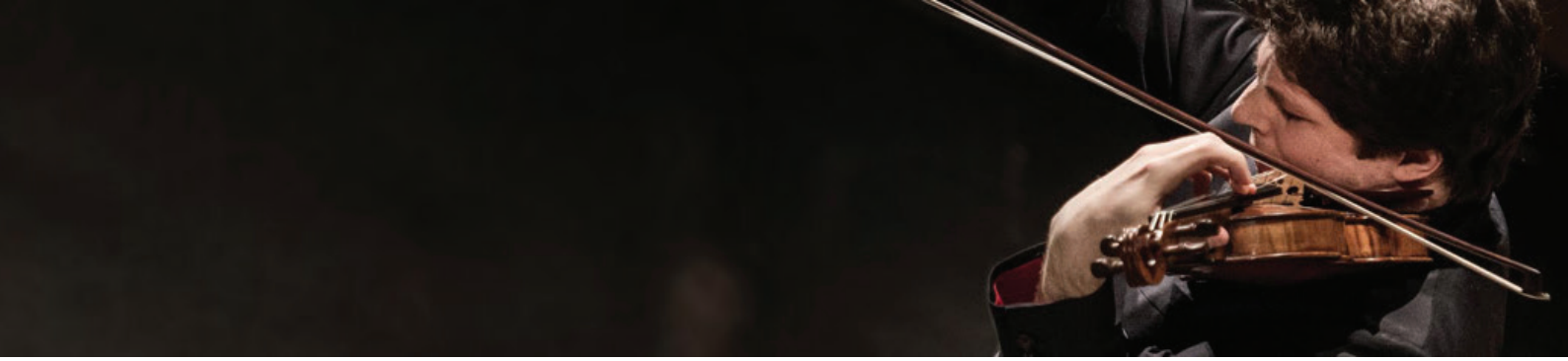

Hadelich Performs Sibelius

Two great Romantic-era works comprise the bulk of this weekend's concerts – Tchaikovsky's "fateful" Symphony No. 4 and Sibelius's tuneful violin concerto. Kaija Saariaho's arresting evocation of the winter sky opens the program

KAIJA SAARIAHO

Born 14 October 1952; Helsinki, Finland

Ciel d'hiver [Winter Sky]

Composed: 2013
First performance: 7 April 2014; Paris France
Last MSO performance: MSO premiere
Instrumentation: 2 flutes; piccolo; 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons (2nd doubling contrabassoon); 4 horns; 2 trumpets; 2 trombones; tuba; timpani; percussion (crotale, glass chimes, shell chimes, triangle, tam tam, suspended cymbals, vibraphone, small bells, bass drum): harp; celeste; piano; strings
Approximate duration: 10 minutes

The Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho studied at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki and later in Freiburg, Darmstadt, and Paris. The latter has, for the most part, been her home since 1982. At the IRCAM research institute there, she became adept at working on tape and with live electronics. This, in turn, fashioned her approach to orchestral composition, particularly regarding the shaping of dense sound masses in slow transformations.

In addition to orchestral music, Saariaho has composed extensively for the voice, with operas, an oratorio, and song cycles in her catalogue. Dawn Upshaw, Kartia Mattila, and Gerald Finley are among the singers for whom she has written. Her acclaimed opera *L'Amour de loin* ("Love from Afar," composed in 2000) was staged at New York's Metropolitan Opera in 2016, the first opera by a woman to have been performed there since Dame Ethel Smyth's Der Wald in 1903.

Orion (2002), a tryptich that calls for a Mahler-sized orchestra, is one of Saariaho's most frequently programmed works. In 2013, she rescored its middle movement, Winter Sky, for a smaller orchestra, giving it the same title – but in French, *Ciel d'Hiver*, to set it apart from the original. Commissioned by Musique Nouvelle en Liberté, an organization whose mission is to bring contemporary music to a larger audience, *Ciel d'Hiver* joins several others of Saariaho's works that, one way or another, take their inspiration from things in sky and space. (*Orion* refers to the constellation, named after the hunter in Greek mythology, that appears in the northern hemisphere's winter sky.)

