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The Fourth Symphony: Ending and Beginning in Complete Disaster

The great conductor Herbert von Karajan described Sibelius's Fourth Symphony as "one of the very few symphonies that ends in complete disaster" (Osborne 1989: 108); and almost as disastrous were the first attempts to record it. The nature of the disaster in which the symphony itself culminates lies in the actual thematic material with which Sibelius chose to work; but its successful performance was partially obstructed by Sibelius's habit of giving scant advice to the interpreter.

In addition to motivic interaction, the construction of the Fourth Symphony is based on a large-scale harmonic and rhythmic experiment for which there is no precedent. For instance, the very beginning of the work is simply an attempt to notate an *allargando* (see first movement, bars 1–6). Sibelius is simultaneously giving us the germ of the whole work, while also providing a framework to prepare the listener for what he wants to say. This is his equivalent to the introduction of a Haydn symphony; but it is also an introduction to a series of introductions. Listening without preconceived notions of form, we discover that each movement ends without resolution and that finally Sibelius draws a series of lines under what he has written and says good night. I think this is part of the fundamental appeal of Sibelius's music: he mirrors real life in having no easy fixes to offer, no cosy symmetry, no "and they all lived happily ever after" storybook ending; but his direct and honest approach also created problems for the symphony's first interpreters.

The first recording of the work was made by Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra on 23 April 1932. Stokowski tried to make sense of the ending and give it a resolution. As can be seen from Table II, Stokowski began the finale very slowly, speeding up slightly by letter G, though losing way again by the time he reached the eighth measure of letter W and getting even slower to the end, until finally grinding to a halt. Made with an extremely small string complement of 8, 6, 4, 4, 3, the recording was not, so far as I am aware, issued in Europe, but was undoubtedly known at EMI in London, and surely Stokowski would have sent Sibelius a copy. It was not an auspicious start.

By the time of his death in July 1933, Robert Kajanus, Sibelius's favoured early interpreter, had already conducted for the first two volumes of the Sibelius Society recordings, and Georg Schnéevoigt, who succeeded him as conductor of the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra, was the obvious person to continue this work. In February 1934 Sibelius wrote to Walter Legge, who was in charge of the society recordings for EMI, telling him in a postscript that: "My old friend Professor Schnéevoigt is coming to London in May with his orchestra and wants to play my Symphony No. 6 and *The Oceanides*. How do you feel about this? He plays these works very well." (Translated from German in Legge 1998: 69.) Legge took the hint and arranged for the Sixth Symphony to be recorded



in concert. He sent test pressings to Sibelius, including also recordings of *Luonnotar* and the Fourth Symphony made at Schnéevoigt's Queen's Hall concert on 4 June 1934, writing "[...] I wait anxiously to hear from you that they please you. I am sure that they will, particularly those of the Sixth Symphony." (Legge 1998: 70) This live recording of the Sixth Symphony was indeed approved and issued in Vol. 3 of the Sibelius Society series.

It is not clear whether Sibelius denied his imprimatur for the Schnéevoigt recordings of the Fourth Symphony and *Luonnotar*, since no letter from him on the subject is known. Maybe he wrote about it when he gave his approval for the Sixth Symphony recording, or perhaps he did not want to condemn an old friend in writing. If this latter suggestion is true, the problem may quite possibly have been discussed when Legge visited Sibelius in the summer of 1934. (Legge 1998: 72–74) Obvious grounds for not issuing the Schnéevoigt recording are provided by some unfortunate lapses in playing by the first horn and a temporarily poor recorded balance shortly after letter D in the finale, where the solo viola is too forward; though Sibelius may have made some verbal remarks that there were other interpretive problems, with or without going into detail.

Matters were taken further when Legge sent to Sibelius on 11 January 1935 a list of discrepancies of tempi and balance which Sir Thomas Beecham had found between the score and the Schnéevoigt recording, asking for clarification for the purpose of a concert performance Beecham was to give shortly. (Legge 1998: 74–76) Five days later, Sibelius telegraphed Legge: "SATISFIED WITH SIR THOMAS JUSTIFIED CRITICISM LETTER FOLLOWS GREETINGS SIBELIUS". (Legge 1998: 76) The following day, still in haste, Sibelius sent a letter with a detailed response to nearly all of Beecham's comments, and including metronome marks.¹ So fundamentally different are the proposed tempi from those of Schnéevoigt's performance as to make it clear that he and the composer had totally incompatible ideas about how the first and last movements should go.

