

Musical Narrative as a Tale of the Forest in Sibelius's Op. 114

Les Black

The unification of multi-movement symphonic works was an important idea for Sibelius, a fact revealed in his famous conversation with Gustav Mahler in 1907:

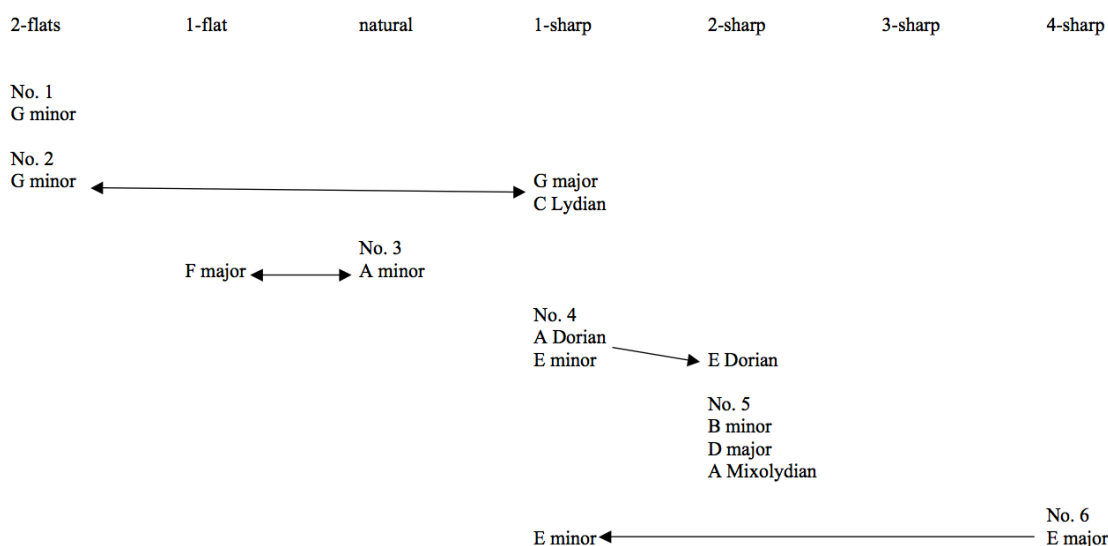
'When our conversation touched on the essence of the symphony, I maintained that I admired its strictness and the profound logic that creates an inner connection between all the motifs.'¹

One might not expect a similar network of profoundly logical connections to exist in sets of piano miniatures, pieces he often suggested were moneymaking potboilers. However, he did occasionally admit investing energy into these little works, as in the case of this diary entry from 25th July 1915:

"All these days have gone up in smoke. I have searched my heart. Become worried about myself, when I have to churn out these small lyrics. But what other course do I have? Even so, one can do these things with skill."²

While this admission might encourage speculation concerning the quality of individual pieces, unity within groups of piano miniatures is influenced by the diverse approaches Sibelius employed in composing these works. Some sets were composed in short time-spans, and in several cases included either programmatic titles or musical links that relate the pieces. Others sets were composed over many years and appear to have been compiled simply to satisfied the demands of a publisher. Among the sets with programmatic links are Op. 75, 'The Trees', and Op. 85, 'The Flowers'. Unifying a set through a purely musical device is less obvious, but one might consider his very first group of piano pieces, the Op. 5 *Impromptus*. This set was composed in a relatively short span of time, though some of the pieces were drawn from pre-existing works.³ As shown in Example 1, there is a progression of keys and modes in the sharp direction, from G minor to E major. The last piece concludes in E minor, bringing the final diatonic collection to the centre of the spectrum of keys and modes explored throughout the set. This key scheme hints that many unifying features could be found in later sets, though the relationships may not be motivic as in the symphonies.

Example 1: Keys and Modes in Op. 5.



At the opposite end of Sibelius's career, the *Five Esquisses*, Op. 114,⁴ composed early in 1929, offer a splendid example of a work that displays both musical and extra-musical unity. In exploring this work, I will begin with the most

obvious aspects of musical expression leading into an interpretation of the programme suggested by the titles. I will then support my reading of the literary narrative with a musical narrative.