At the outset of *Ciel d'Hiver*, solo instruments successively limn melodic lines onto a quivering soundscape. First comes the piccolo, playing the work's seminal motif – a descending three-note figure comprised of a half-step followed by a tritone (G-flat, F, B). As the orchestral background unfolds, a solo violin takes up the motif, followed by clarinet, oboe, and muted trumpet. Then begins a multi-voiced layering of the three-note idea and several related melodies, initiated by the first violins. The second half of the piece is more about texture than melody, as the three- note motif is transmogrified into a succession of dense chords with continually fluctuating tone colors. Even as the entire orchestra is exploited, from top to bottom, tiny details come forth – such as the brief cello solo near the end. The piece concludes in a shimmering cloud of sound, with the piano's treble register lending a distinct and pleasant timbre.

Recommended recording: Hannu Lintu, Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra (Ondine)

JEAN SIBELIUS

Born 8 December 1865; Hämeenlinna, Finland
Died 20 September 1957; Jarvenpää, Finland

Violin Concerto in D minor, Opus 47

Composed:	1903
First performance:	8 February 1904; Helsinki, Finland
Last MSO performance:	January 2016; Christopher Seaman, conductor; Karen Gomyo, violin
Instrumentation:	2 flutes; 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 4 horns; 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; timpani; strings
Approximate duration:	31 minutes

Jean Sibelius began playing the piano at age nine. He didn't like it. At14, however, "the violin took me by storm," the composer wrote, "and for the next ten years it was my dearest wish, my overriding ambition, to become a greatvirtuoso." Sadly, his goal remained unrealized: By the age of 14, many would-be virtuosos are already seasoned players. Additionally, the instruction available to the young Johan (he later Gallicized his name, emulating an uncle) was provincial at best – and he had a propensity for performance anxiety. He nevertheless became proficient enough to play in the orchestra of the Vienna Conservatory when he was a student there (1890–91), and even auditioned – albeit unsuccessfully – for a seat in the Vienna Philharmonic.

Of solemn disposition, Sibelius was not drawn to composing concertos. Certainly he was not of the ilk that produced the flashy concertos of his day, and the violin concerto is his only completed concerto for any instrument. As music writer David Hurwitz points out, "the work sounds as much like Sibelius as it does a violin concerto. In other words, at no point does it turn into a gratuitous display of technical tricks at the expense of the composer's own idiomatic voice. His natural preference for low, dark sonorities permits him to write in his normal style for the orchestra, while at the same time fashioning a perfect accompaniment for the solo violin."

It was the German virtuoso Willy Burmester, a student of Joseph Joachim, who encouraged Sibelius to write a violin concerto; he hoped to give the first performance. Sibelius crafted the concerto during 1903 and settled on a premiere date in March 1904. Unfortunately, circumstances caused the composer to set an earlier date, one that did not work for Burmester's schedule. (Most probably, the "circumstances" were money woes: The time when Sibelius wrote the violin concerto was somewhat turbulent, with accumulating debts and bouts of heavy drinking.) Deeply offended, Burmester refused ever to play the concerto.

The first performance was given at Helsingfors (Helsinki) in February 1904. Victor Nováček was the soloist and Sibelius conducted the Helsingfors Philharmonic. The composer revised the work the next year, making it more compact and slightly lessening its technical demands. The new (and present) form had its premiere in Berlin under the baton of Richard Strauss, with soloist Karl Halir, on 19 October 1905. The next year, Maud Powell introduced the piece to the United States.

Full of Romantic-era passion from start to finish, the concerto affords a wide range of musical expression. Sibelius essentially casts the violinist as a singer, conveying the gamut of human emotion – whether in an Italianate melody, a melancholy daydream, or a foot-tapping dance rhythm. Interestingly, we don't hear the close-knit dialogue between soloist and orchestra characteristic of the violin concertos of, say, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and Brahms.

