

Program notes by ERIC BROMBERGER

Fuel

JULIA WOLFE

Born December 18, 1958, Philadelphia

Julia Wolfe trained first at the University of Michigan, earned her M.M. at Yale and a Ph.D. at Princeton, and has gone on to become one of this country's leading composers. Her *Anthracite Fields*, for chorus and instruments, won the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2015, and the following year she was named a MacArthur Fellow. Wolfe's music combines several powerful strands: not just the great classical tradition, but such diverse forces as American folk music, rock, minimalism, and others. She has written for orchestra, chamber ensembles, keyboard, and voice, and her music—which is often informed by a strong social conscience—has been performed around the world. Wolfe has been drawn particularly to multi-media works, and she has collaborated with a number of filmmakers.

Fuel, composed in 2007, was a joint project with the American filmmaker Bill Morrison (born 1956). Their collaboration came about as the result of a commission from the Ensemble Resonanz, a string orchestra based in Hamburg. The composer has offered an introduction to this project:

The idea for *Fuel* began in conversation with filmmaker Bill Morrison. We talked about the mystery and economy of how things run—the controversy and necessity of fuel—the global implications, the human need. The music takes its inspiration from the fiery strings of Ensemble Resonanz. The members of the group challenged me to write something rip roaring and virtuosic, asking me to push the group to the limit. This request merged with the sounds of transport and harbors—New York and Hamburg—large ships, creaking docks, whistling sounds, and a relentless energy. *Fuel* was premiered in a multi-media performance with a film by Bill Morrison at the Kaispeicher B Warehouse at the port of Hamburg, Germany, in 2007.

Wolfe's description is exactly right: *Fuel* is high-energy, high-intensity music that explodes to life and then never lets up—throughout, the music rides along a shaft of white-hot sixteenth-notes. Wolfe's instructions to the performers are precise: they are instructed at some points to play with a “scratch sound,” at others to sound “like singing,” and about halfway through, the violins are sent off on an ebullient episode that Wolfe marks *Strong and Joyful (like Vivaldi)*. Her highly-energized music becomes a perfect correlative to Morrison's time-lapse vistas of busy waterfronts, in which loading cranes cavort along the docks like gigantic insects, shipping containers rise in perfectly-balanced stacks, trucks grind past, humans are reduced to insignificant specks, and heavily-laden ships ease delicately forward before a backdrop of towering skyscrapers.

Piano Concerto No. 2 in G Minor, Opus 22

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS

Born October 9, 1835, Paris

Died December 16, 1921, Algiers

Saint-Saëns wrote this popular concerto in the space of seventeen days in the spring of 1868. The Russian composer-pianist Anton Rubinstein was visiting Paris and wanted to show off his abilities as a conductor. He and Saint-Saëns, then 32 years old, struck a deal: Saint-Saëns would compose a piano concerto and be soloist at the first performance, while Rubinstein would conduct. Saint-Saëns worked very quickly, not only composing but learning his own music, and he was soloist at the first performance on May 13, 1868.

The concerto as finished, however, contained a number of surprises. The first movement, marked *Andante sostenuto*, opens with an extended cadenza for solo piano rather than the orchestral exposition of the classical concerto. But this cadenza is not so much a bravura showcase as it is an act of homage to Bach: its neoclassical poise pays tribute to a composer Saint-Saëns very much admired. The orchestra makes its own dramatic entrance, and the movement then develops in more normal form, with a graceful second subject that flows easily between unexpected keys. The movement is quite brilliant (this concerto was a particular favorite of that other piano-playing Rubinstein, Artur), and Saint-Saëns offers the soloist a further cadenza just before the close.

The second movement is not the expected slow movement, but is instead very fast. Marked *Allegro scherzando*, this movement is a rondo: the piano's dancing opening theme is

repeated by the strings and develops through a series of repeated episodes. This movement, which might be mistaken for one of Mendelssohn's scherzos, has all the grace of that earlier composer's best fast movements.

The finale, marked *Presto*, is a *tarantella*, a blazing dance in 6/8 meter that sweeps across the range of the keyboard. The music sparkles and bubbles along, leading one very witty pianist to remark that this concerto "begins with Bach and ends with Offenbach."

