

In Search of Sibelius Six
A personal survey of selected performances of Sibelius's Sixth Symphony
by Christopher Howell

I have recently discussed off-the-beaten-track recordings of [Bruckner's](#) and [Schubert's](#) sixth symphonies. I am not developing an obsession with sixth symphonies and sooner or later this occasional series will embrace works by composers who did not write six symphonies anyway. Sibelius's Sixth Symphony has nevertheless always been both an inspiration and a frustration to me. An inspiration because in some ways it is my favourite of the seven, a frustration because performances rarely leave me as satisfied as I hoped.

As with my Bruckner and Schubert articles, this is not intended as a beginner's guide to recordings of this symphony – once little recorded, the number of available versions has increased dauntingly in recent years. In this personal search for an interpretation that matches my own vision of the work – it may not match other people's – I shall take in most of the earlier recordings, of which there were not many till about 1960. I shall then look at some rarer versions, not all from the "official" discography. Indeed, as in my Bruckner and Schubert articles, I shall be looking at some interesting performances by conductors who were never invited to record it in the studios at all. The availability of these being somewhat volatile, I shall limit myself to heartfelt but generalized thanks to the enthusiastic bloggers, YouTube posters and contributors to limited-access channels who have made it possible for me to hear them. I shall conclude by discussing four recent broadcast performances by conductors still very much with us. A table with timings will be found at the foot of the article.

From 78s to the beginning of stereo

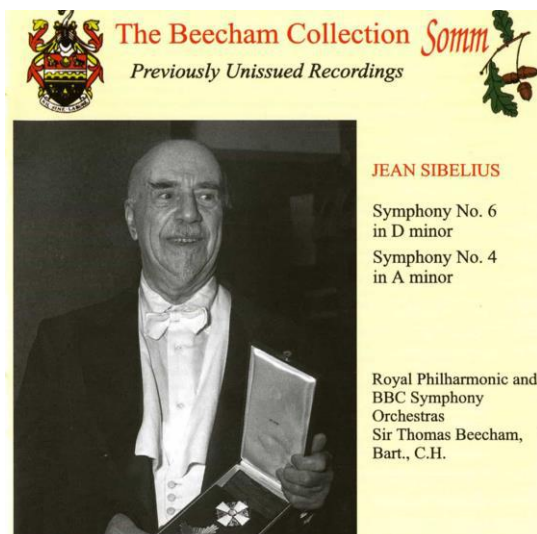
The Finnish National Orchestra visited London for concerts and recordings in 1934 and set down the first recording of the Sixth Symphony for the HMV Sibelius Society on 8 June. The conductor was **Georg Schnéevoigt**, successor to Robert Kajanus as Finland's leading conductor, but by general consent a lesser figure¹. This is perhaps the only symphony in the Sibelius Society series that has never been held as a particular yardstick to beat all that came afterwards. The others were conducted by Kajanus (3, 5; Kajanus had already recorded 1 and 2 with Finnish Government support), Beecham (4) and Koussevitzky (7) Schnéevoigt drives passionately and is far from strait-laced – hear the flexible shaping of the opening pages. Particular issues have always been the fast, almost skittish, second movement and a pell-mell scherzo that becomes gabbled at times. The problem in the outer movements seems to be that Schnéevoigt is unwilling to believe Sibelius was not still writing romantic, Tchaikovskian symphonies, and he seems to want to twist the sixth to meet this vision. The result is that the interpretation seems applied rather than to emerge from the music. Perhaps, if we knew more of Schnéevoigt's



¹ The orchestra is sometimes described as the Helsinki City Orchestra. As I understand it, the orchestra was in fact the Helsinki City orchestra, of which Schnéevoigt was now conductor in succession to Kajanus. This orchestra was later renamed the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra. The name of "Finnish National Orchestra" was assumed for the tour and recordings as a patriotic gesture. The Fourth Symphony was also recorded at these sessions, but Sibelius expressed reservations about it and it was not issued at the time.

work, we would have a context for his performance, but I cannot imagine it ever providing me with great satisfaction.

Serge Koussevitzky was clearly a major figure and at least one of his Sibelius recordings has classic status. He did not record the Sixth. A scratchy but listenable performance given with the Boston Symphony Orchestra on 9 March 1946 has survived. Koussevitzky was inclined towards slow tempi, but not here. The beginning has a certain spaciousness, but things later become volatile in the extreme. The opening of the second movement, too, suggests that this movement will be allowed to expand naturally, but it is actually faster than Schnéevoigt, with a tear-away interpretation of the “Poco con moto” towards the end. The third movement is very steady, but actually sounds a little spiritless at times. The finale is again highly driven. The performance has a certain litheness to commend it and of course the virtuoso playing of the orchestra can take these tempi in its stride, but the spirit of the work seems very far distant. In direct comparison, Schnéevoigt actually sounds spacious in three movements out of four.



The second studio recording of the symphony was made in London in 1947. The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra was conducted by **Sir Thomas Beecham**. This was actually recorded for RCA and for copyright reasons it did not become available in the UK until 1991. As unsatisfactory recording followed unsatisfactory recording, those in the know assured us that the one recording that got to the heart of the music was this one. When it finally came out, I was not quite as overwhelmed as I had expected. I have already discussed my reactions on MWI, in a [review](#) in which I explained my preference for Beecham's live performance from a Promenade Concerto of 15 September 1954. This was issued in 2005 on SOMM-

BEECHAM 18. I have accordingly listened again to this for the present article. My objection to the 1947 recording – not wholly attenuated by the 1954 one, was that Beecham seemed to feel the need to “do things” with the music instead of letting it express itself naturally and at its own pace.

Things may feel different if you have just been listening to Koussevitzky. Beecham’s first movement is breezy, but its winds now seem nature-derived rather than rostrum-driven. His second movement – the marking is “Allegretto moderato” – is far more measured than Schnéevoigt or Koussevitzky and expresses much doleful poetry. The “Poco vivace” third movement is slightly slower than Koussevitzky’s but is more purposeful. In the finale, he shows that, at a steady tempo, the northern storms roil and rage all the more – his triple-forte climax is awesome. This last movement, at least, shows a great Sibelian at work.

