

## A Shadow, an Aura and Some Notes on Light: Re-defining the Sibelius Legacy

Tim Howell

Compare the opening of Sibelius' Sixth Symphony with the closing moments of Magnus Lindberg's orchestral work *Aura*; to be more precise, compare bars 1–32 of the Sibelius and bars 760–780 of the Lindberg. Although written seventy years apart, (Sibelius's Sixth Symphony dates from 1923, Lindberg's *Aura* from 1993), there are strong and deliberately evoked connections between these two very different works: the aura of Sibelius's shadow is somehow encapsulated here.[1] Lindberg clearly sounds like Sibelius – the legacy is alive and well. Perhaps you don't need to read any further? Alas, it's not quite so simple... We must not confuse 'reference' with 'influence'.

For a start, it is important to realise that Finnish new music has moved on a lot in that seventy-year period. To illustrate this visually: although we're told not to judge a book by its cover, that may not apply to scores. If you look at the standard Wilhelm Hansen Edition of Sibelius's Sixth Symphony and compare it with exactly the same cover type for Lindberg's orchestral work *Kraft* – the latter is literally some twelve times bigger. More seriously though, it's worth noting that *Kraft* predates *Aura* by some 10 years, and is the work that pinpoints Lindberg's international recognition as a leading figure in contemporary music. This is a piece that encapsulates his maxim that 'only extremes are interesting', indeed, that applies to the sheer size of the score itself, given it's about a metre tall. Also, it is also only fair to note that Lindberg would not have achieved that degree of recognition had he confined himself to some kind of Sibelian pastiche. In fact, despite the number of clear and deliberate references to Sibelius (namely both the Sixth and Seventh Symphonies and *Tapiola*) discernible in *Aura*, this is a truly original work. So, aural connections merely amount to 'reference' and looking at a score (even just its cover, let alone the music inside) simply highlights 'difference'; either way, they're not really helping us define 'influence'.

### A Shadow

To begin to explore this issue we need to go back and consider the nature of 'Sibelius's shadow', a term in common usage from the 1920s onwards and one that may be viewed in either a positive or negative light today. Positively: the significance of an internationally-recognised compositional figure who embodied Finnish national identity and communicated to a wide-ranging audience cannot be overestimated. Sibelius and Finland are somehow inseparable, almost synonymous. Studying the development of musical modernism in Finland is a voyage of discovery – a journey from the national dominance of this single figure to the international influence of the current school of contemporary composition. The power of music to communicate has long since been recognised; its potential to transcend barriers of geography, language, race and time affords it a special place in Finland's political and social history. Sibelius was the pied-piper: his singular achievements brought in their wake a progressive attitude towards music. Without Sibelius as a creative catalyst it is doubtful whether the level of support for new music in Finland – its undoubted success story – could ever have been achieved. His was a shadow that cast light on future generations.

But what about those living directly in that shadow, those who were anxiously trying to determine 'who will be the next Sibelius?' The longevity of this grand old man of Finnish music – complete with a creative vacuum of the thirty-year silence waiting to be filled – cast a shadow over their search for an individual identity. Historically, just as composers of the past felt compelled to react to the 'ghost' of Beethoven or the 'spell' of Wagner, in Finland you could not ignore the 'shadow' of Sibelius. Nevertheless, a group of composers who embraced the modernist aesthetic (though not always consistently so) – Aarre Merikanto, Erik Bergman, Einojuhani Rautavaara and Paavo Heininen (to name but four) – collectively helped to establish what today has become a thriving new-music scene in Finland: an internationally recognised school of contemporary composition. More importantly they were able to do so without any sense that Sibelius' shadow was a negative influence.[2]