The five pieces of the set bear the titles *Landscape*, *Winter Scene*, *Forest Lake*, *Song in the Forest* and *Spring Vision*. The general musical tone of the first piece is Romantic, with a relatively free form, and much tonal wandering. By comparison, tonality in the middle three works is relatively static, and their forms are fairly transparent. The general tone darkens across these pieces, with the peak of intensity occurring in the fourth piece, a work evoking a mysterious, perhaps even mystic quality. The final piece presents a much brighter mood and simpler material, bordering on naïve. If Sibelius had an overarching programme in mind, it would have surely shaped the expressive flow of the work. Thus, we might turn the process around and attempt to expand the pithy titles into a narrative based on the expressive evolution apparent in the music. The title of the first piece, *Landscape*, refers neither to a specific time nor a specific place. The shifting keys, textures and tonal centres of the work may evoke a passage through changing landscapes, but could also suggest a more subjective quality. I believe this piece is akin to the 'Pastoral' Symphony's 'Awakening of cheerful feelings on arrival in the country'. Like Beethoven, Sibelius begins with the feelings of the protagonist before revealing the specific action of the story. The many shifts in tonality may represent the restlessness that inspires the journey into the forest. *Winter Scene* sets the time of our protagonist's encounter with nature, while *Forest Lake* brings us to a precise location. The mysterious tone of *Song in the Forest* suggests a crisis. Clearly this forest song is not the benign call of birds but rather a music that represents the intimate yet unknowable essence of the forest. Finally, *Spring Vision* takes us forward in time, and may be heard as a depiction of nature reborn. However, this piece may also reveal the results of the protagonist's journey into nature; thus the focus turns back on the observer. In this interpretation, the set follows the model of the 'Pastoral' Symphony quite precisely. While the shepherd's song may be encountered as an object in nature, it is the subjective reaction to the song, the 'Happy and grateful feelings after the storm', that are essential.

If this reading of the programme is accurate, one might expect to find details across the five pieces that generate a similar musical narrative. The large-scale tonal relationships support the broad outline of the narrative suggested by the titles. The keys progress from E flat major in the first piece to E major in the last. The middle three works present many modal colorings, but remain set for the most part in the natural-note collection. The relative stasis in the diatonic collection of these middle pieces seems to reflect the permanence of nature, which will be little changed from its encounter with the protagonist. On the other hand, the change of keys from beginning to end suggests a transformation of the protagonist. The encounter with nature, specifically hearing the *Song in the Forest*, is the catalyst that brings about the change. As we will see, the middle section of that piece is the crux of the drama, when the protagonist has a clear opportunity to turn back, but decides to submit to the mysteries of the forest. The lasting effects of this transformative moment may be put into question by the tone of the final piece, leaving listeners to draw their own conclusions concerning the outcome of the drama. Such conclusions will be aided by a brief examination of some of the musical details of each piece.

Example 2: Formal Diagram and Sketch of Op. 114, No. 1 (*Landscape*).

1–2	3	4	5–12	13–14	15–17	18	19–20	21	22	23–32	33–40
a	b	c	a1	a variant	b	c	b	c	b1	a1	c + cadence

The image shows a musical score for the first piece, *Landscape*, with formal diagram labels and chord diagrams. The score is divided into two systems of measures.

Measures 1-16:

- Measures 1-2: Eb major: I
- Measure 3: vi
- Measure 4: V9
- Measures 5-12: V2, V⁴/Gb, B major: V⁴/V
- Measures 13-14: G# E
- Measures 15-16: E major: vii⁴₃, ii⁴₂; C#minor: iv⁴₂, ii⁴₂, V

Measures 17-40:

- Measures 17-18: C, Db⁹, G, Eb
- Measures 19-20: E⁹, Bb
- Measures 21-23: Eb major: V, vi⁴₃ (as in m. 8), V⁷, i
- Measures 24-25: Db major: ii, vii⁴₃ (as in m. 23)
- Measures 26-27: V⁷, i
- Measures 28-32: Ab minor: iv, ii⁷, V, i
- Measures 33-38: iv, V⁹, IV⁶₄, ii⁴₂, I
- Measures 39-40: I