The first column of Table I shows what Beecham measured from the Schnéevoigt recording. Using a metronome to do this is not easy, and by the time Beecham dealt with the finale he made significant errors which I have marked with asterisks (the actual tempi are given in Table II). The second column gives the gist of Sibelius's response (translated from German in Legge 1998: 76–77).² Apropos of the opening tempo Beecham had written

¹Jussi Jalas (1988) reports that Sibelius said: "There is no such thing as tempo as an absolute concept. I have made metronome markings only in order to prevent the grossest mistakes, so that there should not be a repetition of something I heard on the radio some time ago, when the Karelia overture was played at half the correct speed. My metronome markings are generally a load of rubbish." (Quoted from a book review translation by Hildi Hawkins in *Finnish Music Quarterly*, 1/89, p. 50.)

²There are a few errors of reading and translation of this letter in Legge 1998. Namely, the tempo for the first movement's letter B should be read as "40 (–48)" and not "40 (–45)", and Sibelius's original ending to the letter reads: "Von Letter [sic] S an nach und nach ruhiger bis $\text{♩} = 100$ bei Letter W. Von Letter W bis zum Schluss $\text{♩} = 100$. Die 6 letzten Takte: *mf*. So ernst wie möglich und ohne *ritardando* (tragisch, ohne Tränen, unwiederrufflich)."





Table I : Sibelius's Metronome Marks

| | Schnéevoigt (Beecham letter) | Sibelius 1935 | Sibelius 1937 | Sibelius ca. 1942 |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| 1st Movement | | | | |
| beginning | ♩ = 48–50 | ♩ = 52–60 | ♩ = 54 | ♩ = 48–54 |
| B <i>Adagio</i> | ♩ = 76–80 | ♩ = 40 (–48) | | |
| C + 7 <i>Tempo I</i> | ♩ = 80 | ♩ = 60 | | |
| I <i>Adagio</i> (page 11) | | ♩ = 40 | | |
| <i>Tempo I</i> (page 12) | | ♩ = 60 | | |
| 2nd Movement | | | | |
| | | | ♩ = 96 | ♩ = 96–104 |
| 3rd Movement | | | | |
| before C | ♩ = 56 | | ♩ = 50 | ♩ = 80–92 |
| after C | ♩ = 66 | | | |
| D + 5 | ♩ = 80 | | | |
| 4th Movement | | | | |
| beginning | ♩ = 144 * | ♩ = 132 | ♩ = 108 | ♩ = 126–132 |
| F | ♩ = 132 | | | |
| S onwards | ♩ = 120 | <i>rallentando</i> | | |
| W | ♩ = 96–100 | ♩ = 100 | | |
| end | ♩ = 80 * | ♩ = 100 | | |

“The opening is marked *Tempo molto moderato quasi adagio*. The time adopted by the Finnish Orchestra is M.M. ♩ = 48–50. As this is easily the slowest speed of any known piece yet written it should be marked *Adagio molto*. All the more so because the so-called *Adagio* at Letter B is M.M. ♩ = 76–80, a much quicker time.” (Legge 1998: 75) Sibelius’s response shows that the opening is not to be played as slowly as the *Adagio* at letter B, and that the tempo of the opening cello theme should be about twice as fast as Schnéevoigt had adopted. Stokowski had got this right. See Table II.

Armed with this information, Beecham conducted the symphony on tour with his London Philharmonic Orchestra in Edinburgh (26 January, 1935) and Sheffield (28 January, 1935), culminating in a performance at a Royal Philharmonic Society concert in the Queen’s Hall, London, on 31 January, 1935. (Parker 1985, Benson 1998: 243–244) This concert must have been broadcast by the BBC,³ since the very next day Sibelius wrote to Legge saying: “My dear friend, I think this is excellent. Perfect. While listening to it I noted the following [...]” (Legge 1998: 77)

Sibelius’s comments on Beecham’s performance concern details of perfecting the interpretation. He concluded: “I must now express my deep admiration for Sir Thomas

³In the interview which Sibelius gave Legge during the summer of 1934, published in the *Daily Telegraph* on 15 December 1934, Sibelius had already been quoted as saying: “Beecham’s performances have come to me by wireless and they are superb.” (Legge 1998: 74)



Beecham's masterly conducting. For me it was something unique and remarkable." Given this testimonial, and Legge's promotion of him, Beecham was an obvious candidate to record the Fourth Symphony for Vol. 5 of the Sibelius Society edition. But this did not happen until the end of 1937, possibly because of a marketing decision taken to record first the Violin Concerto with Heifetz and issue this as the major work of Vol. 4, or to reduce Schnévoigt's loss of face.