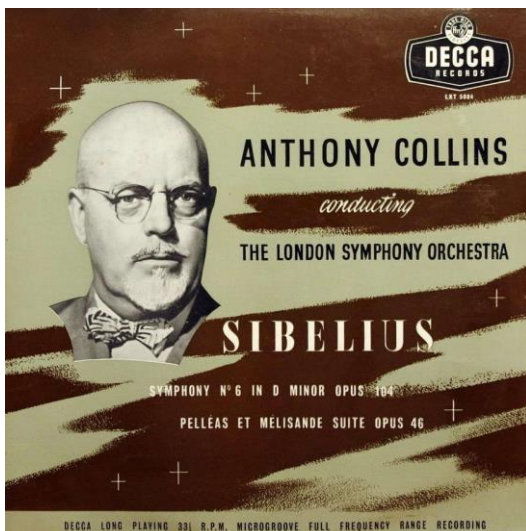
Beecham had conducted a complete cycle of Sibelius’s symphonies in 1938. The Koussevitzky performance was also part of a cycle, which the conductor had hoped to crown with the première of the long-awaited Eighth Symphony – a wait that has been to continue, with diminishing hope, long after the composer’s death. Complete cycles have not survived under either conductor. The first complete cycle, with a single orchestra and conductor, was recorded in 1952-1953 by **Sixten Ehrling** for the Swedish Metronome label. The orchestra is called the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra on the CD issue, but the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra has been so-called only since 1992. Previously, from 1957, it was the Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra. At the time of these

recordings it was the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, and that is how it appeared on the original issues. Could I put in a plea NOT to update orchestra's names in this way, but to call them what they were called when they made the recording or gave the performance? Quite apart from anything else, the name gives us a rapid clue as to the date – any recording by the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra should automatically have been made post-1992.

Whatever, these recordings remained unknown in the UK and finally surfaced only a few years ago. They were issued in the USA by Mercury. This was fortunate, since the Metronome tapes had deteriorated so much that the CD transfers were made from Mercury LPs. The Sixth, at least, sounds well for the date.



Here, at last, is Sibelius straight from nature. The first movement is actually quite brisk, but there is a feeling of irresistible momentum, with neither pushing nor pulling from the conductor. This does not preclude perceptive phrasing, careful balancing and lucid textures. The lower string tremolos near the end are made to sound truly menacing. The second movement, too, hits on a perfect tempo that neither drags nor hurries, the halting main theme traversing the landscape like a wounded bird. The third movement may seem restrained at first, but it sets up an inexorable motion and finishes with a maelstrom. The finale deliberately avoids the fierceness with which most conductors invest the jagged syncopated theme that interrupts the opening meditations. Well structured as it is, here Ehrling must yield to Beecham at his best.



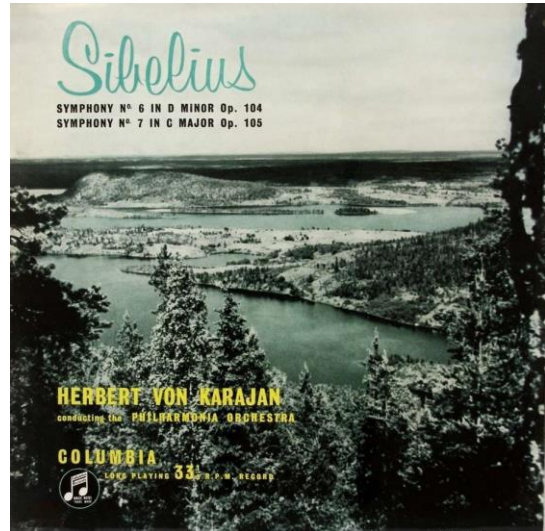
The first Sibelius cycle widely available was recorded by Decca, with **Anthony Collins** conducting the London Symphony Orchestra. The Sixth was set down in June 1955. This was the most expansive reading so far. It is a straightforward affair and my impression this time round was of Ehrling with a bit less tension. I say “this time round” because it was my introduction to the symphony in the 1970s. I recall quite clearly my first reactions, that this was a sunnier-than-usual side of Sibelius. The first movement struck me as traversing a landscape populated by happy villages and farms, snowy maybe, but sunny too. To some extent I still find it so, except that this not really what I listen for in Sibelius. Where Ehrling is elemental, evoking forces of

nature, Collins is picturesque. We are more aware of the people living in his landscape. This makes Collins, for me, several notches lower in achievement than Ehrling, yet this more human view may yet prove an entry point for those who find the later Sibelius stark and forbidding. Certainly, in its day, the Collins had a deserved status in the UK as a considerable improvement over Schnéevoigt, the only previously available version and long out of the catalogue anyway.

Not to be outdone by Decca, Walter Legge set his sights on a Philharmonia cycle to be issued on Columbia. He even proposed that Sibelius himself might conduct it, or at least supervise it. Given

Sibelius's great age – this was in the early 1950s – it was probably a polite gesture on his part, without real expectations that it would come about. Nor did it. Moreover, the conductor on whom his was pinning his hopes in those years, **Herbert von Karajan**, was a convinced Sibelian but rather choosy about which works he conducted. In the end, the first three symphonies were recorded under Paul Kletzki, the rest under Karajan. No. 6 was set down in 1955.

This has the broadest first movement of those discussed so far. In the opening pages, I found myself admiring the phrasing and control of dynamics while regretting a certain lack of forward movement. Forward movement, as opposed to onward surge, is established in the main part of the movement. Karajan's "Allegretto" is faster than anyone's so far except Koussevitzky's, but it is completely without the snatched, skittish quality of the latter. As with some of his Beethoven, Karajan proves able here to make a fast tempo sound, not so much like a fast interpretation, but a slow interpretation speeded up. All the same, I could not get very involved with it. The third movement is steady. It is a mere three seconds



shorter than Erhling's, but the latter's chunky textures are more characterful. Karajan's finale is broad, yet Beecham unleashes more elemental storms at a broader tempo still.