Example 2 provides a formal diagram and sketch of the harmonic structure of the first piece, *Landscape*. The E flat major tonality of the opening is presented with a typical Sibelian ambivalence of mode. The major key sound of bar 1 is challenged by a dominant to tonic motion in C minor at bar 3, but this motion lacks a leading tone. A V⁹ chord reinstates the key of E flat major in bar 4, but this chord does not resolve. This type of modal juxtaposition between weakly defined relative keys is so characteristic of Sibelius that its inclusion at the beginning of the set may be an invitation to consider Sibelius himself as the protagonist of the drama. The tonal uncertainty of the opening continues throughout the piece, with many allusions to tonal centres, but no strong cadential motions. For example, the five-sharp music of bars 8–12 may suggest B major or G sharp minor, but the string of parallel four-three chords forestalls the clear arrival of a key. Eventually, A natural appears, pulling the music toward E major or C sharp minor in bars 13–14. Though not an exact restatement, bar 13 returns to the general texture and shape of bar 1. This is significant, since E is the tonal centre of the final piece of the set. It would appear that receptivity to the transformative power of nature is part of the protagonist’s character from the beginning. When the five-sharp material of bar 8 is reprised in the home key in bar 23, Sibelius again resists a decisive cadence in E flat. Instead, a sequence takes the music down to D flat major and finally A flat major third. The E double flat is likely to be perceived as a D, part of a V/V in A flat. Thus G flat is as an appoggiatura to F, and the interval is actually a diminished fourth (D/G-flat). A V⁹ of E flat immediately follows this oddly spelled interval, clarifying the function of E double flat. I believe Sibelius chooses the E double flat spelling to suggest that a journey away from this starting point is inevitable. The note D, leading tone to E flat, resolves upward to the home tonic, whereas the note E double flat should resolve downward, away from home. The idea of turning away from home is confirmed in the final cadence. As shown at the end of Example 3, V⁹ passes through IV⁶₄ and ii⁴₂ before arriving on the final tonic.⁵ The note D is led down to C and finally B flat, not to the tonic note. Clearly, the musically unsettled nature of the piece and avoidance of strong cadences suggest a restless quality. I believe Sibelius wishes to affix this quality to the subject of his drama, making the first piece a landscape of the soul.

Example 3: Op. 114, No. 1, mm. 32-40

The form of the second piece, *Winter Scene*, is given in Example 4. The A major opening music shifts twice to the parallel minor. The second modal shift persists to the end of the piece. I believe the key scheme in the second piece literally centers the drama in nature. The three-flat music of *Landscape* is balanced by three-sharp music, which is then centred on the natural-note collection, the diatonic region that represents nature. The mode changes in this piece draw attention to the mediant notes, C sharp and C. When C supplants C sharp, the minor key music is saturated with strong C–B appoggiatura motions. These highlighted pitches continue the idea of motion away from the starting point.

Example 4: Formal Diagram of Op. 114, No. 2 (*Winter Scene*).

1–7	8–15	15–24	\ \	25–33	34–42	43–55
intro major to minor	A minor	B minor to major		A ₁ major to minor	B minor to major	A + cadence minor

Example 5 summarizes this process. In the first piece, we find the leading tone of the original tonic notated as E double flat, suggesting downward resolution. In the next piece, C sharp and C provide the main modal contrast, and C–B is the most prominent melodic detail. Thus, the string of semitones extends down from E flat to B. In the next piece, a B half-diminished seventh chord is the main harmonic entity, though B does not take a prominent position in the bass. However, in *Song in the Forest*, B anchors the main harmonic structure, and persists to the end of the piece, preparing the E major tonality of the final piece. While these notes do not constitute a voice-leading gesture, they do sketch a path from the initial tonic to the note that will support the decisive moment of the drama.

Example 5: The Chromatic Link from Eb to B

Aside from this span of emphasized pitches, the middle pieces slowly develop modal coloring and scale formations that prepare the sound of the final piece. I believe scales take on symbolic meanings within this set. Conventional major and minor sounds dominate the first piece, before the protagonist confronts nature. These sounds may represent a more urbane life, isolated from the wilds of nature. The middle of the set uses modal sounds, mostly Dorian and Lydian. These scales are associated with folk music, and with people living close to nature. Thus, modality transmits the drama when the protagonist comes to the forest. While modality may represent people in contact with nature, nature itself requires a separate identity. In this set, Sibelius chooses the acoustic scale, with its collection of notes that approximate the beginning of the overtone series.

