WAGNER Overture to *Tannhäuser*

SIBELIUS Symphony No. 2

BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA



ANDRIS NELSONS Music Director



Richard Wagner



Jean Sibelius

RICHARD WAGNER (1813-1883) *Overture to Tannhäuser*

Wagner's Overture to *Tannhäuser* never failed to please. Though the music was not entirely understood when he led the opera's premiere on October 19, 1845, in Dresden, the overture was instantly popular. It was the *Tannhäuser* Overture that began convincing the wider public of Wagner's merit as a composer; and it was an 1851 concert performance led by the composer that made an ardent Wagner devotee of Mathilde Wesendonck, at whose instigation Wagner and his first wife, Minna, were later provided lodging on the Wesendonck estate near Zurich, where the relationship between Wagner and Mathilde fanned the flames that produced *Tristan und Isolde*.

In his libretto, Wagner seized upon a theme that would remain one of his overriding concerns: the redemption of man by woman. The minstrel Tannhäuser rejects the revelries of Venus' domain and rejoins his Minnesinger comrades at the court of the Landgrave of Thuringia, whose niece Elisabeth has been pining for Tannhäuser's return. During a song contest on the theme of love—first prize being Elisabeth's hand in marriage—Tannhäuser, still in Venus' sway, extols the virtues of physical love. Only Elisabeth's intervention saves him from death at the hands of his outraged comrades, and he joins a band of traveling pilgrims to seek Papal absolution in Rome. The Pope refuses him, but Elisabeth's prayers and self-willed death win his salvation, and Tannhäuser, following a last struggle with the forces of Venus, dies, redeemed, on Elisabeth's bier.

Wagner constructed the overture according to principles he himself set out in his January 1841 essay "On the Overture," shaping several musical ideas from the opera into a symmetrical scheme to produce "a musical artwork entire in itself" and in which "the characteristic theme of the drama" reaches "a conclusion in anticipatory agreement with the solution of the problem in the scenic play" through the interweaving of appropriate thematic materials from the opera to follow. The solemnly intoned Pilgrims'

March gives way to the music of the Venusberg, which is followed by Tannhäuser's hymn to Venus in praise of love. A central, seductive Venusberg episode with solo clarinet and violins in eight parts leads to another stanza of Tannhäuser's hymn and the reiteration of the frenzied Venusberg music, but the Pilgrims' March makes a triumphant and overwhelming return.

JEAN SIBELIUS (1865-1957) *Symphony No. 2 in D, Op. 43*

Having given up legal studies to pursue music in Berlin and then in Vienna, during which time his compositions were performed in Finland with increasing success, the 26-year-old Sibelius secured his reputation at home in April 1892 with the first performance of his 80-minute symphonic poem *Kullervo* for soloists, male chorus, and orchestra. Soon after this came the symphonic poem *En Saga* and then the music of the *Karelia* Suite, the latter written for an historical pageant at the University of Helsinki. Robert Kajanus, conductor of the Finnish National Orchestra, a champion of Finnish music and of his friend Sibelius in particular, afforded the composer many opportunities to appear throughout Scandinavia and Europe. By the early 1900s Sibelius was invited regularly to conduct in Germany and elsewhere, both on the continent and in England. That period also saw the beginning of his international reputation, which was consolidated through the appearance of the first five symphonies between 1899 and 1915 (though the final version of the Fifth appeared only in 1919). Two of Sibelius' most enduringly popular works—*Finlandia* and the Second Symphony—were written early in this period, at a time when the forces of Finnish nationalism were severely threatened by Russian domination.

Among the repressive measures imposed by the Russians was the "February Manifesto" of 1899, which aimed to deprive Finland of its autonomy by curtailing freedom of speech and assembly. In early November that year, the "Press Pension Celebrations" ostensibly designed to raise money for the



pension funds of newspapermen were in fact intended to provide both financial and moral support for a struggling, beleaguered press. The three-day celebration's main event took place on November 4, a gala performance featuring a set of historical tableaux with music by Sibelius, who wrote seven numbers in all. The final tableau began with the words, "The powers of darkness menacing Finland have not succeeded in their terrible threat. Finland awakes..." and it was the music for this scene that became, in its revised version of 1900, *Finlandia*.

Finlandia and the Second Symphony are linked by two factors of immediate interest: the political context in which they were written, and the fact that the idea for an overture entitled *Finlandia* was actually suggested to Sibelius in a letter from an anonymous admirer who introduced himself a short while later as Axel Carpelan. For several months beginning in February 1901, using funds secured for him by Carpelan, Sibelius vacationed with his family in Italy, where he sketched the Second Symphony. Putting aside plans to work on a Dante-inspired tone poem, Sibelius completed the symphony, which he dedicated to Carpelan, early the following year, though revisions forced postponement of the premiere until March. Also on the program—which the composer led four times, to sold-out houses—were an overture in A minor and an Impromptu for female voices and orchestra written by Sibelius especially for the occasion. The first performance, given by the Helsinki Philharmonic, took place on March 8, 1902.