The first set of sessions for the Beecham recording took place on 27 and 29 October, and 1 November, 1937 (Gray 1979: 40). It can be assumed that the work was deemed finished on 1 November, since on the same day Beecham proceeded to record six sides of the *Tempest* Music and six takes of Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer* Overture. From 8 to 15 November Beecham and Legge were in Berlin making their famous *Magic Flute* recording. In fact, Legge was already in Berlin on 5 November recording, so it was probably not until he returned to London that he was able to listen to test pressings of the Sibelius symphony. (Gray 1979: 40–41, Sanders 1982: 252)

Maybe Legge had misplaced Sibelius's earlier letter, for on 19 November 1937 he sent a telegram to Sibelius asking for metronome marks to all four movements; and this action, taken after the recording sessions, indicates that Legge, at least, had misgivings about Beecham's tempi. Sibelius telegraphed back the next day, providing metronome markings for the inner movements for the first time. The marking for the finale was now significantly slower than that provided nearly three years earlier. See Table I, column 3.⁴

Test pressings were sent to Sibelius, who listened to them and wrote on 28 November, 1935 to Legge:

As this symphony is hardly suitable for the gramophone one needs to perform much of it with a different balance than indicated in the full score. The solo passages sometimes cannot be heard at all.⁵ Unfortunately I cannot really comment on the overall sound as the equipment which you sent me is now completely ruined after being repaired locally. I must therefore travel to Helsinki, albeit reluctantly, to listen to the records again and will write to you about this in more detail. The tempi were fine although I would suggest playing more softly in the last movement from letter S. (Translated from German in Legge 1998: 82–83.)

It is not known whether Sibelius actually did listen to the test pressings again before sending a telegram to Legge two days later, saying: "DISCS BY SIR THOMAS ARE EXCELLENT CANCEL LETTER 28/11" (Legge 1998: 83). Forty years later, Legge claimed that Sibelius had sent him a four-page letter with detailed criticisms of this first

⁴Column four of Table I gives metronome marks attributed to Sibelius and published as "Metronomimerkinnät Sibeliusen sinfonioihin" [Metronome Markings for Sibelius's Symphonies], *Musiikkitieto* I/1943, p. 12.

⁵Robert Layton (1965: 82) reports apropos of the Beecham recording that "a set of miniature bells were specially constructed that were more powerful than the glockenspiel to ensure their audibility on 78 r.p.m. records." Whether this set was made specially for Beecham's second recording is not stated. As only nine pitches are used, it is conceivable that they may have been constructed in less than a week.





Table II: Measurements from recordings

| | Stokowski | Schnéevoigt | Beecham 1937 | Beecham 1955 | Karajan 1954 | Karajan 1965 |
|------------------------------|-----------|-------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| First Movement | | | | | | |
| page 1 | ♩ = 48 | ♩ = 58 | ♩ = 36 | ♩ = 47 | ♩ = 57 | ♩ = 52 |
| page 2 | ♩ = 48 | ♩ = 53 | ♩ = 36 | ♩ = 37 | ♩ = 52 | ♩ = 44 |
| B | ♩ = 50 | ♩ = 40 | ♩ = 51 | ♩ = 45 | ♩ = 36 | ♩ = 37 |
| C + 6 | ♩ = 52 | ♩ = 29 | ♩ = 37 | ♩ = 40 | ♩ = 26 | ♩ = 28 |
| C + 7 (Tempo I) | ♩ = 61 | ♩ = 33 | ♩ = 42 | ♩ = 45 | ♩ = 50 | ♩ = 42 |
| D | ♩ = 72 | ♩ = 44 | ♩ = 47 | ♩ = 57 | ♩ = 56 | ♩ = 46 |
| Second Movement | | | | | | |
| bars 1 – 28 | ♩ = 83 | ♩ = 106 | ♩ = 102 | ♩ = 102 | ♩ = 93 | ♩ = 95 |
| K + 4 – K + 14 | ♩ = 59 | ♩ = 70 | ♩ = 63 | ♩ = 64 | ♩ = 45 | ♩ = 47 |
| M + 7 – M + 15 | ♩ = 74 | ♩ = 84 | ♩ = 68 | ♩ = 68 | ♩ = 47 | ♩ = 51 |
| Third Movement | | | | | | |
| bar 1 | ♩ = 78 | ♩ = 48 | ♩ = 64 | ♩ = 65 | ♩ = 57 | ♩ = 59 |
| Fourth Movement | | | | | | |
| bars 1 – 6 | ♩ = 98 | ♩ = 129 | ♩ = 127 | ♩ = 125 | ♩ = 128 | ♩ = 122 |
| the 8 bars before G | ♩ = 105 | ♩ = 131 | ♩ = 120 | ♩ = 125 | ♩ = 117 | ♩ = 113 |
| W + 8 | ♩ = 55 | ♩ = 98 | ♩ = 100 | ♩ = 97 | ♩ = 72 | ♩ = 75 |
| last 6 bars | ♩ = 47 | ♩ = 73 | ♩ = 72 | ♩ = 81 | ♩ = 68 | ♩ = 83 |