It is a cliché to attack Karajan's Sibelius on the grounds that the plush sound cushions the harshness of the music. It is not really the plush sound – not really so very plush in this early Philharmonia stage – that worries me, it is the iron control over everything. Rather than nature in the raw, this seems well-ordered parkland where we can admire the natural beauties without getting our feet wet.

Nevertheless, we criticise Karajan's Sibelius at our peril, for Sibelius himself told Walter Legge that "Karajan is the only one who really understands my music"². It is not clear, though which interpretation(s) Sibelius had been listening to. Karajan's recording of the Sixth would seem, in any case to be the last which the composer could have heard.

As to Sibelius's attitude to his interpreters generally, I recall reading a story many years ago – I cannot recall where – that Sibelius turned on the radio to hear a really poor performance of one of his symphonies. As he sat there fulminating, he resolved to write to the conductor, which he did. The writer of the article later had the opportunity to meet this conductor – who he did not name. Sibelius's letter was one of the conductor's most prized possessions, and contained nothing but kind suggestions as to how he might improve his interpretation.

Returning to the Sixth Symphony, Sibelius did not pass Schnéevoigt's Fourth for issue, but approved the Sixth, so evidently he felt it gave a reasonable idea of the music. Of the Beecham recording, he wrote to the conductor "It is indeed excellent and I send you my most cordial thanks for it". This is said to have been his favourite of all recordings of his symphonies³. By the 1950s, he was apparently preferring Karajan above all others. Yet we are also told that Sibelius's chosen interpreter at the end

² Quoted in Timothy L. Jackson & Veijo Murtomäki, *Sibelius Studies*, Cambridge University press 2001. Article by Robert Layton, p.29

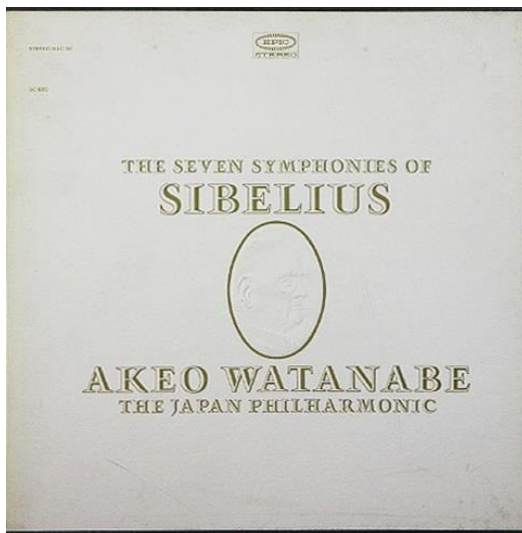
³ The composer's eldest daughter confirmed this to Robert layton in 1959. See Jackson et al, *ibid*, p.20.

of his life was Tauno Hannikainen, whose few recordings – no Sixth – developed a cult following. His stark, unvarnished view of the works he did record is a far cry from Karajan.

Did Sibelius listen to Ehrling and Collins? Ehrling visited Sibelius in search of advice and was simply told to use his own imagination⁴. Collins sent a telegram to Sibelius seeking advice over various points, and was told “Conductor must have liberty to get performance living”⁵. The implication seems to be that Sibelius was glad to have his music performed and ready to thank gracefully anybody who performed it reasonably well.

The performances under Schnéevoigt, Beecham, Ehrling, Collins and Karajan are therefore the only ones issued during Sibelius’s lifetime. They also close the chapter of mono recordings. Before moving to the stereo era, I should like to draw attention to, and appeal for the issue of, a further mono cycle that exists in the Danish Radio vaults. This was conducted by Thomas Jensen, at the head of the Danish Radio Orchestra, in concerts between 1957 and 1963. Back in 1924, as an orchestral cellist in Copenhagen, Jensen had played in six concerts at which Sibelius himself conducted a large number of his works. Jensen was also in the orchestra in 1926, when Sibelius made his last appearance as conductor of his symphonies. Jensen is said to have maintained a clear memory of Sibelius’s tempi and to have put them into practice. This is also said of Jensen’s Nielsen, which he also played under the composer, and in this case we have recordings which convincingly bear this out. The radio recordings are described as having excellent mono sound, but copyright problems have prevented their issue⁶. Jensen’s Decca recording of the Lemminkainen Legends also testifies to his qualities as a Sibelius conductor.

The first stereo cycle of Sibelius Symphonies was another little-known affair. It was made in 1962 by the Japan Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by **Akeo Watanabe**. Watanabe, whose mother was Finnish, if these things matter, was particularly noted for his Sibelius and made a second cycle in 1981.



Watanabe’s Sixth is notable for its calm, but not static, luminosity. In three movements out of four, the tempi are middle-of-the-road, yet there is a wonderful feeling of freedom, of open spaces, of gentle but inexorable movement. He is also minutely observant of dynamics, but never pedantically, he always conveys the meaning behind the markings. His luminosity does not preclude menacing moments – the lower strings growl ominously towards the end of the first movement. His one unusual tempo is in the third movement, which is rather slow. The dotted rhythms have an engaging

clucking quality, especially when passed to the wind band. He also lets us hear the canon between harp and wind. I had written this off as a lost cause, and it would certainly be difficult to make it audible in the concert hall. However, if Watanabe had help from the engineers, they made a very natural-sounding job of it. Watanabe’s finale perhaps does not unleash Beecham’s elemental force, but neither did I feel short-changed, as I rather did with Ehrling. In spite of the slowish third movement, this is the performance, of those so far discussed, with which I can most identify.

