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KULLERVO – A SYMPHONY FOR A TRAGIC HERO

FRANCISC ERCSEY-RAVASZ[1]

SUMMARY. The last decade on the 19th century saw a major crisis of identity in what is known today as Finland. Having emerged from under centuries of Swedish rule and being incorporated into the Russian Empire, the population turned to its true ethnic roots. The compilation and the publishing of the Kalevala set in motion a series of cultural and artistic events which resonated deeply with the political aspirations of the moment. Amidst this effervescence came the young Jean Sibelius to present one of his earliest monumental works, *Kullervo Op 7.* Often mislabeled as a symphonic poem, this programmatic symphony draws upon the story of the Kalevala's 6th cycle. The unfolding plot is a typical tragic hero story set in a very Finnish framework. The composer had therefore to solve the task of presenting a particular version of a universal archetype and to create a symphony that can be both a testament to the struggles of his own time and a monument within the history of universal music.

Keywords: Sibelius, Kullervo, Kalevala, tragic hero

1. Introduction

Kullervo, this early work of Jean Sibelius has a tremendous importance in the composer's oeuvre. In 1892, before its premier Sibelius was the great hope of the Finnish school of composition, but a hope that wasn't confirmed yet, he was by no means the recognized figure that he is today. *Kullervo* will change that literally overnight. The resounding success of this programatic symphony based on a cycle from the *Kalevala* transformed the composer into one of the most emblematic figures of Finnish national culture. Although this work is mainly a tonal-functional one and as such it doesn't show those innovative techniques which will characterize the composer's later works in clear form, through its conception it signals the future to come and it carries without a doubt the seeds of the great musical monuments that followed.

[1] *PhD, Invited lecturer at the Babes-Bolyai University, Faculty of Political Sciences, Administration and Communications, where he teaches Musical Illustration. Freelance composer for documentaries, audiobooks. E-mail: kashunator@yahoo.com*

2. Historical background

Towards the end of the 19th century the Finnish people was in the midst of an intense cultural and political fervor. The territory which we know today as Finland was under Swedish rule since the middle of the 13th century and through those times Sweden really consolidated its rule. But in 1809 following the Treaties of Tilsit King Gustav Adolf IV made a series of very serious mistakes, diplomatic blunders which brought the country in conflict with the Russian Empire. War followed and Sweden lost many territories to Russia, including that of Finland, which became part of the Russian Empire as a grand duchy. This triggered a serious crisis of identity among the inhabitants of these lands and it lead to the awakening of the Finnish national sentiment.

The attempts to emancipate Finnish language and culture were remarkable. Until that time Finnish was regarded as a primitive, colloquial one, a language of the peasantry, totally inadequate for culture and education. Indeed, Finnish noblemen, intellectuals and their families spoke Swedish and this was also the case in the Sibelius family, but this was about to change. The composer's parents along with many intellectuals joined the so-called Fennoman movement, the goals of which were perhaps best formulated by the author, philosopher, journalist and politician Johan Wilhelm Snellman: "We are not Swedes, we don't want to be Russians, so let's be Finns!"[2] Thus the young Johan Julius Sibelius (he adopted the French form Jean later inspired by the business card of an uncle) was enrolled in a Finnish school, even though in his home the spoken language continued to be Swedish.

Another significant event that had a major impact on the nation's cultural and political progress was the compiling and publication of the *Kalevala*. Elias Lönnroth, a physician went on eleven field trips which took up a decade and a half in total to collect Finnish and Karelian folklore. From this, after some changes and completions he created the enormous epic corpus known today as the *Kalevala*, nearly 23.000 lines, 50 songs arranged in ten cycles. *Kullervo* is the sixth cycle.

3. The main idea and the plot behind Kullervo

Partly from his own initiative and partly as a result of his family's advice the young composer had for a long time plans to write music inspired by Finnish folklore. In an undated letter – possibly from 1899 – his brother, Christian

[2] Kari Tarkiainen: *Adolf Ivar Arwidsson*, in Matti Klinge (ed.): *Suomen kansallisbiografia* 1. SKS, Helsinki 2003, ISBN 951-746-442-8 (pg. 406).

even mentions that he is sending him collected folkloric texts, adding: "it's a pity that you don't have much time, otherwise you could compose for example a choral cycle on an episode of the Kalevala or something similar...")[3].