Symphony No. 5 in E-flat Major, Opus 82

JEAN SIBELIUS

Born December 8, 1865, Tavastehus, Finland

Died September 20, 1957, Järvenpää, Finland

World War I threatened the western consciousness in a way that it had never been assaulted before—for the first time it dawned on the human imagination that it might be possible to destroy civilization. That war, which leveled so much of western Europe, left Scandinavia untouched, and the residents of those countries were left watching warily as the horror unfolded to the south. In 1915, the first full year of the war, two Scandinavian composers drafted powerful symphonies. Neither composer connected his symphony directly to the war, but it is hard not to feel that both works register some response to that traumatic time. In Denmark, Carl Nielsen wrote his *Fourth Symphony*, which he called the "*Inextinguishable*"—it is a violent symphony that finally makes a statement of faith that life will prevail. In Finland, Jean Sibelius wrote his *Fifth Symphony*, which—while not so violent as the Nielsen—also drives to a heroic conclusion. Sibelius wanted his symphony understood only as music: for the London premiere in 1921, he specified that "The composer desires the work to be regarded as absolute music, having no direct poetic basis." But while neither symphony may consciously be about the war, both make statements of strength and hope from out of that turbulent time.

The Sibelius *Fifth Symphony* had a difficult birth—it went through three different versions spread out over five years. Sibelius had made a successful tour of America in 1914, and he returned home to find Europe at war. A notebook entry from September 1914 brings his first mention of the new symphony, as well as an indication of how depressed he was: "In a deep valley again. But I already begin to see dimly the mountain that I shall certainly ascend . . . God opens his door for a moment and His orchestra plays the Fifth Symphony." He drafted the symphony across 1915 and led the premiere on December 8 of that year, his fiftieth birthday.

But Sibelius was dissatisfied, and across 1916 he revised the symphony, combining its first two movements and so reducing the number of movements from four to three. But when this version was performed in December 1916, he was still unhappy, and he came back to the symphony three years later and revised it a third time. This final version was premiered in Helsinki on November 24, 1919, a year after the end of the war.

As completed, the *Fifth Symphony* has an unusual structure, and it blurs traditional notions of sonata form, which depends on the contrast and resolution of different material. Instead, the *Fifth Symphony* evolves through the organic growth of a few fundamental ideas. The most important of these is the horn call heard at the opening of the first movement. That shape sweeps up over an octave and falls back (commentators are unable to resist comparing this opening to the dawn), and this shape will recur in many forms over the course of the symphony. The movement rises to a great climax at which that horn-shape blazes out in the brass, then speeds seamlessly into the *Allegro moderato*. This is the symphony's scherzo, and in the earliest version of the *Fifth Symphony* it was a separate movement (this movement also incorporates the fanfare-figure from the opening, and perhaps that unifying feature was what led Sibelius to fuse the two movements). The movement gathers strength on its driving 3/4 pulse and drives to a tremendous conclusion.

The central movement—*Andante mosso, quasi allegretto*—is in variation form, but even this old form evolves under Sibelius' hands. Instead of a clear theme followed by variations, Sibelius instead offers a series of variations on a rhythm: a sequence of five-note patterns first stamped out by low pizzicato strings. Such a plan runs the danger of growing repetitious, but Sibelius colors each repetition in a new way and at one point plunges into a rather unsettled interlude in E-flat major before returning to the home key of G major and a quiet close. In the movement's final minutes come hints once again of the horn-theme from the symphony's very beginning.

The concluding *Allegro molto* bursts to life in a great rush of energy from rustling strings, and soon this busy sound is penetrated by the sound of horns, which punch out a series of ringing attacks. In a memorable phrase, the English writer Donald Francis Tovey has described this moment as Thor swinging his hammer through the whistling wind, but it is a mark of the subtlety of this symphony that this same figure had served as an accompaniment figure to the rhythmic variations of the middle movement. Over the cascading peal of those bright horn

attacks, woodwinds sing a radiant melody, one so broad and grand that its effect has been compared to the last movement of Beethoven's *Ninth*. This melody evolves through various forms and finally builds to a great climax and drives toward the powerful close.

Nielsen had concluded his "*Inextinguishable*" *Symphony* with a ferocious duel between two timpanists stationed at each side of the stage. By contrast, the end of Sibelius' *Fifth Symphony* feels classic in its simplicity. Sibelius builds to a climax, cuts the music off in silence, and then finishes with six huge chords. The first four—widely and unevenly spaced—feel lonely and uncertain, and then every player on the stage joins together for the final two chords, which bring the *Fifth Symphony* to its smashing close.

Scandinavian composers were all too aware during World War I of the chaos sweeping across Europe, and both Nielsen and Sibelius responded with wartime symphonies that held out hope in the face of that destruction. If Sibelius refused to connect his *Fifth Symphony* directly to that war, he nevertheless made its moral message clear in his own description of its ending: "The whole, if I may say so, a vital climax to the end. Triumphant."