⁴ Related in an article by Peter Gutmann: <http://www.classicalnotes.net/classics2/sibelius.html>

⁵ Gutmann, *ibid.*

⁶ See note by Arne Helman to Danacord’s set “Thomas Jensen conducts Scandinavian Classics” (DACOCD 523-4)

A personal journey

I have related the Sibelius Sixth story in full to the dawn of the stereo era. As I stated at the beginning, this article is really a personal quest for “my” Sibelius Sixth. Maybe I would find it among those that I have not heard, but I will now leave the beaten track and, in some cases, the official discography. Incidentally, you will find reviews by me on MWI of cycles by Bernstein and Berglund (Helsinki), so do not suppose that I have not heard any of those not included.

My first port of call is a performance that harks back to 21 April 1952 and is a broadcast by the Cologne Radio Symphony Orchestra under **Hans Rosbaud**. It has circulated among collectors for years but has now been issued on CD by ICA Classics (ICAC 5109). Hans Rosbaud has enjoyed legendary status as a Sibelian on account of a DG LP with the Berlin Philharmonic containing Tapiola and some shorter pieces. He recorded none of the symphonies, but radio performances of 2, 4, 5 and 6 survive.

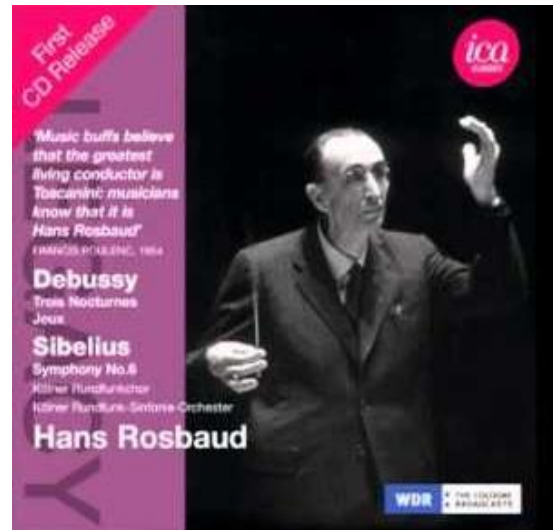
Rosbaud’s first movement is extremely slow – the longest of any discussed here. I miss that glorious sense of freedom and open spaces I found in above all in Watanabe. On the other hand, I find it curiously haunting. Though dark and brooding, it strains towards a climax, eventually achieving a brief burst of C major splendour, which promptly collapses. Rosbaud finds, in fact, a tonal drama between the brooding tonic D minor and the occasionally glimpsed brighter C major.

Rosbaud’s inner movements are also slow. In the second he finds doleful poetry similar to Beecham’s. The third goes at about Watanabe’s tempo. If I say it is a despondent trudge, I intend to define it, not to criticize it, for it is wholly convincing on its own terms.

Rosbaud’s first three movements, however, should be read in the light of his finale. This is not actually so slow, and furthermore he takes literally Sibelius’s request near the end for “Allegro assai” which should be – and here is – faster than the initial “Allegro molto”. Rosbaud unleashes during the “Allegro molto” an elemental Tapiola-like force that surpasses even Beecham, then caps it by driving the “Allegro assai” very hard indeed. This sets the seal on a remarkable, even great, performance. Whether, in view of that very slow first movement, it is 100% “my” Sibelius Sixth is another matter. It is certainly an indispensable one.

Casual decisions by dictatorial recording bosses can have far-reaching results. If Walter Legge, instead of insisting in his attempt to get a cycle out of Karajan, had engaged Rosbaud to make a cycle as a contemporary rival to Decca’s Collins, our perception of these works in the 1950s would have been quite different. Indeed, given that lesser conductors tend to trot out local variants of their greater colleagues’ recordings, Sibelius interpretation might have taken a different direction entirely over the next few decades.

Since I wrote my article [about Dean Dixon](#) in my “Forgotten Artists” series, various additional material has come to light – at some stage the article will be revised. Among the “new” items is a performance of Sibelius’s Sixth Symphony which he gave with the Hessian Radio Symphony



Orchestra (now the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra) in 1972. I already noted in my article Dixon's fine performance of Sibelius's Fifth Symphony with the Rome RAI Symphony Orchestra in 1959.

Sibelius was a composer with whom Dixon was particularly associated. In 1951 he had substituted for an indisposed Igor Markevich in a Helsinki concert which included Sibelius's Fifth Symphony. The concert was broadcast and Sibelius himself heard it. He immediately declared "This is a man I want to see. He has understood what I meant". So Dixon's name is to be added to the rather long list of conductors who obtained similar recognition from Sibelius and a meeting between Sibelius and Dixon followed⁷.

In his younger years Dixon was a fiery interpreter – this can still be heard in the Rome Fifth. As time went on, he seemed to take pride in becoming the perfect Germanic Kapellmeister – and an extremely good one, too. His tempi are similar to Rosbaud's – only the third movement is notably swifter – but the effect is different. Rather than an elemental contact with nature in the raw, he takes a serene view, with a sense of wide-eyed wonder, even in the finale, that is extremely attractive. In the last resort, I have to say that Rosbaud dares more and achieves more, but I am glad to have this Dixon performance.



With so many famous cycles to choose from, it may seem downright perverse to take my next example from the cycle set down by **Sir Alexander Gibson** with the (not yet Royal) Scottish National Orchestra for Chandos in the early 1980s. In part, its relative obscurity drew me towards it. There is also a personal reason, for it was really Gibson who taught me to love Sibelius. I never heard him conduct the Sixth live, but one symphony per season was the rule in the four years (1971-4) I spent at Edinburgh University. It was during a performance of the Second Symphony, the first I saw him conduct, that I realized he had a very special feeling for this composer. In the second movement of that symphony, there are numerous

pauses between the phrases. It is easy enough to just count them out, and I don't suggest that Gibson actively lengthened or shortened them. But he created the impression that each new phrase was somehow born in the wild, expanded, then died back into the wilderness. The Sixth Symphony does not have specific example of this sort of thing, but you can sense during his timing of the phrases at the beginning of the finale that he is totally at one with the composer's thought processes. He is also master of the sudden brass snarl-ups which are not as frequent in this symphony as in some of the others, but nevertheless must not be underplayed.