The *Kulervo* cycle has a certain degree of autonomy within the *Kalevala* in the sense that the characters and the plot involved can be understood easily without knowledge of the other cycles. In fact, the main character of the whole of *Kalevala*, Väinämöinen doesn't even appear in it. Untamo murders every member of Kullervo's tribe with the exception of his pregnant mother, whom he kidnaps. The newborn boy has magic powers, Untamo hears him swearing vengeance when he is only three months old. Scared by the boy, Untamo tries to kill him, but he fails thrice, so he sells him as a slave to Ilmarinen, whose wife tries to destroy him by hiding sharp stones in his bread. The stones break the blade of Kullervo's knife, the only object that he had from his parents. Furious, the boy curses Ilmarinen's cows which transform into bears killing his captors.

Thus Kullervo frees himself and he finds his parents who are miraculously still alive. His sister however disappeared a long time ago and she is believed to be dead. Then one day the young man goes to collect the taxes for his tribe. On his way back he meets a beautiful young girl and after some unsuccessful attempts he manages to seduce her. But when the girl tells her story, he learns that she is none other than her long lost sister. The girl immediately kills herself, Kullervo however – mad from the terrible pain and shame – swears to avenge himself on Untamo, the source of all this evil. Indeed he obtains a magic sword from Ukko and he manages to completely eliminate Untamo's entire tribe. Arriving back to his home however he learns that his entire family perished. He goes back to the very place where he seduced his sister and asks his magic sword whether it would kill him and when the sword agrees, he too commits suicide on the same spot. Thinking of this story one cannot help but think of a distant parallel, that of Oedipe. Another tragic hero, another sexual taboo involved, a sin committed unknowingly while on the road, a victim that kills herself and a similar desire to atone and pay for the sin.

4. The music of Kullervo

The majority of the work is purely instrumental, the only parts where Sibelius used a soprano, a baritone and a male choir are the scene of the seduction and that of Kullervo's death. Of course, while talking about Kullervo,

[3] From the correspondence between Christian and Jean, box nr. 28, apud: Sibelius, Jean: *Kullervo* Op. 7, Breitkopf& Hartel, Wiesbaden, 2005. Foreword by Glenda Dawn Goss, pg. 12.

one cannot avoid the question of the genre. Many editions of the score and also many recordings present it as either a symphonic poem or a suite. Neither of these is correct. First of all, a symphonic poem is by definition a work in only one movement. As for the suite, this work is by no means a series of stylized dances, Kullervo is without a shade of doubt a programmatic symphony in five movements. There are several arguments for this. Firstly, the composer himself referred to it as a symphony every single time he mentioned it in his correspondence with Aino Järnefelt, the conductor Robert Kajanus or his former teacher, Martin Wegelius. he used the Swedish word *symfoni*. Next, in 1917-1918 when he transcribed it for piano and voice, he gave it the title "*Kullervon valitus*[4]", and the subtitle: *Ote-Kullervo sinfoniasta* – which is Finnish for "After the Kullervo symphony". Then in 1945 the city of Lovisa decided to mark with a commemorative plaque the house where he finished the "*Kullervo suite"* and they sent him the initial text for approval, to which Sibelius replied immediately stating that *"Kullervo* is a symphony, not a suite|".

Finally we have the very form and structure of the piece to confirm that *Kullervo* is in fact Sibelius' first – unnumbered – symphony. The five part structure emerged during the composition process. The composer's letters from these times reflect the different successive stages of evolution. The idea of the strict symphonic form was present from the very beginning, but at first he thought of three, maybe four movements. We also know that Sibelius considered for a while the use of a narrato, but later he discarded that idea, choosing instead to use a choir to tell the story. The choir itself was supposed to be a mixed one initially, but then the composer took his former teacher, Wegelius' advice who argued that some of the more explicitly sexual themes might be too embarrassing for women to sing, so he decided to use a male choir.

In the first movement we have *Allegro moderato*, E minor and a strict sonata form. The movement is purely orchestral and it has an introductory character without any specific narrative elements. The second part – *Kullervo's Youth* is also devoid of action. Sicelius wrote to Aino: "... I don't want to go too much into details, I only have the image of Kullervo as a child, as a shepherd in the service of Ilmarinen in my mind..."[5]. In the same letter he also wrote that he intends to frame the entire movement as a lullaby (B minor, *Grave*) which gradually grows into a march[6].

