

# **The **Seven** Symphonies: A Finnish Murder Mystery**

## **THE SIXTH SIBELIUS LECTURE**

Excerpt: pages 306 – 310 from the new International Edition of the novel, which will become available to US & UK readers in February 2005.

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Embedded in this unusual crime thriller are **seven public lectures about Sibelius and his music** given at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki by the fictional character Dr Nick Lewis, a Welsh musicologist who has lived for many years in Finland.

You will notice that \* [ some parts of this lecture excerpt have been bracketed off as optional. ] \* This is a feature of all seven lectures, provided for the benefit of those readers who wish to skip the more theoretical elements.

The following pages also contain some material relevant to the murder mystery plot. These passages are, in this excerpt, shown in grey.

The additional characters mentioned are:

Detective Inspector Miranda Lewis, Finnish-born daughter of the lecturer; Adrian Gamble, an English composer; Rosie Lewis, Miranda's younger sister; Phillip Burton, an English teacher; Dr Panu Marski, a forensic psychologist.

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made her uncomfortable. Miranda wasn't sure why. There was no reason to feel ashamed. She couldn't tell where this relationship with Adrian might lead long-term, but it had already reawakened her responsiveness to physical tenderness and closeness: something she'd almost conditioned herself into believing she didn't need. Yes, it was high time to break out of her self-imposed celibacy! So why this reluctance to tell Rosie? One way or another, she'd have to deal with it by the end of the day.

"Five weeks ago, in the first lecture of this series, I discussed the concept of *Finnishness* in Sibelius's music. I'd now like to review the subject...

"We've seen how the composer's style — initially derived from the prevailing German and Russian models — steadily evolved into something altogether more personal and original. Was this evolution then an acquisition of greater degrees of Finnishness? Throughout his life, Sibelius categorically denied — although perhaps not with total honesty — having employed folk melodies in any of his compositions; and he clearly wished to be taken seriously as a player in the larger arena of Western musical civilization — not compartmentalized off into some parochial Nordic national school. Which begs a further question: if Sibelius was such a national composer, shouldn't there be a national school to accompany him? It's true that a handful of Finnish composers self-consciously attempted to create one. But their works affect a superficial imitation of some of the master's textural characteristics with an almost exclusive reliance on Kalevala mythology. They are seldom performed outside Finland.

"Sibelius's *modus operandi* was, in fact, such that his music is extremely difficult to imitate...

\* [ He would allow a composition to grow organically from a small amount of thematic material, and his orchestration was an integral part of that process. It's true that he made use of the piano to sketch out his preliminary ideas, but rarely did he draft the bare musical lines of his orchestral works at any length — intending to orchestrate them later. Much of the compositional process occurred in his own head over a long period of gestation until, at last, it could flow onto the page more or less in full score.

"Last Wednesday I endeavoured to outline some of the

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composer's stylistic devices. It's important to realize that none of them can be easily separated from the music as a whole. We cannot graft them onto another piece to make a parody of Sibelius, as we might do successfully with, for example, Stravinsky's harmonic and rhythmic devices. Stravinsky's traits are skin-deep and easily imitated. Sibelius's lie at a more profound level of structure. They're fully integrated into the compositional process for each specific composition. This is why a convincing imitation of Sibelius's music would prove so difficult. ]\*

"It's a tempting yet ultimately simplistic stratagem in criticism and commentary to catalogue an artist according to his environment — to somehow attribute his genius to such geographical features as fjords or mountain ranges or idyllic rolling hillsides of agrarian greenery. But the well-springs of creativity will always lie in the artist's individuality as a human spirit, in his or her unique ability to transform the medium of choice — be it music, painting or literature — into a vehicle for universal human expression. We cannot limit the source of Sibelius's finest music to a single geographical location. It is the heritage of all mankind. It speaks to everyone everywhere, and at the most profound of human levels. What should be recognized is that Sibelius's music is not, in any very important sense, itself Finnish; rather that Finnish music has become, by definition and after the event, the music of Sibelius.

"And yet... "

Dr Lewis halted on a high peak of intonation. The audience waited expectantly, and the sudden silence achieved something that the last few minutes of Welshly lilting eloquence had failed to do: it snapped Miranda back from where she'd drifted at the earlier mention of Sibelius's *modus operandi* into a separate train of thought concerning garden secateurs, hypodermic syringes, and wire ligatures. With a shudder she resolved to keep her attention on the lecture — although her father was himself now heading off in a direction not obviously connected to the previous topic...

"Sibelius was endowed with the faculty of perfect pitch, and he also experienced a vivid synaesthetic connection between colours and musical sounds. In childhood, he attempted to match the bright hues of the living room carpet to particular keys on the family piano. In later life, he would describe B major, for example, as a glaring red; or

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explain that an especially favourite shade of green found rarely and exclusively in the sky at sunset time lay somewhere between D and E-flat. Colours could likewise affect his mood. The sight of venison soup mixed with blackcurrant juice is said to have depressed him, whereas a glimpse of scarlet silk could cheer him up for the rest of the day. Birdsong he found especially fascinating. The curlew sang between A and F. The bullfinch 'double-stopped' like two simultaneous strings on a violin. The composer even claimed that he could recognize which flocks of migrating starlings had wintered in noisy city environments by the timbre of their twittering. And then there was the call of the crane, which he referred to as the *leitmotiv* of his whole life. His favourite birds were, in fact, cranes and swans. Could there be some significance in the fact that Jean's only memory of the parent he lost so young was sitting on his father's lap being shown a picture of a huge swan?