The lengthy first movement (Allegro moderato) contrasts passages of melancholy and restraint with passages of great intensity and force. It is cast in sonata form, but with an extensive cadenza replacing what normally would be the development section. In the slow movement (Adagio di molto), a bourbon-hued contralto voice sings an affecting melody ("sonorous and expressive") of vast breadth. The form is simple (ABA), but the orchestral colorings are wistful, seductive, and sophisticated. The closing Allegro, ma non tanto's first theme is introduced by the soloist, accompanied only by an insistent pounding ostinato in the timpani and basses. Its second theme has a lumbering rhythm, once described by British musicologist Sir Donald Francis Tovey as "a polonaise for polar bears," a description few program-notes writers can resist quoting.

Recommended recording: Augustin Hadelich; Hannu Lintu, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra (Avie)

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Born 7 May 1840; Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia
Died 6 November 1893; St. Petersburg, Russia

Symphony No. 4 in F minor, Opus 36

Composed:	1877-78
First performance:	4 March 1878; Moscow, Russia
Last MSO performance:	September 2013; Andreas Delfs, conductor Instrumentation: 2 flutes; piccolo; 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 4 horns; 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; tuba; timpani; percussion (bass drum, cymbals, triangle); strings
Approximate duration:	44 minutes

All his adult life, Tchaikovsky struggled with his homosexuality and its attendant guilt. At age 37, thinking marriage, domesticity, and a sympathetic woman the possible solution, he made a rash and desperate decision: He married Antonina Milyukova, a Conservatory student from whom he had received a written declaration of love. Their union was a disaster that led Tchaikovsky to a nervous breakdown, an attempted suicide, and a hasty retreat to Western Europe.

His Fourth Symphony dates from this stormy period, 1877-78, the same time he was composing the opera *Eugene Onegin*. His work on Op. 36 also coincides with the start-up of a 13-year association with his patroness Nadehzda von Meck; it was a felicitous relationship that, though they never actually met, provided a needed emotional outlet for both parties. With these disparate external circumstances, it's little wonder the composer vacillated between melancholy and exuberance, between optimism and resignation. One can't help hearing these contrasts in the music itself.

The F Minor Symphony opens with an ominous brass fanfare – the "fate" motif – that recurs throughout the large-scale first movement; listen for its return in the finale as well. Of this, the composer wrote:

> *The introduction is the seed of the whole symphony, undoubtedly the central theme. This is Fate, i.e., that fateful force that prevents the impulse toward happiness from entirely achieving its goal, forever on jealous guard lest peace and well-being should ever be attained in complete and unclouded form, hanging above us like the Sword of Damocles... Our only choice is to surrender to it...*

The tuneful second movement, Andantino "in the manner of a song," begins with a mournful oboe solo; the passionate climax is a reminder of the lamenting phrases prevalent in the first movement. "Here is that melancholy feeling that enwraps one when he sits alone at night in the house exhausted by work," Tchaikovsky wrote. "A swarm of reminiscences arises. It is sad, yet sweet, to lose one's self in the past."

Playful pizzicato strings dominate the scherzo. According to the composer, "Here are capricious arabesques, vague figures that slip into the imagination when one has taken wine and is slightly intoxicated." Woodwinds and brass provide contrast, then join together with the plucked strings to bring the movement to a close. The final movement, Allegro "with fire," combines rondo, sonata, and variation form. Tchaikovsky incorporates an old Russian folksong ("In the field stood a birch tree") as one of its themes. The brass fanfare from the first movement is revived as a disquieting presence, but the music's momentum returns to end this much-loved symphony in resplendent jubilation.

Recommended recording: Evgeny Mravinsky, Leningrad Philharmonic (Deutsche Grammophon)

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.