The dramatic third movement describes the events, the tragedy caused unknowingly by Kullervo: the sleigh ride, the seduction, the terrible truth and the mental anguish. here for the first time the soloists and the choir

[4] Kullervo's Desire.
[5] Letter to Aino, December 1891.
[6] "I finalen i början dyningar af (sic!) marcia" (*the beginning of the finale shall swell into a march*).

appear, the latter merely tells the story and provides no commentary whatsoever, while the former gives us the dialogue between Kullervo and the girl. The music (F major, *Allegro vivace*) is very descriptive, every moment is emphasized, the melodies, rhythms and harmonies are very plastic and expressive.

The fourth movement *"Kullervo goes to war"* (*Alla marcia*, C major) starts in Myxolidian mode on G but then journeys through remote keys. It's a forced march, often broken and interrupted by narrative elements and the intense psychologic sketch of a hero who is on the edge of utter madness. Although purely orchestral, it has a motto given by the composer, a stanza from the relevant part of the *Kalevala*:

"Kullervo, Kalervon pojka/ Sinisukka äijön lapsi/ Läksi soitellen sotahan/ Ilotellen tappelohon/ Soitti suolla, soitti maalla/ Kajahutti kankahalla/ Rojahutti ruohokossa/ Kulahutteli kulossa".

In English: "Kullervo, Kalervo's son / Son of an old man in beautiful blue garments/ Wento to war whistling/ Gladly he went to battle/ Singing and whistling among lakes and moors/ Calling out loudly among the weeds/ Trampling through grass and meadows/ Singing by stump and by swamp."

The choir reappears as the narrator in the fifth and last movement. It is a slow finale, *Andante* – E minor, very grave and depressing, concluding the work with the inevitable outcome, the death of the hero.

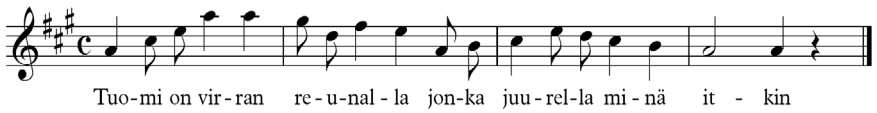
5. Musical language

Since the theme of this work is rooted in Finnish folklore, one might expect an abundance of Finnish melodies and motives, but that's not really the case. Although elements of Finnish and karelian folklore are present, there are no direct quotes, even where the composer decided to use a melody from folklore, he heavily altered it. Nor can we find arrangements or motivic developments that are typical for Finnish folklore. Instead this work shows a very refined fusion between the Romantic symphonic tradition and the composer's very personal approach. Yet we are still quite far from that intense motivic germination leading to a grandiose finale that will become Sibelius' trademark approach to form in his more mature work, especially in his last three symphonies and his later symphonic poems – *Tapiola* for instance. It is nevertheless obvious that even in those early years Sibelius was struggling with some of the usual techniques of development. "Durchführung zum Teufel!"[7] – he wrote in German on one of the pages of an early draft of the first movement.

[7] "To the devil with the development!" - Sibelius, Jean: *Kullervo* Op. 7, Breitkopf & Hartel, Wiesbaden, 2005. Foreword by Glenda Dawn Goss, pg. 13.

Let's take a look therefore at some of the Finnish melodies that appear at key moments. The very first movement starts off with a modified version of a song "*Tuomen juurella*"[8]. We can be sure that Sibelius knew and liked this melody because he already used it before in a brass septet written in 1889 for a competition.

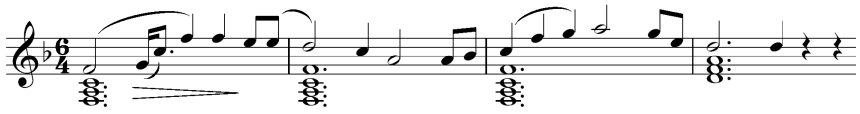
E.g. 1



First line of the Finnish folk song "Tuomen juurella"

With some melodic and rhythmoc changes this tune found its way into the main motif of the first movement. Most significantly, Sibelius changed the second note to be the second degree of the key, instead of the third as it is in the original tune. This resulted in a very special character and the composer was really satisfied with it. In a letter to his fiancée Aino Järnefelt he called it "a wonderful motif"[9]:

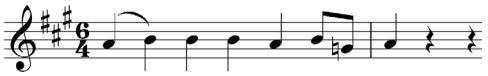
E.g. 2



Sketch of the main theme of the first movement, as it appears in a letter to Aino, on April 18, 1891

Another moment inspired obviously by folklore can be found in the second movement, starting with bar nr. 157. The motif has a reduced ambitus, it's typically Karelian and it appears first on the English horn being then repeated almost hypnotically by the other woodwind instruments and later by the French horn and the violins too:

E.g. 3



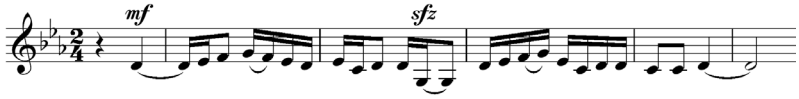
Jean Sibelius: Kullervo Op.7, part 2, measure 157, English horn

[8] Under the cherry tree.

[9] Letter to Aino from December 1891, apud: Sibelius, Jean*: Kullervo* Op. 7, Breitkopf & Hartel, Wiesbaden, 2005. Foreword by Glenda Dawn Goss, pg. 13.

In the fourth movement there's a melody that might sound familiar to everyone who knows Stravinsky's Petrushka:

E.g. 4



Jean Sibelius: Kullervo Op. 7, part 4, measure 142-147, violin 1

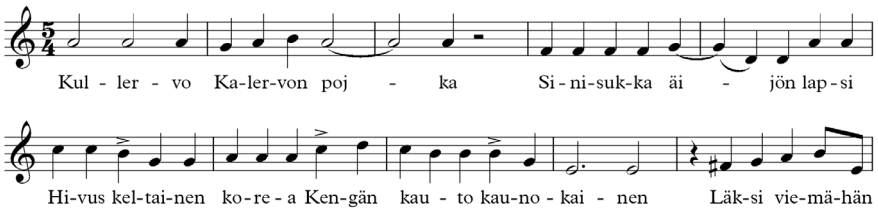
Finnish conductor Jussi Jalas who happens to be the composer's son-in-law believes that Sibelius and Stravinsky probably heard the same Karelian melody[10].

Apart from these melodies though there is a series of elements that have roots in the way Finnish folk songs in general and stanzas of the Kalevala in particular were traditionally sung. Throughout the symphony we encounter time signatures of 5/4, a clear connection with the so-called Kalevalic meter, a version of the trochaic tetrameter[11]:

Vē – lĭ kūl-tă vēik-kŏ-sē-nĭ[12]

This is the dominant meter in the third movement *"Kullervo and his sister"*, the one which deals with the drama itself:

E.g. 5



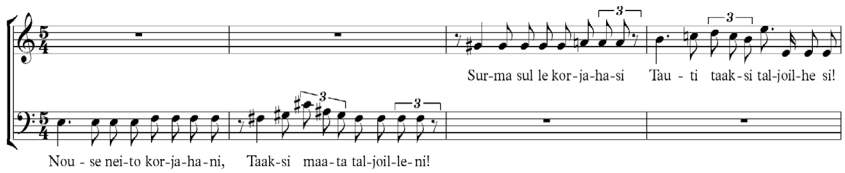
Jean Sibelius: Kullervo op. 7, part 3, measures 44-53, choir

[10] Jalas, Jussi: *Kirjoituksia Sibeliuksen sinfonioista: Sinfonian eettinen pakko*. Ed. Frazer, Helsinki, 1988.
[11] Common in the folklore of the entire Baltic area.
[12] Brother, dear younger brother – the first line of the *Kalevala.*

Skimming over these lines[13] the alliterations are striking even to someone who doesn't know any Finnish. Indeed, this is one of the characteristics of the *Kalevala*. In the Finnish language the consonants K, V, S and H stand at the beginning of a huge number of words, combined with the fact that the stress is always on the first syllable this gives a special sound to the language itself. Sibelius consciously exploits this special feature: he never writes a pause between two words that begin with the same consonant, not even when there is a line break between them in the poem, as it is indeed the case in the above example: "Hivus **k**eltainen **k**orea/**K**engän **k**auto **k**aunokainen...".