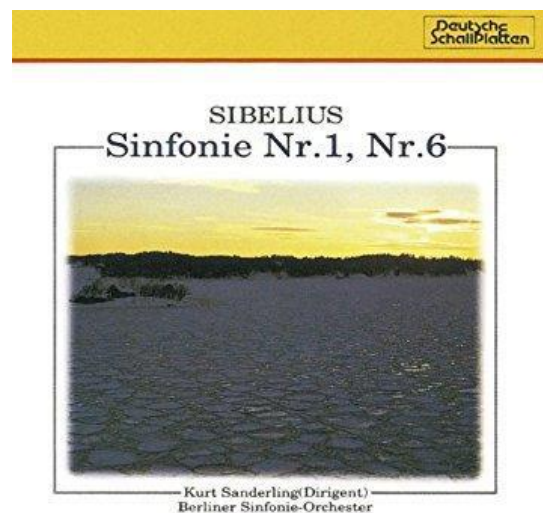
I bought Gibson's Classics for Pleasure recordings of Symphonies 2 and 5 and they have seemed, down the years, my natural Sibelian home. I never investigated the Chandos cycle, partly because Gibson could be very uneven in his achievement, and not always at his best in the studio, and I feared to spoil my treasured memories. These recordings have had a very mixed press down the years. The Sixth, for example, has been utterly trashed in a Gramophone survey, while I see some commentators prefer it above all others.

⁷ Related in Rufus Jones Jr: *Dean Dixon: Negro at Home, Maestro Abroad*, Rowman & Littlefield 2015, p.73.

Certainly, the opening few bars might have justified a retake. The tempo is fast and unsettled, and the movement of the inner parts is unclear. This lasts for less than the first page. Gibson's magical drop to piano at the end of that page seized my attention, and from here the tempo settles down. His gradation of dynamics over these first pages is notable. The movement then proceeds at an unhurried, inevitable pace which allows a fair amount of Rosbaud's mystery, but also a fair amount of Watanabe's sense of freedom and wide open spaces. In the second movement he manages to combine Beecham's and Rosbaud's doleful poetry with Ehrling's and Watanabe's wounded bird movement. The third movement spins along beautifully, the dotted rhythms having a certain wry humour. The canons get through about as well as they are likely to. The finale, like the first movement, begins briskly then settles down after a few bars. This can easily happen in concert. Could it not have been correct for a recording? Thereafter everything unfolds splendidly, a little less savage than Rosbaud but with plenty of impetus and a fine triple forte crash.

This is more the sum of its parts. In the end, my impression was not that I had been listening to Gibson's Sibelius Six. I had been listening to Sibelius Six – just that. Gibson had the ability, when the mood took him, to meld orchestra, conductor and composer into a single whole, so that we received the composer's message direct. When this happened, he was great. The trouble was, this didn't always happen and you went to his concerts on tenterhooks. Here he is pretty close to his best.

For many years, **Kurt Sanderling's** cycle with the Berlin Symphony Orchestra was another little-known factor, but it has recently circulated on the bargain Brilliant label. The Sixth is dated 1974. I included Sanderling when I planned this article because the idea of a dark, expansive approach appealed to me, and that is what most comments led me to expect. As I worked through my chosen recordings, though, the conviction has grown on me that, while I would not wish to hear this music hustled, it doesn't do to exaggerate in the opposite direction. The second movement here is a case in point. No limping, wounded bird here, but not even doleful poetry, to my ears. The vast expanses of snowy waste Sanderling opens up are bleak in the extreme. Sibelius's "Allegretto moderato" marking is somewhat evasive but a trace of "Allegretto", however moderate, must surely remain. This is "Andante" if it isn't "Adagio". I wouldn't willingly come back here.



After this, Sanderling's third movement is a surprise, swift and ebullient, with a light touch that even embraces the brass snarls – which consequently do not register. It is nevertheless refreshing, and the canons come across so perfectly as to imply assistance from the engineers. But one says this of Sanderling at one's peril. When this conductor returned to discographical favour in the 1970s – after an early start in Leningrad – with a cycle of Brahms Symphonies made in Dresden, there were complaints about the artificial balance, with strong spotlighting of the wind solos in particular. Then he came to Edinburgh to conduct Schubert's Eighth and Ninth Symphonies with the Scottish National Orchestra. Immediately, in the clarinet solo at the beginning of the "Unfinished", we heard what we heard on those Dresden records – thick sonorous strings with the clarinet brought well forward. It sounded just as artificial to me as it did on the records, but it had to be admitted that the artifice was done for real. Perhaps we were just not used to hearing the SNO conducted by a tonal architect of

this kind. So let us give these canons the benefit of the doubt. Not many conductors could give such equality to harp harmonics and wind, but perhaps Sanderling could.

Sanderling opens the first movement as broadly as Rosbaud, but when the rocking strings-and-harp accompaniment sets up he moves ahead and builds up considerable momentum if no great climaxes. The finale, too, begins slower than the tempo he eventually settles upon. He drives through the body of the movement in a manner perhaps more Beethovenian than Sibelian, but there's plenty of energy. He makes surprisingly little of the triple forte climax – he just lands on it. The real objection, though, is to his slowing down for the finale chorale-like pages. It is true that he is stoic rather than lachrymose – for this relief much thanks – but Sibelius's tightly-wrought structure is undermined. So, in spite of a good third movement, this is the one really unacceptable performance so far.