As stated above, *Landscape* remains conventionally diatonic, with the modal colorings restricted to relative major-minor contrasts. In *Winter Scene*, the A minor segments have a slight Dorian sound, due to the frequent use of F sharp as a neighbor note to E. However, the leading tone G sharp is also present in these passages, producing an ascending melodic minor scale. Example 6 shows this scale and one of its rotations.

Example 6: Rising Melodic Minor and Acoustic Scales

A Melodic Minor (rising version) D Acoustic Scale

With D as the starting pitch, the A ascending melodic minor scale becomes an acoustic scale – a major scale with raised fourth and lowered seventh scale degrees. In the A minor passages of *Winter Scene*, D appears quite often in the bass with F sharp and G sharp above, suggesting a subtle acoustic-scale coloring. This sound is clearly present in the final cadence of the piece, shown in Example 7.

Example 7: Final Cadence of *Winter Scene*

Forest Lake is even more decisively modal, and continues to develop the acoustic-scale coloring in a very interesting manner. Example 8 gives a formal and musical sketch of the piece. The main D Dorian melody unfolds over a static B half-diminished seventh chord. This harmony projects the essential elements of Dorian sound: a minor triad with a major sixth above the root. While D is clearly the tonal centre of the melody, the chord most often has F as its bass note, though D does eventually break through in the lower register. In fact, one might hear F Lydian as the first scale implied in the opening since F anchors the harmony, and the melody initially moves between F and C as shown in the first phrase of the sketch. The appearance of Lydian sounds may be heard as further preparation for acoustic-scale music, since it mimics the acoustic scale's interval succession through its first six scale steps. In the B part of the form, the pitch collection becomes octatonic, a somewhat uncommon sound in Sibelius's music. After a return of the first phrase of A, a C part emerges in bars 31–39. A different octatonic scale is the source for individual bars in this passage, which appear alongside diatonic collections. The diatonic collections are related by minor third, and thus reflect the minor third symmetry of the octatonic music. The final sonority of the C part is a D major seventh chord with an added G sharp, suggesting another Lydian scale. The piece closes with a final appearance of the first part of A, confirming D Dorian as the main reference collection.

Example 8: Formal Diagram and Sketch of Op. 114, No. 3 (*Forest Lake*).

1–14	15–24	25–29	29–38	39–43	43–47
A1	B	A2	C	retransition (from A)	A3
D Dorian	Octatonic (D-E)	D Dorian	Octatonic (Eb-F) Diatonic (D Lydian goal)		D Dorian

Example 9 shows the transitions into the B and C parts of the form and the octatonic scales that emerge in these sections. In each case, the new pitch collection is preceded by a stepwise ascent that terminates on an unexpected pitch. As shown beside the octatonic scales in the example, one might hear the transitions as shifts of one of the minor tetrachords that comprise the Dorian scale. This shift idea is attractive because of the similar structure of Dorian and octatonic scales. Both scales can be presented as a pair of minor tetrachords, separated by a perfect fifth in the Dorian mode, and by a tritone in the octatonic scale. Going into the B part, one might hear the A flat on the downbeat of bar 15 as a half step downward shift of the expected A, generating a whole-half octatonic scale on D. The C part begins with D leading up to an unexpected E flat. One might hear D shifted up at this point, generating the whole-half octatonic scale on E flat. At the end of Example 9 is a comparison of the octatonic scales found in *Forest Lake* and the acoustic scales used in the set. Octatonic scales have six common tones with four different acoustic scales. The octatonic scale of the B part has this aural connection with the acoustic scale used in *Spring Vision*, while the octatonic scale used in the C part relates to the acoustic scales used in *Winter Scene* and *Song in the Forest*. Though they may at first appear to be a departure from the normative scale formations of the set, the octatonic scales in *Forest Lake* actually forge a link between the prototypically modal Dorian scale, and the acoustic scale, and thus between people in nature and nature itself.

