

Conductor's Note

If you are like me, springtime in 2019 has been a dizzying, breathtaking affair, with one kaleidoscopic burst of color after another vying for our attention. My near-daily walks at the Torrey Pines State Park have become meditations on beauty and gratitude. Yes, let's hear it for rain!

And, in the midst of this year's riotous blooming and blossoming, we at the La Jolla Symphony and Chorus are hard at work on what seems, at first glance, to be the least spring-like musical program imaginable.

We start with the urban grit of Julia Wolfe's *Fuel*, another in the collaborations between Wolfe and filmmaker Bill Morrison. (Some audience members may remember our performance of Michael Gordon's *Gotham* with a film by Morrison in 2016.) In *Fuel* for string orchestra, driving rhythms laced with noisily over-pressured string noises and whip-like glissandi, compete for space in a saturated musical environment. The message is clear, our drive for "fuel" is crowding the planet. And the psyche.

It's a delicate musical metaphor that's easy to get wrong. But Wolfe, a 2017 MacArthur Fellow, succeeds in creating both message and music. Julie is a close friend, dating back to the 1990s and my decade as the percussionist of the Bang on a Can All-Stars. I remember countless rehearsals spent trying simply to harness the extraordinary amount of energy she unleashes in every score. With some composers the secret to interpretive success is pruning—see orchestral music from Berlioz to Philip Glass that requires careful sculpting to avoid over-saturation. But with Julie's music, the goal is not to prune, but to cultivate focus. This means, explicitly, not backing away from the turbulence of her musical textures (as one might in "pruning mode") but by leaning in to create shape-shifting sonic masses and intense colors. Think of this music as an English rather than a French garden!

If elegance, not excess, is what you crave, you'll need only to wait for Camille Saint-Saëns popular *Second Piano Concerto*. There is lightness here and grace as pianist and orchestra weave lines around one another. (We are thrilled to welcome Anne Liu, winner of our 2017 Young Artists Competition as our soloist!) And though a self-proclaimed lover of "modern" music (think mid-19th century France), Saint-Saëns rarely left an impression of speed or restlessness, which were so often the calling-cards of the proto-revolutionaries of the mid- to late-century. Aside from a short period as a child, Saint-Saëns spent his entire life in Paris—an urbanite just like Julia Wolfe, more than a century earlier. But his was a compact urbanism: consistent and not disruptive; stately not unprincipled. He was the prototypical figure of the *Belle Époque*—refined and decorous—but imagine the world he saw in 1921, the year of his death, and what he may have thought about it. What might he have made of the seeds he planted?

An unintended side theme of this concert is surprisingly late death dates of the two male composers. Jean Sibelius, born in Finland in 1865, was practically a contemporary of Saint-Saëns. And like Saint-Saëns he considered a rebellious path only to back away from it and embrace the conservative options of his day. And when you hear his unabashedly beautiful melodies and surging waves of consonant harmonies, you might be surprised that he lived until 1957.

Much of what we know about Sibelius seems contradictory. He has been called, diplomatically, a “keen” smoker and drinker and spoke of the need for alcohol to live life fully. But in fact, alcoholism and smoking nearly killed him several times. Though he was a Finnish national hero, he was often reclusive, and though he was immensely popular during his lifetime he was often troubled and alone. He expressed his disdain for what he called Richard Wagner’s pomposity and vulgarity, but at the same time his overly close relationship with German National Socialists has come under critical scrutiny by some recent scholars.

Perhaps because of these contradictions, Sibelius’s *Fifth Symphony* is a masterful, though thoroughly unconventional work, as though he were underlining the estrangement the Finns have always felt relative to “Europe.” The problems in interpretation are likewise not to be solved by conventional strategies—so useful in Beethoven—of clarifying the form or elucidating harmonic movement. The performative issues are nearly all in the arena of pacing: in timing the surges of emotion to coincide with changes of texture; of crafting just the right control over moments of surprise and, conversely, stabilizing things when steadiness is in order.

But returning to springtime: what does this music—by the edgy New Yorker, the whiskered Parisian, the hard-drinking Finn—have to do with May in San Diego? It lies in the confidential beauty inherent in unexpected growth. San Diego is a gray-green *xeriscape* for most of the year. So, the sudden appearance of color is truly shocking. The beauty of springtime in San Diego lies in the unexpected ‘Rivers of Ranunculus,’ to use a phrase by the poet Wendy Labinger. But its emotional impact comes from the sure knowledge that soon—probably before you read these words—the colors will have faded and the rivers will have run dry again. Likewise, when we hear a light moment in Julia Wolfe (marked, “Like Vivaldi” in the score), the sudden brightening helps us frame the moment. *Fuel* is not all dystopic metaphor; it can enlighten and not only instruct. And, Saint-Saëns can look up from his desk and, through the daily grime of mid-19th century Paris, see the sun.

And Sibelius: From the secluded cabin that he called “Ainola,” after his wife, Aino, he saw the yearly miracle of spring and summer Scandinavia. Under nearly 24 hours of sun a day, no place on the planet grows as furiously, as riotously, as the sub-Arctic taiga. It is a place of conflicting impulses and a delicate balance: It is often dark, sometimes muted under heavy snow, often the home of somber thoughts. But when it blooms. Oh, when it blooms...

--Steven Schick