It is worth noting at this point that, while the two earliest performances, the Schnéevoigt and the Koussevitzky, were the fastest, these swifter interpretations were coexisting with slower ones even within Sibelius's lifetime – well within Sibelius's lifetime if Beecham's performances in the 1930s were similar to his later ones. The modern tendency seems to be towards slower interpretations still. This phenomenon is not limited to Sibelius and seems to reflect a need of our contemporary society, perhaps as a counterbalance to the frenetic pace of modern living. This desire to reinvent the past has led to the invention of Bruckner as the composer of vast meditative expanses, when his music was actually played quite swiftly in his own day and with a certain amount of tempo freedom. A distortion, no doubt, but on the other hand, the original Bruckner never aroused much enthusiasm except, up to a point, in his native Austria, while the far-reaching seer has gone global. Does slowed-down Sibelius meet certain contemporary needs?

The answer would seem to be yes when we find the slowest performance so far, and the first since Rosbaud to exceed the half-hour mark, conducted by a contemporary composer. This is a performance given in Utrecht on 10 November 1996 by the late **Sir Peter Maxwell Davies**. Davies introduces the music and stresses Sibelius's leaning towards past forms. Curiously, he does not mention the references to Palestrina in the first movement, which Sibelius grudgingly admitted to Walter Legge, or the Gabrieli-like exchanges at the beginning of the finale – perhaps he felt they were obvious. Instead, he describes the second movement as a sarabande and feels that Sibelius must have been listening to early processional music in the dotted sections of the third movement. He also draws attention to the canonic passages, and has them played, in his introduction, by just the instruments involved. This is just as well since they do not really come across in the performance itself.

Unlike other purveyors of a slow first movement, Davies is warm-hearted, even lush, aided by rich vibrato from the Utrecht strings. Quite apart from the tempo, this is really a quite different viewpoint from any seen so far. His second movement, mindful of the sarabande comparison, has a certain formal elegance, but also creates considerable tension in the build-up to the return of the main theme – some exciting brass, for example, and real animation in the violin triplets. A notable performance of this movement. The third movement, on the other hand, I found somewhat dispirited. The finale is another matter. It is the slowest of any in this survey, but Davies sets up a lively dancing rhythm in the main body of the movement. It is not elemental like Rosbaud, but it builds up well. He opens the final chorale-like section in tempo, but then winds down towards the end. This performance is interesting above all for what it tells us about the possible relationship between this supposedly conservative composer and a symphonist of our own times, but the second movement makes it essential listening for its own sake.

An even longer performance comes from the late **Sir Jeffrey Tate**, conducting the Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale della RAI on 12 May 2009. An Italian newspaper headed Tate's obituary "The most Italian of British conductors" and indeed, he was loved in Italy in a way that no previous British conductor, apart from the half-Italian Barbirolli, had achieved. He even persuaded his audiences to listen to the likes of Butterworth, Delius, Elgar, Holst, Vaughan Williams and Walton, as well as plentiful Britten, and not always the obvious works. In truth, Sibelius's Sixth Symphony is no more known in Italy than these British composers – this was the first time the symphony had been played in Turin, and it has not been heard there since. An announced performance by the Turin RAI Symphony Orchestra under Karajan on 19 February 1954 was substituted by Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony. This was presumably for lack of rehearsal time – the programme also contained the Italian première of Florent Schmitt's Psalm 47. As far as I can make out from the RAI's Radio Corriere site – the search function, based on text recognition, is not wholly reliable – none of the other RAI orchestras ever played this symphony either. Italian radio listeners were able to hear the work sporadically from foreign radio stations and then, starting from the availability of the Collins recording, on broadcasts using records. Just one broadcast, in 1962, whets the appetite. This was a recording loaned by Finnish Radio of a performance by the Helsinki Symphony Orchestra under Tauno Hannikainen. I wonder if Finnish Radio still has that tape?

Prior to the Turin performance, Tate had conducted the Symphony with the Santa Cecilia Orchestra on 8, 10 and 11 April 2006. This is not described in their archives as the first performance in Rome, but presumably it was. No other performances are listed in the Santa Cecilia archives and, as stated above, the Rome RAI Orchestra does not appear to have played it. Looking elsewhere, La Scala's searchable archives go back only to 1950, but if Sibelius's Sixth – or his Third or Fourth, for that matter – was played at La Scala before that date, it has not been heard since. I have a list of Venice Biennial programmes from 1930 to 1972, and not a single piece by Sibelius was played during the entire period. Further searches should perhaps include Florence and Bologna, but it rather looks as if Tate's performances are the only ones this Symphony has so far received in Italy.

Tate's first movement has the same timing – to the second – as Maxwell Davies's. It also shares Davies's warmth, rather than the darkness and bleakness of other slow performances. Indeed, they are so similar that, listening blind, I might have guessed at two different performances by the same conductor. Not so Tate's "Allegretto moderato", and the inverted commas serve a double purpose. This is the slowest performance I have encountered, way below any logical bottom line for an "Allegretto", even a moderate one. Tate certainly emphasises the apparent anticipation of minimalism, with the bleak unaccompanied scales repeated and repeated with just a few notes different each time. But the notes crawl past and the orchestra sounds increasingly uninterested as the music drags its weary way. The scherzo is by contrast brisk and bright, with the canons clear. The finale is steady enough for the body of the music to sound like a dance, as with Maxwell Davies, but this is an increasingly frenzied dance between polar bears. The triple forte is properly effective. Like Davies, he winds down at the end. The applause at the end sounds no more than dutiful – that second movement can have made no converts. A pity.

Whither now?

I had originally planned to stop here. I have found a performance – Gibson's – that, if not perfect, tells me what I want to hear about this symphony. I have heard interesting things in almost all the other performances. I have also established that the swift-versus-slow rivalry, present well within Sibelius's lifetime, has been increasingly resolved in favour of slower performances. I am left wondering if Gibson was not the last conductor to inject an energetic forward current – though without hurrying – into his Sibelius. Years ago – sixteen in fact – I wrote, when [reviewing](#) Sir Colin

Davis's RCA recordings of Sibelius 1 and 5 with the LSO, and making the comparison with Gibson's Fifth: "It (Gibson's performance) all unfolds as naturally as with Davis yet with a strong current behind it, events happen when they happen not a split second afterwards, my ear feels guided onwards from point to point. Maybe in the intervening years the greenhouse effect has got at the sharp, frozen landscapes Gibson knew, making them a little soggy underfoot". I remarked, too, that "just as some people apparently like mushy peas, so there must be people who like mushy strings". You will gather that I feel somewhat estranged from the direction Sibelius interpretation has taken, and reluctant to expose myself to performances that sound like Sir Jeffrey Tate's but even more so.