Traditionally the lines of the *Kalevala* (as well as the greater part of the Finnish, Estonian, Karelian, Ingrian folklore) are recited by two people, facing each other, holding hands and rocking back and forth to the rhythm of the recitation. The two say the lines alternatively. This is reflected in the third movement, in the dialogue between Kullervo and the girl[14] (soprano and baritone solo):

E.g. 6



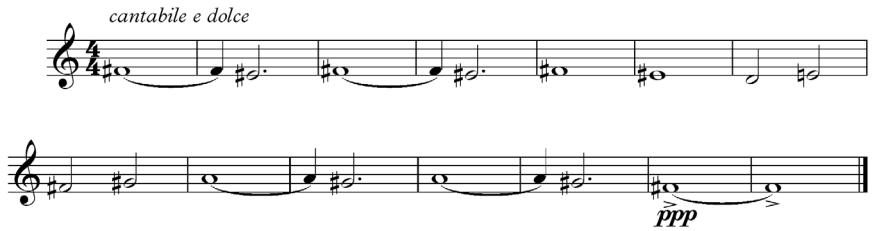
Jean Sibelius: Kullervo Op. 7, part 3, measures 102-105, baritone and soprano

Traditionally, the last syllable of each verse was prolonged and stressed twice, as a means to signal to the other person that it's his turn. Finnish folklorists know this very well, and the fact that this procedure is absent from the dialogue gave way to speculations that Sibelius was unfamiliar with it. Yet he must have been, because he applied a similar procedure in the instrumental parts, for example in the French horn part of the first movement, bars 70-84:

[13] Kullervo, son of Kalervo/ in his blue clothes/ and his blond hair/ went to pay taxes/...

[14] "Come, climb on my sled/Sit between my furs! – May death climb on your sled/Sickness may sit between your furs!..."

E.g. 7



Jean Sibelius: Kullervo Op. 7, part 1, measures 70-84, French horn

There is also another reason to safely dismiss the idea that Sibelius was unfamiliar with the traditional recitation. While he was working at *Kullervo*, he paid a visit to Larin Parske, an illiterate Ingrian farmer with a remarkable memory. He had thousands of poems memorized and his interpretation was certainly authentic.

The combination of these melodic and rhythmic elements is spiced with modal, often oligochordic moments, reminiscent of a recitative. It is remarkable therefore that Sibelius managed to incorporate these into a coherent musical language that doesn't fracture the unity of the work, nor does it obscure its folkloric roots.

6. Dramaturgical approach

Kullervo is first and foremost a tragic hero, a very Finnish version of a very universal archetype. Every culture has some version of a tragic hero story and as such, its essence can easily transcend language. In a letter to Aino Sibelius wrote:

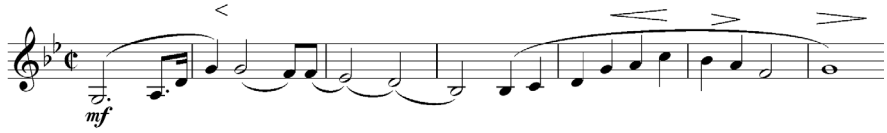
"...the more I delve into Kullervo's destiny the smaller I feel as a being and reckless for even taking on this theme..."[15]

It is quite clear that he intended for his Kullervo to be as human and relatable as possible. Some have even criticized him[16] for not focusing enough on Kullervo's heroism, his greatness as a warrior. The symphonic form itself – when taken seriously – imposes some guardrails that can preclude excesses

[15] Letter to Aino, 21st of December 1891.
[16] A few months after the first glowing reactions some more critical reviews also appeared.

and the hero's deeply flawed humanity is ever present in the musical language. There is a slight tone of melancholy and simplicity especially in the first two movements, reflecting the tumultuous life of an orphan boy. Even that "wonderful motif" is quite melancholic especially with its modal subtonic – tonic ending:

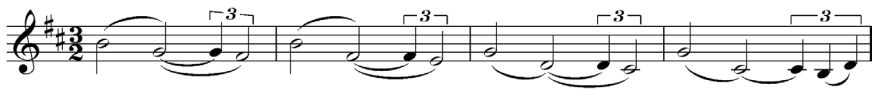
E.g. 8



Jean Sibelius: Kullervo Op 7, part 1, measures 5-11, clarinet

This melancholy becomes more pronounced in the second movement with that lullaby on the strings starting with bar nr. 9:

E.g. 9



Jean Sibelius: Kullervo Op. 7, part 2, measures 9-12, violin 1, 2

Compared to this, the third movement starts off in a rather serene mood, there are no worries or premonitions, nothing foretells the tragic events that are about to occur. The male choir sings the narration as it was written in the *Kalevala*:

"Kullervo, Kalervon pojka /Sinisukka ääijön lapsi /Hirvus keltainen korea /Kengän kauto kaunokainen /Läksi viemähän vetoja /Maajyvie maksamahan /Rekehensä reutoaikse /Kohennaikse korjahansa /Alkoi kulkea kotihin /Malkata omille maille..."