Example 9: Scale Formations in *Forest Lake*

- A) mm. 14-16 (transition to the first octatonic section)
- B) Octatonic scale of B part as a shifted D Dorian
- C) mm. 30-32 (transition to the second octatonic scale)
- D) Octatonic scale of C part as a shifted Dorian
- E) Common tones between Octatonic scales of *Forest Lake* and Acoustic Scales from *Winter Scene* and *Spring Vision*

The image displays musical notation for Example 9, illustrating scale formations in *Forest Lake*. It is organized into five sections, A through E, each with a treble and bass staff.

- Section A:** Shows a melodic line in the treble staff and a bass line in the bass staff. An asterisk (*) is placed above a note in the treble staff. The text "etc." is written above the bass staff. A double bar line separates this section from B.
- Section B:** Shows an octatonic scale in the treble staff, starting on B. The text "shift down one semi-tone" is written below the bass staff.
- Section C:** Shows a melodic line in the treble staff and a bass line in the bass staff. An asterisk (*) is placed above a note in the bass staff. A double bar line separates this section from D.
- Section D:** Shows an octatonic scale in the treble staff, starting on C. The text "shift up one semi-tone" is written below the bass staff.
- Section E:** Shows two octatonic scales side-by-side. The left scale is labeled "B part octatonic scale" and the right is "C part octatonic scale". Below the scales, the text "Common tones with E acoustic (from *Spring Vision*)" is written under the first scale, and "Common tones with D acoustic (from *Winter Scene*)" is written under the second scale.

This brings us to *Song in the Forest*, the climax of the story. A sketch and formal diagram of the piece are given in Example 10. The principal harmony of the outer sections is a French sixth chord with B in the bass. In its first arpeggiation, the second D sharp (that is, D sharp 4) is decorated by a C double sharp. This decoration makes the first bar of *Song in the Forest* strangely summative of the tonal centres to this point. Note that all the main tonics of the first four pieces are present: D sharp is the E flat of piece one, A represents piece two, C double sharp is the D of piece three, and the B in the bass will prove to be the most persistent tonal centre of the fourth piece. The melody is F Lydian, but without the note E. Since an A–D sharp tritone oscillates above the melody, the complete texture is based on an acoustic scale: F, G, A, B, C, D, E flat, notated as D sharp. The French sixth sonority is a perfect harmonic background for music based on the acoustic scale, just as the half-diminished seventh chord perfectly supports Dorian. The chord has all the essential elements of the scale: the tonic note, the major third, the raised fourth and the lowered seventh. The French sixth is also symmetrical, so that this particular chord can be re-voiced with F in the bass. While B may ultimately be posited as the main tonal centre of the outer parts owing to its persistence in the bass, F does take over the role of bass pitch when the melody is playing. This tonal ambiguity adds to the tension and mystery of this piece.

Example 10: Formal Diagram and Sketch of Op. 114, No. 4 (*Song in the Forest*)

1-17 18-25 26-32 33-47 48-55 56-72
 A B transition C B A₁

The musical score for Example 10 is presented in three systems. The first system shows sections A and B. Section A consists of two measures of chords in the treble clef and a bass line. Section B follows with two measures of chords. The second system is labeled 'transition' and shows a melodic line in the treble clef and a bass line. Section C begins with a melodic line in the treble clef and a bass line. The third system shows sections B and A₁. Section B consists of two measures of chords, and A₁ consists of two measures of chords. Chord symbols are provided below the bass staff: V⁴₃, i, Fr+6, and (V⁹/E).

While the outer sections establish the mood of *Song in the Forest*, the dramatic highpoint occurs in the middle of the piece, identified as part C in the diagram and sketch. At bar 30, the music shifts to A minor, leading to a rising sequence, outlined on the second and third systems of Example 10. After A minor, the keys of B minor, C sharp minor and D sharp minor are touched. Example 11 presents the passage from the arrival of D sharp minor to the end of the C part. D sharp is enharmonically equivalent to E flat, the tonic note of the first piece. The arrival on D sharp is at first a linear event; the tonic chord emerges at the end of a string of parallel tenths on the downbeat of bar 41. From here, the music promises a stronger confirmation of this key. The bass steps down through C sharp to B, the sixth scale degree of D sharp minor. Over this B, the 'Forest Song Chord' returns, bringing with it the moment of truth for the protagonist and for the tonality of the set. The chord could function as a French augmented sixth and confirm D sharp, the tonic of the first piece. This outcome would suggest turning back and rejecting nature's influence. However, the French sixth resists resolution. Note that C double sharp in the arpeggiated chord of bar 42 is replaced in the tenor register by a held C natural in bar 44. This note bolsters the chord's affiliation with dominant function, inviting us to hear a V^o of E. The next bars descend to low B, with the return of this anchor pitch coming just a half bar after the Golden Section. By persisting to the end, B connects to the E major tonality of the final piece as a dominant, confirming the transformation of the protagonist.