But do I not owe it to modern conductors at least to hear a few of them? Well yes, I think I do. The four performances I shall discuss are all live broadcasts, though in three cases out of four you will find official recordings by the conductors concerned. They are all by conductors with an established reputation in Sibelius and even the oldest of them is hardly a senior statesman as yet. Interestingly, three out of four come from a concert that concluded a Sibelius cycle by playing the last three Symphonies in a single programme. This shows that, even today, you are most likely to encounter the Sixth as part of a cycle. The three cycles were all given in the "Sibelius year" 2015.

The free-standing performance of the four was given by the BBC National orchestra of Wales under **Thomas Søndergård** on 5 December 2014. By and large I seemed to have cast my net on the right side. The first movement has a wonderfully strong forward current, with that sense of freedom and open spaces that I missed in some of the more measured interpretations. The moment of panic near the end is very finely done. The second movement nicely takes in both Sibelius's "Allegretto" – the wounded bird cadence – and his qualifying "moderato", allowing for doleful poetry without dragging. So far, this could be my Sibelian home as much as Gibson's. I thought the third movement a little slow, though it is very alert and the canons are beautifully clear. Of all the versions that are, to my ears, too slow, this comes as close as any to convincing me in spite of myself. The body of the finale has splendid drive, building to a splendid triple forte crash. Søndergård then interprets Sibelius's "Allegro assai" marking as meaning a slightly slower tempo than the previous "Allegro molto". The result is a certain drop in tension towards the end. Here, though, I feel we can no longer evade a linguistic dissertation on what these terms actually mean.

I remarked above that Hans Rosbaud is one of the few conductors who takes the "Allegro assai" substantially faster than the preceding "Allegro molto". My Italian wife has confirmed to me, without any hesitation, that "Allegro assai" means something more than "Allegro molto". We may take this as linguistically incontrovertible, then. But suppose the person writing the Italian is not a native Italian, and knows French much better than he knows Italian? "Assai" sounds as if it ought to mean the same as the French "Assez", which instead means "rather". If a French composer wrote "Très vite" and then followed it by "Assez vite", he would expect the second to be considerably slower. An Italian composer who wanted this would write "Allegro molto" and "Piuttosto allegro", a marking we do find from time to time. But Sibelius was not an Italian composer. Nor, for that matter, is Søndergård an Italian conductor and he evidently believes – or has reason to suppose Sibelius believed – that "Allegro assai" should be slower than "Allegro molto". All the same, Rosbaud's finale provides strong evidence that Sibelius did know his Italian, and wanted a faster tempo.

While we are about it, it may be worth looking at another linguistic problem, Sibelius's "Poco vivace" marking for the third movement. Probably, he meant "Un poco vivace". The difference in Italian between "poco" and "un poco" is more or less the same as that in English between "little" and "a little". You may ask for "a little sugar" in your coffee, but you might think it politic to tell your doctor you take "little sugar". The amount could be the same, the difference is in how you look at it. If you

describe someone in Italian as “poco vivace”, it is not a great compliment – they will be a rather dull, lifeless sort of person. It means something like “not lively at all”. Whereas *un poco* – usually abbreviated to *un po’* – *vivace*” is nevertheless positive in meaning – “a little bit lively”. However, musical literature – by non-Italians and by Brahms in particular – is full of markings such as “poco allegro” or “poco adagio”. These composers seem to want to attenuate the “allegro” or the “adagio”. It is hardly probable, after all, that Sibelius really wanted a dull, lifeless performance of this third movement, even if he inadvertently asked for one. “Vivace ma non troppo” – “lively, but not too much” – is surely what he meant.

So what did he really want? Not, I would imagine, a pell-mell performance like Schnévoigt’s that gets through it in less than three minutes – the only performance I know that breaks this particular time barrier. And yet, Sibelius passed this for issue. At the other extreme, I should be inclined to invoke a “four-minute rule”. None of the performances that take four or more minutes – Rosbaud, Watanabe and Søndergård – quite convince me, whatever their compensating felicities, that they are not a tad too slow. In conclusion, then, a marvellous first two movements from Søndergård, some minor doubts over the other two.

My next performance was given in the Barbican on 12 February 2015 by the Berlin Philharmonic on a tour under its conductor **Sir Simon Rattle**. My initial impression of over-manicured phrasing was largely dispelled as the body of the movement got under way. Precision and nicely observed dynamics remain the principal features, but there are no eccentricities either and the movement surges forward at a good tempo, if not quite with Gibson’s or Søndergård’s strong current. The second movement has a good basic tempo, but somehow seems static. It is as though Rattle’s insistently subtle phrasing robs it of breathing space. The “Poco con moto” section is very much faster – no other performance has made such a difference. To my ears, it does not emerge naturally from what came before. You could discuss at some length what this marking means, too. As pure Italian, it is too ungrammatical to have any meaning at all. Presumably, Sibelius thought he was qualifying his “con moto” – “with movement”. You could argue, though, whether “with a little movement” would be faster or slower than the basic “Allegretto moderato”. The usual solution of taking it just a little faster is musically convincing.

Rattle’s third movement is an unqualified success – just that little bit faster than Søndergård, it has real spin and the canons come across beautifully. Rattle begins the finale rather steadily, but he is awe-inspiring once the body of the movement is under way, unleashing the elements and driving to a splendid triple forte crash. His “Allegro assai” is just a little bit faster. Unfortunately, he treats the chorale-like ending as a slow – and further decelerating – epilogue. Moreover, whereas Sanderling at least maintained an air of stoicism, Rattle degenerates to a mood of lachrymose self-pity that is surely extraneous to Sibelius’s world. Sibelius for non-Sibelians, perhaps.