"All this leads us to an important aspect of Sibelius's personality: his closeness to nature. He'd visited Niagara Falls; he'd revelled in the Moravian scenery of farmhouses and forested hills near Brno, once viewed from a railway carriage; and he'd never forgotten the majestic oak trees and bluebell woods of the English countryside. But his greatest love would remain for his home country.

"By overpopulated mainstream European standards, Finland is still blessed with large and relatively untouched areas of natural beauty. Respect for nature is a deep-seated component of the Finnish persona. Even the technologically savvy, mobile-phone-wielding, internet-exploiting, techno-music-designing younger generation of Finns hasn't entirely lost this traditional love for the forests and lakes of the national heartland. Should we then be asking ourselves whether this oh-so-Finnish love of nature, with all its associated world of rich visual and aural timbres... whether this has in some sense found its way into the music of Sibelius? Have we at last found that Finnish connection? The only answer I can offer is a subjective one. If I were sent alone to an isolated cottage on an island somewhere in the middle of the Finnish lake district, and was allowed just one piece of music to keep me company for the duration, I know exactly which piece it would have to be: Sibelius's Sixth Symphony, opus 104.

"Having categorized the Fourth as the least understood of

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Sibelius's symphonies, we should, I believe, designate the Sixth as the most underestimated.

\* [Like the Third, it's less frequently performed, and the impression made on the unfamiliar listener is likely to be that of a lightweight, insubstantial work. It is, in fact, that very insubstantiality which, after repeated listenings, makes the Sixth Symphony one of Sibelius's most rewarding creations. It floats, it glides, it drifts like gossamer on a predominantly gentle, though from time to time quirky and unpredictable wind. This lighter-than-air incorporeality is achieved, in part, by an underutilization of the bass instruments and a tendency towards quieter dynamic levels. The addition of a smooth-sounding bass clarinet to the low register — its only appearance in any of Sibelius's symphonies, by the way — and the delicate highlighting imparted by a single harp: these also contribute much to the individual colouring of the symphony. ] \*

"The orchestration is indisputably original, although it remains straightforward and unassuming, avoiding any unnecessary 'window dressing'. As Sibelius explained: in contrast to most of his contemporaries, he was not offering a colourfully concocted cocktail, but *pure spring water*."

Miranda's mind was wandering again...

The girl is found spread-eagled on the landing. She's fully clothed. The French horn lies untidily upended and forgotten in the corner. The finger has been removed, but where is the 'window dressing'? Where is the vanity of the set piece? The tableau? And what on earth happened to the sexual component? Of course, he was interrupted, but...

Phillip shifted in his chair beside her. She turned, and their eyes met. When he gave her a questioning look, Miranda made an effort to smooth the frown she must be wearing into something more appropriate. Phillip seemed reassured and his attention slipped back to the stage. Miranda's was proving more elusive.

\* [ "Although outwardly adopting the traditional four-part plan," her father was now saying, "the symphony lacks a genuine slow movement. In fact, the four movements seem strangely alike. The dramatic contrasts we expect in the large-scale architecture of a symphony have been subsumed and miniaturized into brief, elegantly delineated upsurges of more turbulent and strident energy. They

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provide a minimal, though essential, amount of piquancy. Only in the finale is the calmly rippling textural stream allowed to expand for a while into a raging torrent. And yet even *this* outburst is counteracted by the serenity — one might almost say detached restraint — of the beautiful coda that concludes the movement and the whole work. The overall after-image one carries away from a performance of the Sixth Symphony is that of pastoral tranquility and inner solitude; benign certainly but, as we would expect of Sibelius's important later works, entirely without sentimentality. ] \*

"Yes, this Sixth Symphony, like the Fourth, stands quite alone in the composer's output. Its atmosphere is unique, though bearing throughout Sibelius's unmistakable signature."

Another distraction for Miranda: What had Panu Marski said about the difference between *modus operandi* and 'signature'? Something about the 'signature' being less functional than the MO — that it revealed the emotional component of the crime rather than mere practicalities. Was that the point he'd been making? Damn, she couldn't remember! And damn the whole case! It interfered with everything she tried to do. She couldn't even listen to her father's lecture without drawing a parallel to those miserable serial killings!

Despite later recalling mention of Sibelius's *emphasis on the Dorian mode*, and the *organic, almost minimalistic development of his motivic material*, Miranda realized towards the end of the lecture how little she'd taken in of her father's detailed analysis. She was obliged to comfort herself with his closing comments...

"In conclusion," Nick had said, "we should surely pay heed to the composer's own advice that, although one may analyse, explain theoretically, and find various interesting things going on in the music, it's important not to forget that the Sixth Symphony is, beyond anything else, a poem."

[This is the end of the Sixth Lecture excerpt from. . .](#)

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