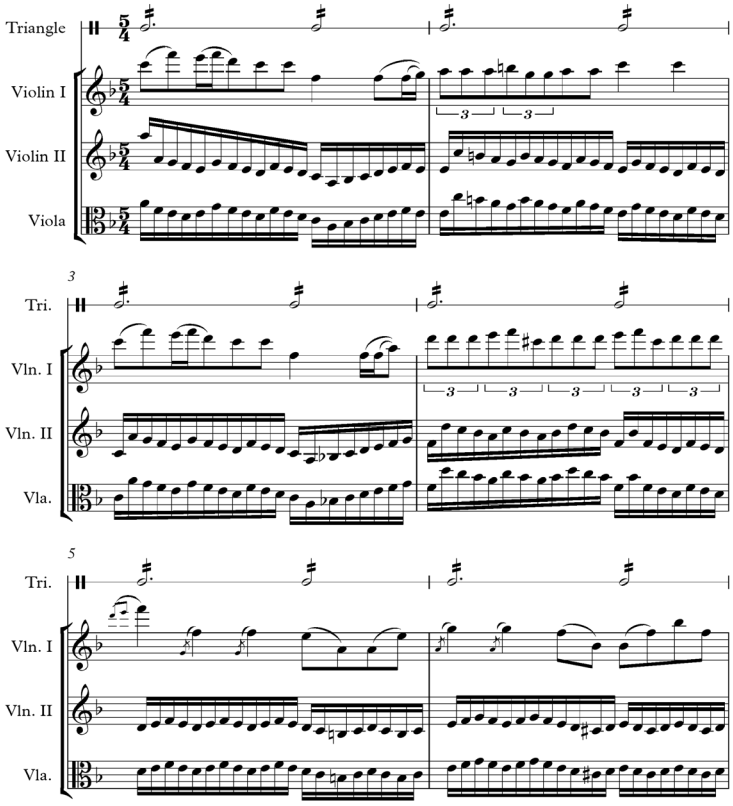
In English:

"Kullervo, son of Kalervo/ in beautiful blue clothes/ with his blond hair/ and leather boots/ went to pay the taxes/ to pay his debt./ After doing that/ having paid his taxes/ on his way back on his sled/ gliding fast on his sled/ always towards home/ across the fields/..."

The melody here is one of rustic simplicity in 5/4, with few melismas and lacking any ornaments. It's simply a picture of an ideal winter landscape and a journey that is for the moment completely ordinary. The arrangement

is quite simple too, a triangle imitates the sound of the sleighbells, the harmonies are devoid of any clashing elements or unexpected changes. There is a rolling figure between the second violin and the viola that seems to depict the landscape as it's flying by:

E.g. 10



Jean Sibelius: Kullervo Op. 7, part 3, measures 24-29

But the serene journey doesn't last. The scene of the seduction itself is the only one where the composer decided to slightly change the original text. The original of the *Kalevala* states here: *Raha muutti morsiamen* – meaning: the money seduced the girl. Sibelius wrote instead: *Halu muutti morsiamen* – desire seduced the girl. The change is not as dramatic as it seems at first glance, because the Finnish word *halu* comes from the verb *haluta* which refers to material desires. Sibelius simply chose a somewhat gentler word for the same

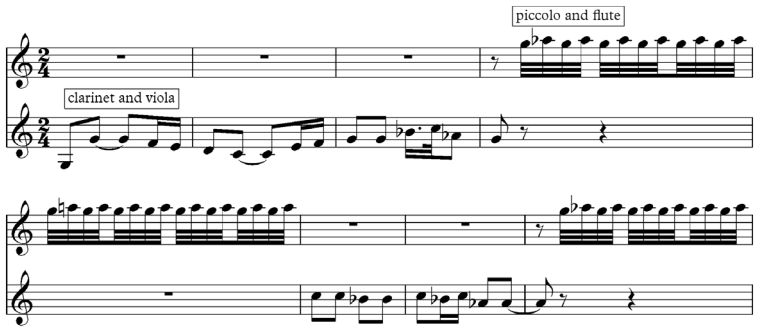
thing, probably because he was deeply in love at that time. That also explains the sheer erotic intensity of the moment when the girl gives in to Kullervo's advances.