Across the Atlantic, with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra on 26 March 2015, **Thomas Dausgaard** was also concluding a Sibelius cycle. My first impression was that this was going to be one of the good ones. The opening is not allowed to hang fire and the body of the movement surges nicely. However, at the end of the exposition, Dausgaard inexplicably pulls on the brakes. Then, with the pattering string quavers, he gets going again and I am left wondering whether this is really a fixed feature of his interpretation or whether something happened in the hall to disturb his concentration. The second movement verges on the too slow, but it is really the sometimes fussy phrasing that prevents it from taking wing. Oddly, Dausgaard solves the “Poco con moto” problem by not changing the tempo at all. The third movement also verges on the too slow – it is reasonably vivacious at the beginning but becomes static in the dotted rhythm sections. The finale begins spaciously, then takes wing in the

main part of the movement. The “Allegro assai” is slightly faster than before, but then Dausgard draws out the ending – not as much as Rattle but one would be so grateful not to hear it done at all. Probably I am emphasizing the negative points, a lot of this is good and I would have enjoyed it well enough had I been there.

Back in the UK, the Sibelius year was celebrated with a Proms cycle in which **Osmo Vänskä** conducted the BBC Symphony orchestra. Symphonies 5-7 were given on 17 August 2015.

Vänskä begins no. 6 with phrasing so very detailed as to obstruct the flow. Once the movement has got going he maintains an adequate surge but always seems to be holding something back. Before the programme starts, we hear him tell the presenter that the element of melancholy is always present in Finnish music. No doubt he’s right, but this seems to be a case of conducting to an agenda rather than let the music tell its own tale. The second movement is pretty slow and the hesitant violin’s theme is dissected with expressive bulges, even on single notes, rather like one of the more extreme HIP singers performing baroque opera. I found it rather enervating. He does at least move forward for the “Poco con moto”. In the third movement, Vänskä seemingly takes Sibelius’s Italian at face value, for this is not lively at all. It does have, though, an air of mystery, and an engaging stuttering quality in the dotted rhythm passages.

Don’t give up on Vänskä, though, for his finale is absolutely terrific. He takes Sibelius’s “Allegro molto” literally, even shaving a few seconds off Koussevitzky’s timing. But, by digging into the phrasing meaningfully, he does not run Koussevitzky’s risk of making it sound like a virtuoso exercise. The opening pages flow beautifully, then the syncopated figure strikes like lightning across a Northern sky. Soon the air is writhing and seething, helped along with what sound like hard timpani sticks. The triple forte is immense and then, like none but Rosbaud before him, he forges ahead with a faster tempo at the “Allegro assai” and allows no sentimental lingering during the final wind down.

So where have contemporary performances taken us? Mercifully, if anyone has exceeded Tate’s almost 33 minutes, it hasn’t come my way. The four discussed have remained within the half hour. All the same, there is a tendency to linger. There is also a tendency for HIP procedures to invade the field. The flagrant example was Vänskä’s second movement, but the problem is that a new generation of violinists is growing up that plays everything this way. I have noted with at least one player not long out of conservatoire that, if you put a romantic piece in front of him, he chops up the phrasing and separates notes in the HIP-baroque manner as a matter of course. You have to ask him, firmly, more than once, to get him to attempt a long line. A lot of this breakdown into short phrases, then, may be, not so much the conductor’s influence as the conductor’s lack of influence, though the Vänskä case I mentioned is quite clearly something the conductor has worked at. The irony is that HIP practices are willy-nilly invading a type of music where, logically, the HIP solution would be the long unbroken lines of yore that Sibelius himself is not known to have objected to. In conclusion, then, my Sibelian home remains where it was before. But the excellence of most of the performance by the youngest of the conductors here, Thomas Søndergård, suggests that I should not worry too much about the Sibelian future.

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Appendix

Timings of the performances discussed. Timings of live performances are net of applause or announcements, but may include some space between movements.

			I	II	III	IV	TT
Schnéevoigt	Finnish National Orch.	1934	08:09	05:27	02:50	09:21	26:49
Koussevitzky	Boston Symphony Orch.	1946	07:34	04:19	03:35	08:52	24:22
Beecham	Royal Philharmonic Orch.	1954	07:35	06:17	03:50	10:16	27:58
Erhling	Stockholm Radio Symphony Orch.	1952/3	07:56	05:41	03:42	09:36	26:56
Collins	London Symphony Orch.	1955	08:35	06:46	03:27	09:44	28:34
Karajan	Philharmonia Orch.	1955	09:16	05:15	03:39	09:50	28:02
Watanabe	Japan Philharmonic Orch.	1962	08:25	05:33	04:00	09:30	27:30
Rosbaud	Cologne Radio Symphony Orch.	1952	11:16	06:01	04:04	09:13	30:37
Dixon	Hessian Radio Symphony Orch.	1972	09:47	06:23	03:37	09:14	29:05
Gibson	Scottish National Orch.	1980s	07:57	06:08	03:42	09:42	27:31
Sanderling	Berlin Symphony Orch.	1974	09:07	07:05	03:26	09:58	29:37
Davies P.M.	Utrecht	1996	10:25	06:19	03:57	11:00	31:44
Tate	Orch. Sinf. Nazionale della RAI	2009	10:25	08:11	03:28	10:24	32:51
Søndergård	BBC National Orch. Of Wales	2014	08:13	06:16	04:02	10:07	28:43
Rattle	Berlin Philharmonic Orch.	2015	09:11	06:13	03:45	10:26	29:37
Dausgaard	Seattle Symphony Orch.	2015	08:43	06:23	03:54	10:05	29:08
Vänskä	BBC Symphony Orch.	2015	09:08	06:58	03:51	08:48	28:48