Example 11: *Song of the Forest*, mm. 40-46

The musical score for Example 11 shows a single system of music with treble and bass staves. Chord symbols are provided below the bass staff: Fr⁶ of D# (B-D#-E#-G##) or V⁷_{b5} of E (B-D#-F-A) and V^{b9} of E.

After this moment of high drama, the relentlessly jovial *Spring Vision* is almost disappointing: a happy ending that borders on vapidty. A formal diagram and a few key passages are given in Example 12. The outer sections employ the

E acoustic scale, though the raised fourth is balanced by A naturals when the melody descends to the tonic note. Since the acoustic scale was encountered in the middle pieces, we might interpret its inclusion in the last piece as a sign that the forest has made a lasting impression on the protagonist. Aside from the acoustic colouring, the middle of this piece includes a rather clumsy ascending stepwise sequence in bars 27 to 32 and bars 39 to 44, which may be heard as a remembrance of the sequential passage in the middle of *Song in the Forest*. If it is meant to evoke that moment, it is doing so in a rather simplistic manner. This might suggest that the dramatic, mystical qualities of that moment are fading in the mind of the protagonist. While this sequence is clearly less powerful than the sequence in *Song in the Forest*, the cadence that concludes the first appearance of the phrase arrives in bar 38, exactly at the Golden Section, as did the triumph of B as a dominant in the previous movement. These important events, occurring at nature's ratio, are another indication that nature has had a profound influence on the protagonist. In addition, the acoustic coloring perseveres, and the final gesture of the set is an A sharp to B semitone. This motion between the enharmonically respelled dominant note of the key of the first piece, and the dominant note of the last piece may suggest that the transformative moment has indeed generated a lasting change in the main character. Overall, *Spring Vision* transcends its initial impression as a frivolous happy ending, presenting some intriguing interpretive avenues.

Example 12: Op. 114, No. 5 (*Spring Vision*): Formal Diagram, mm. 1-6 and mm. 27-38.

1-2	3-26	27-38	39-50	51-61
Intro	A	B	B ₁	A ₁

mm. 1-6

mm. 27-38

Golden Section

I would submit that Sibelius, despite his disdain for miniatures, has indeed composed the Op. 114 *Sketches* with skill. The manner in which the first three pieces lead the ear to the B tonic and acoustic scale sound of the fourth piece, which in turn prepares the final goal of E, can leave little doubt that Sibelius constructed the set as a unified whole. The pieces also have a very progressive quality. The use of octatonic scales in *Forest Lake*, the bitonal feeling and arch form of *Song in the Forest*, the general use of the acoustic scale and even the placement of significant events at the Golden Section all suggest a kinship with Debussy and Bartók. Nearing the end of his career, Sibelius shows no lack of interest in the fruits of his labour, or the development of his craft.

¹ Andrew Barnett, *Sibelius* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 185.

² Erik Tawaststjerna, *Sibelius, Volume III (1914–1957)*, trans. Robert Layton (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1997), 61.

³ Barnett, 84.

[4](#) Jean Sibelius, *Five Esquisses, Op. 114* (Helsinki: Edition Fazer, 1973). My analysis is based primarily on this edition, the only printed score available in 2010. A more reliable printed version has recently appeared in the Jean Sibelius Works series as volume V/3. I would like to thank Anna Pulkkis for pointing out several errors in the earlier printed edition, and pointing me to some of the manuscript materials she used to edit the aforementioned volume.

[5](#) Sibelius's handwritten fair copy of this piece omits the final motion to F in the top voice of bar 39, eliminating the ii^o chord.

[6](#) For a detailed study of modal implications in the work, see Veijo Murtomäki, "Modal-tonal techniques in Sibelius's opus 114", *Musurgia* XV/1–3 (2008): 71–81.

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