Sibelius had by now come to represent an embodiment of Finland's national pride; he had been among the first to sign a recent petition protesting a Russian plan to dissolve the Finnish army in yet another attempt by Russia to undermine Finland's identity. With this in mind, it is easy to understand how Robert Kajanus chose to read a political message—never specifically intended by the composer—into the music. In an article following the premiere, Kajanus wrote:

"The Andante strikes one as the most broken-hearted protest against all injustice that threatens at the present time to deprive the sun of its light and our flowers of their scent.... The scherzo gives a picture of frenetic preparations. Everyone piles his straw on the haystack, all fibres are strained and every second seems to last an hour. One senses in the contrasting Trio section with its oboe motive in G-flat what is at stake. The finale develops toward a triumphant conclusion intended to rouse in the listener a picture of lighter and confident prospects for the future."

To fill out this programmatic interpretation, it is worth mentioning, too, that when the Boston Symphony Orchestra performed the Second Symphony under Finnish conductor Georg Schnéevoigt in 1924, Schnéevoigt observed to the BSO's program annotator Philip Hale that, regarding the beginning, "the composer's intention was to depict in the first movement the quiet, pastoral life of the Finns undisturbed by thought of oppression." There is of course no denying that the conclusion of the Second Symphony is "triumphant," but the work's dramatic progress can be appreciated just as well in purely musical terms. There is a fluidity of motion that constantly engages the ear, deriving in part from the choice of broad-breathed time signatures (e.g., 6/4 in the first movement, 12/4 for the oboe melody of the scherzo's contrasting section, 3/2 for the finale), and also from the composer's unerring feel for the orchestral palette, as he adds layer upon layer of sound to achieve each climax, sets individual instrumental colors against the whole, and highlights these colors within ever-varying textures. The first two movements are of a piece, the nobility of the Andante responding to the questions raised by the opening Allegretto. The last two movements are literally connected, the Vivacissimo bursting forth with the symphony's fastest and most furious music, the contrasting oboe melody (whose repeated notes hark back to the symphony's opening) leading on its second appearance directly to the finale in one of Sibelius' boldest strokes of invention—one that he would elaborate with ever-increasing ingenuity and originality in the symphonies yet to come.



ANDRIS NELSONS

Andris Nelsons became the Boston Symphony Orchestra's Ray and Maria Stata Music Director in September 2014, following a year as Music Director Designate. In his first season as its fifteenth music director, he leads the orchestra in ten programs at Symphony Hall, repeating three of them at Carnegie Hall in New York. He made his BSO debut in March 2011 at Carnegie Hall with Mahler's Symphony No. 9. His Tanglewood debut was in July 2012—conducting both the BSO and Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra as part of Tanglewood's 75th Anniversary Gala—and his Symphony Hall debut in January 2013. Maestro Nelsons' Boston appointment has affirmed his place among today's most sought-after conductors; he is acclaimed for his work in both concert and opera, with such distinguished institutions as the Berlin Philharmonic, Vienna Philharmonic, Amsterdam's Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Gewandhaus Orchestra of Leipzig, the Bavarian Radio Symphony, Philharmonia Orchestra, Vienna State Opera, Metropolitan Opera, Bayreuth Festival, and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. His tenure since 2008 as music director of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra—a position he holds until the summer of 2015—has encompassed major tours worldwide, as well as regular summer festival appearances and acclaimed recordings. He is also the subject of a recent DVD, a documentary film entitled "Andris Nelsons: Genius on Fire." Born in Riga, Latvia, in 1978 to a family of musicians, Andris Nelsons began his career as a trumpeter in the Latvian National Opera Orchestra before studying conducting. Prior to his position with the CBSO, he was principal conductor of the Nordwestdeutsche Philharmonie in Herford, Germany, from 2006 to 2009, and music director of the Latvian National Opera from 2003 to 2007.

BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA 2014–2015

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Charles Munch chair, *ended in
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Tamara Smirnova

Associate Concertmaster
Helen Horner McIntyre chair, *ended
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Alexander Velinon

Assistant Concertmaster
Robert L. Beal, Enid L., and Bruce A.
Beal chair, *ended in perpetuity*

Elita Kang

Assistant Concertmaster
Edward and Bertha C. Rose chair,
ended in perpetuity

Bo Youp Hwang §

John and Dorothy Wilson chair,
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chair, *ended in perpetuity*

Ikuko Mizuno

Ruth and Carl J. Shapiro chair,
ended in perpetuity

Nancy Bracken *

Stephanie Morris Marryott and
Franklin J. Marryott chair

Aza Raykhtsaum *

Catherine and Paul Buttenwieser chair

Bonnie Bewick *

Mary B. Saltonstall chair,
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Wendy Putnam *

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Charles S. Dana chair, *ended in
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ended in perpetuity

(position vacant)

Lois and Harlan Anderson chair,
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Diana Osgood Tottenham/Hamilton Osgood chair, endowed in perpetuity

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