The power and sensuality of this peak only makes the moment of truth more shocking. The girl tells her story in the same simple, almost recitative-like manner and it takes a very long time until she says the fatal words: Kalervo's daughter. What follows is a stroke of genius. A bar and a half of silence and then a sharp, ear-piercing C sharp minor chord, like the stroke of a blinding light brings us the immediate and total breakdown, the unspeakable revolt felt by the hero.

Finally, Kullervo finds his words and the scene is quite brutal: "Eikä surma suonim tehnyt /Tauti oike`in osannut / Kun ei tappanu minua / Kaottannut kaksiöisnä". In English: "Death wronged me, sickness injured me when it didn't attack me, it didn't take me when I was only two days old".

Kullervo's total brokenness, his deranged mental state is obvious in the fourth part, which is essentially a forced march broken here and there by the same annoying thrill. Sibelius must have seen this trill as being very important because instead of using the regular symbol for thrills, he chose to write it out every single time note by note:

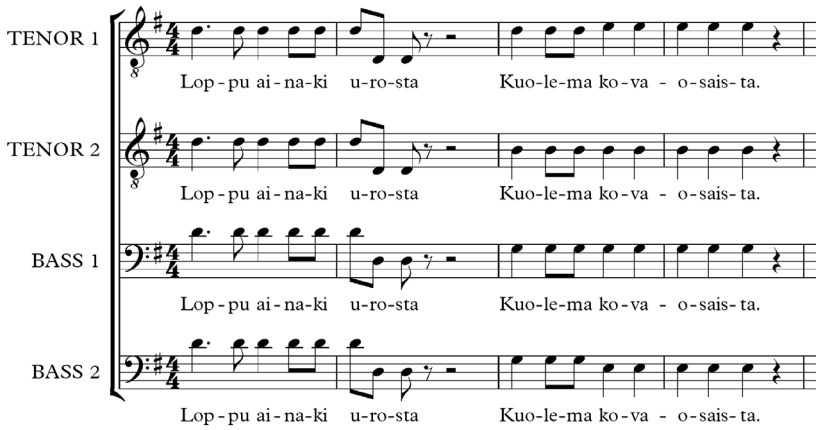
E.g. 11



Jean Sibelius: Kullervo Op. 7, part 4, measures 5-12

In the end there's no other outcome: coming back from the war Kullervo finds his family dead, his farm destroyed. The only thing left for him to do is to re-establish the natural balance of deeds by his own death. Here, from G major in the last bars the music moves into a peaceful, serene E minor, the choir goes from unison to a complete chord:

E.g. 12



Jean Sibelius: Kullervo Op.7, part 5, measures 218-221, choir

It's almost liked the biblical "it is accomplished". In that sense Sibelius didn't feel the need to add anything, there's no lesson to be learned, no conclusion to be drawn, no ideas to emphasize. A complete work of art speaks for itself.

The Larousse encyclopedia has this to say about Sibelius: "...in the Scandinavian countries, in Britain and the United States he is generally acclaimed as a major symphonist. In Germany, on the other hand, he tends to be treated with a certain reserve, while in France he is dismissed altogether."[17]

In any case, this work was a watershed moment for Sibelius, marking his first recognition as one of the great composers, but it also came as a first bloom of an emerging Finnish musical culture. After the glorious premier of the 28th of April 1892 the conductor, Robert Kajanus handed a crown of laurel leaves bound with a ribbon in the blue-white of Finland's national flag. And on that ribbon, they wrote the words that reflected the feelings of every Finn in those days, a quote from the 50th song of the *Kalevala*:

"Sittäpä nyt tie menevi, Ura uursi urkenevi"[18].

[17] *The Larousse Encyclopedia of Music*, The Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd. Paris 1977.
[18] Thus from now on we will lead our own destiny on a newly prepared road.

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