recording, but that Beecham, however, simultaneously persuaded Sibelius to send him (Beecham) a telegram approving the pressings. Legge stated further that when he produced the letter, Beecham capitulated, proposing to take the symphony on tour, with Legge present for the purpose of checking that Sibelius's criticisms were being addressed. According to Legge, Beecham also offered to re-record the symphony at his own expense. (See Amis 1989 and Schwarzkopf 1982: 164–165.) Not all these statements jibe completely with the facts. The tour during which Beecham worked on the Fourth Symphony had already taken place in January 1935, and the events surrounding it suggest almost conclusively that it was this tour to which Legge refers. There was, in fact, only time for a single performance of the symphony, in the Queen's Hall on 2 December. (Parker 1985) This all-Sibelius programme, which commenced with Symphonies 6 and 7 and concluded with the *Karelia* Suite, was given under the auspices of the Royal Philharmonic Society.⁶

There must have been a good reason why Beecham re-recorded the whole work on 10 December 1937 (Gray 1979: 40). Maybe this was done in response to a now-lost four-page letter from Sibelius, as Legge maintained, or perhaps Sibelius stood by his

⁶Though hardly an impartial observer, Legge himself reviewed this concert in glowing terms for the *Manchester Guardian* the following day (See Schwarzkopf 1982: 54–55).



comments in his letter of 28 November when he heard the test pressings on better equipment. Equally possible is that Legge and Beecham agreed in any case with Sibelius's letter of 28 November. The new takes were used for the issued master, and presumably Sibelius was again sent test pressings, though regrettably no further correspondence on the matter seems to have survived.

Table II shows measured metronome marks for cardinal points in the work. To be noted are that Beecham ignored Sibelius's remarks concerning the two tempi of the first movement; like Schnévoigt, he reversed the composer's intended relationship between them, playing the opening much slower, and letter B faster, than Sibelius recommended. The tempi for Beecham in the fourth column are for the recording made in 1955 at the concert given in London to celebrate Sibelius's 90th birthday, when Beecham regrettably still ignored the composer's instructions.

To be noted also is the slower tempo for the fanfare at the sixth bar of letter C in the first movement taken by everyone except Stokowski, who is also the only conductor of those surveyed to maintain the tempo of letter B for the fanfare, even though this tempo is itself faster than Sibelius indicates. Other metronome marks are revealing, particularly of the way all the conductors make an accelerando in the four bars between Tempo I (C + 7) and letter D in the first movement. Tempi are given for the second movement, showing how both Stokowski and Schnévoigt accelerated during its course. The slow movement has been subjected to a variety of tempi, though none except Stokowski's approaches Sibelius's recommendation.

How about the ending? When Beecham had written to Sibelius in January 1935 about Schnévoigt's recording, he had pointed out that: "At the close of this movement the conductor makes a *rallentando poco a poco*. He also makes a marked *diminuendo* during these last six bars, ending *pp*. This seems good and natural, but it is not marked in the score. What does Professor Sibelius want here?" (Legge 1989: 76) Sibelius had replied "From Letter S on, gradually more calm until $\text{♩} = 100$. From Letter W until the end $\text{♩} = 100$. The last six bars: *mf*. As solemn as possible and without *ritardando* (tragic, without tears, definite)." (Author's translation. See Note 2.) By December 1937, Beecham had forgotten this advice: he started off with good intentions at letter W with Sibelius's metronome mark, but allowed himself to slow down in the last line, ending in the same tempo as Schnévoigt, and losing further ground in the last two chords. Nevertheless, this is a big improvement on Stokowski and Schnévoigt. To be fair, all three of these recordings have their merits and are interesting; but Sibelius quite clearly insisted that a strict tempo ending is crucial for the work, and in this respect none of the three is satisfactory.

It is well worth inspecting the Karajan recording of 1954. At that time Karajan and Legge were very close; they spent hours preparing for their work in the recording studio and in doing so they listened to and discussed previous recordings. It would have been unthinkable for Legge not to have talked with Karajan about the circumstances of the Beecham recording and, indeed, in a letter to Sibelius of September 1954 Legge wrote:



“[...] You have probably forgotten, but in 1937 you kindly sent me new metronome markings for the end of the Fourth Symphony. These were an invaluable guide to us in recording and it has particularly gratified me to see that several American critics have commented that for the first time in their experience the wonderful two last pages of the Fourth Symphony are revealed in an entirely new light.” (Tawaststjerna 1997: 329) The results of this can be seen in Table II, which also shows that the relationship between the two tempi of the first movement are as Sibelius stipulated in 1935.