This of course brings us to the subsequent generation, and the focus of this article. Magnus Lindberg (b. 1958) and Kaija Saariaho (b. 1952) were both pupils of Paavo Heininen – and so are very much more distanced from Sibelius's shadow – raising questions about how and why they relate his legacy. Lindberg has never been troubled by compositional influence, or shy about acknowledging it. His teachers comprise a veritable Who's Who of international musical modernism: Einojuhani Rautavaara and Paavo Heininen in Helsinki, Franco Donatoni in Siena, Hermut Lachenmann and Brian Ferneyhough in Darmstadt (and London), York Höller in Cologne, Vinko Globokar and Gérard Grisey in Paris. Other declared influences are impressively diverse: Babbitt, Berio, Boulez, Lutosławski, Murail, Sibelius, Stockhausen, Stravinsky, Varèse, Xenakis and Zimmermann are especially notable, along with elements of minimalism, spectral music, free jazz, progressive rock and ethnic music from East Asia. But all this might just make

Sibelius appear to be even more of an oddity, especially when placed alongside Stockhausen and Ferneyhough (for instance).

As ever though, Lindberg is always ready to explain any apparent anomaly: 'I have always said it was a pity that Sibelius was Finnish! His music has been deeply misunderstood. While his language was far from modern, his thinking as far as form and the treatment of materials is concerned, was ahead of its time' (a comment made in 1993, when *Aura* was being written).[3] This brings me to an important point: although you can find musical extracts that allow you literally to hear Sibelian influence in Lindberg (as above), this is not typical of Lindberg's language: it's a kind of quotation. The example from *Aura* comes from a work that is an 'in memoriam' piece (dedicated to the memory of Lutosławski) and it may well be part of its reflective atmosphere which occasions nostalgic references to the past, evoking Sibelius in particular. What seems to be of greater relevance though, given Lindberg's comments above, are issues of 'form' and 'treatment of materials'.

## **An Aura**

A rather special relationship between form and content is one of the most far-reaching aspects of the Sibelius legacy. It has long-since been argued – and by me in particular – that Sibelius's manipulation of musical time in order to generate formal schemes of great originality amounts to one of his most significant achievements. Lindberg's *Aura* is a forty-minute piece in four movements, each of which is defined by its own expressive character. However, they are played without a break and material is deliberately sustained at those points of potential change: issues of multi-movement contrast versus single-movement continuity are therefore brought into question. Separating opposing tempi into self-contained movements epitomises conventional symphonic thinking and Sibelius ranks amongst the first composers in history to challenge this tradition. He developed a technique whereby apparent multi-movement contrasts contribute to actual single-movement continuity: the Seventh Symphony is the ultimate example.

Against this background, we may consider Lindberg's *Aura* as a work that seeks to re-imagine these principles within a modernist language. Making the case that *Aura* is a symphonic work is really quite compelling: its first movement is the longest and most eventful; the second is slower with chorale-based passages; the third deploys multiple ostinati in mechanistic encounters (a modernist scherzo, in effect); and the finale acts as 'a magnet' (as the composer defines it) – drawing upon earlier materials, channelling them into a dramatic climax, before closing with a contemplative coda (the very end of which so directly evokes the opening of Sibelius's Sixth Symphony).

So what does Lindberg say about this? 'I believe that the overall form of *Aura* would make it appropriate to call the piece a symphony. But it is not a symphony. The piece could be called a concerto for orchestra, but it isn't that either'.[4] Well, thanks for clarifying that for us, Magnus! Actually, the whole idea of 'symphony' in Finnish new music is a sensitive area. The Sibelian shadow still implies a degree of traditional thinking relative to this genre and there are many examples of large-scale orchestral works where composers studiously avoid the term. (Neither Lindberg nor Saariaho has written pieces called 'symphony', though both will use the term 'concerto' for instance.) Ironically, the closest parallel is with Sibelius himself and the Seventh Symphony. He had originally thought that the continuous form he had created was a 'symphonic fantasy'; only later did he concede that the piece was in fact 'a symphony'. Lindberg's position is essentially the other way around: he acknowledges that *Aura* may be a symphony but refuses to call it such. All this forces us to reconsider the relative values of process and form when defining a genre.