The ending of the finale is slower than Sibelius envisaged, but the previous recordings had demonstrated by their inability to maintain it that $\text{♩} = 100$ may be too fast for the last page. Karajan, however, sticks closely to his tempo of $\text{♩} = 70$ throughout the final page, and it is this that allows a sense of tragedy that avoids any hint of self pity.

Sibelius wrote to Legge in September 1954: “[...] As you know, I have always been a great admirer of Mr v. Karajan and his magnificent rendering of my works has given me the keenest satisfaction. Especially in the Fourth Symphony, his great artistic line and the inner beauty of the interpretation have deeply impressed me [...]” (Legge 1998: 202–203) Writing again to Legge in May of the following year, Sibelius repeated his high opinion of Karajan: “You have perhaps wondered why I have not written to you before and thanked you for the excellent recordings of my Fourth and Fifth Symphony [sic]. I now have heard them many times and can only say that I am happy. Karajan is a great master. His interpretation is superb, technically and musically.” (Legge 1998: 203)⁷ Legge wrote that Sibelius described Karajan as: “[...] the only one who plays what I meant”, (Schwarzkopf 1982: 231) and Legge also reported that, shortly after he delivered test pressings of Karajan’s recordings of Symphonies 4 and 7 and *Tapiola* to Sibelius, the latter told him: “Karajan is the only man who really understands my music: our old friend Beecham always makes it sound as if he had learned it and conducted it from a first fiddle part.” (Schwarzkopf 1982: 165, Amis 1998)

What was it then that Sibelius heard in the Karajan recording that Beecham did not achieve? We should not take the composer’s comment too literally, but it was obviously a reference to Karajan’s understanding of and attention to the essential polyphonic nature of Sibelius’s music – not something which appealed much to Beecham, as is obvious when one examines his repertoire – and his ability to relate things over a long time span. Specifically in the Fourth Symphony I should like to draw attention to a critical passage in the finale. It is in that great maelstrom of themes, leading to the drop of a major seventh plus an octave entrusted to the trumpets and trombones, where Karajan recognised the importance of the violin and viola line above the more obvious thematic fragments. This is the *allargando* from the opening of the first movement; an *ostinato* beginning with

⁷It is curious that Sibelius approved the third trombone’s E# in the sixth bar of letter C in the first movement. Very odd too is the short F# of bar 3, which is not only uncharacteristic of Karajan and the Philharmonia Orchestra, but also disfigures Sibelius’s composed *allargando*.





8 notes to the bar, then six, followed by four, three, two, one. (See Finale, letter O to seven bars after letter P.) The “complete disaster” that Karajan describes is surely that this intervention fails in its intended calming effect. Beecham plays the passage at face value; but it is Karajan who makes the connection between it and the regular syncopated minims which eventually peter out at the beginning of the last line of printed music: the death throes of the composed *allargando* with which the symphony opened. This is why the tempo must be mercilessly maintained to the end.⁸

In preparing this paper, I at first thought that my impressions were too subjective. This despite the fact that the evidence shows that Beecham did not follow Sibelius’s crucial instructions. Because of his pioneering work on behalf of the composer, Beecham has always been rightly admired by British Sibelius lovers, and I had always been told that the Beecham recording of the Fourth Symphony was the one to hear. Therefore it took some time to come to terms with the idea that it was Karajan and not Beecham who unlocked the secret to the work. Confirmation of this opinion comes from one renowned Sibelius expert, who inscribed a copy of the German version of his Sibelius biography with the words: “To Herbert von Karajan. The only conductor who understands the Fourth Symphony. Erik Tawaststjerna.” (Osborne 1998: 524)

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⁸Layton (1981) quotes Karajan as describing the symphony as “[...] a work without compromises – it faces the ultimate”.





Recordings of Symphony No. 4

Stokowski/Philadelphia Orchestra (1932). RCA Victor Masterworks set 160.

Schnévoigt/Finnish National Orchestra (1934). Published for the first time in 1997. World Records SH237.

Beecham/London Philharmonic Orchestra (1937). EMI DB3351-5; CDM 7 64027 2.

Karajan/Philharmonia Orchestra (1953). EMI 33CX1125; CDM 5 66600 2.

Beecham/Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (1955). Published for the first time in 2000. BBC Records BBCL4041-2.

Karajan/Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra (1965). Deutsche Grammophon 415 108-2.

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