The structure of Sibelius's Seventh Symphony has generated much discussion, which may be summarised in terms of two perspectives. Some view the piece as a series of blocks of material (associated with traditional multi-movement works) that have been joined together into a continuum: in other words, a formal layout of an architectural shape – a spatial scheme. Others (including myself) tend to see the work as superimposing layers of activity, where faster surface events articulate a slow-moving, underlying, tonal pattern: in other words a formal succession that unfolds in time – a temporal process.[5] Existing in space, unfolding in time, architectural form or organic process, the Seventh Symphony creatively explores these competing elements. From this perspective, Lindberg's *Aura* is something of an equivalent structural hybrid; it combines concerto-for-orchestra thinking – with its attendant opposition, dialogue and block-like form: something architectural – with symphonic processing – based on organic growth and coherent narrative: something temporal – held within a framework of dramatic tension. This is perhaps the true Sibelius legacy – his 'attitude to form and treatment of materials' as expressed by Lindberg – rather than the occasional and superficial reference to an earlier language that is more easily discerned and demonstrated, but ultimately less convincing.

## **Some Notes on Light**

But, can any of this shed light on the music of Kaija Saariaho? There are no precise references to Sibelius here, either in terms of the composer verbally acknowledging any influence or any aural connection to be found within the music itself. Indeed, I cannot direct you towards listening to an extract of Saariaho that sounds like Sibelius (as was the case with Lindberg). However, her cello concerto *Notes on Light* (2006–07) reminds us of the importance of visual stimuli for this composer; moreover, the significance of light for Finnish composers in general, and to Saariaho in particular, cannot be overestimated (something she did confirm to me in interview and an issue that does invite parallels with Sibelius, at least in the broadest sense). [6] Extremes of light and dark (and the very slow rate of evolution between them) condition perceptions of how time passes, and Saariaho feels that this is ingrained in her psyche, despite her having lived in Paris for so many years. Also, within the Nordic climate, that prolonged, cyclic quality of light and dark is offset by abrupt seasonal changes: winter to spring, brown to green, take just a couple of weeks.

The differing qualities of light envisioned at each stage of this five-movement work act as a powerful metaphor. Collectively they offer a vivid perspective on timescale. Gradual evolution of light conveys a horizontal, temporal process, resulting in narrative continuity; sudden contrasts of colour exert a vertical, spatial impulse, creating structural articulations. Typically for Saariaho, this results in two formal impulses: (i) organic – music that unfolds and finds shape over time; and (ii) architectural – a sequence of events sculpted in space. Mapped on to the concerto genre, inherent dialogue and duality are respectively conveyed through these reflections on time and space. Saariaho has, after all, defined the basis of her compositional process as ‘capturing time and giving it a form’. [7]

These principles operate on both large-scale and local levels. The piece as a whole is a voyage that leads us to the very heart of light, a metaphor confirmed by the T.S. Eliot quotation on the last page of the score:

"...I could not  
 Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither  
 Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,  
 Looking into the heart of light, the silence."  
 T. S. Eliot: *The Waste Land* (1922)

Yet a destination that reaches the ‘source of light’ – namely ‘silence’ – suggests a cyclic quality overall. The multi-movement phases of this work, a scheme of apparent diversity, collectively explore various qualities of light – suggesting an implicit continuity, which may be grouped into three stages: Example 1 shows the overall layout of the work.

EXAMPLE 1: *Notes on Light*: overall layout.

Movement	Title	Duration	Quality of light	Character
I	‘Translucent, secret’	4'57	Translucent	Misterioso, espressivo
II	‘On Fire’	3'12	Blazing	Sempre energico
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III	‘Awakening’	7'52	Colourful	Dolce, languido
-----				
IV	‘Eclipse’	4'22 [attacca]	Darkness	Molto calmo
V	‘Heart of Light’	7'06	Brightness	Dolce, espressivo

Ranging from absolute brightness to total darkness, characteristics of transparency, reflection, diffraction, translucence, opaqueness – and even the soloist being eclipsed – are all envisioned here. Along the way, soloist and orchestra explore relationships between light and speed that convey horizontal continuities, and their specific qualities – colour and tempo – which articulate vertical contrasts. [8]

On a local level, the workings of the opening movement ‘translucent, secret’ explore a balance between spatial duality and temporal dialogue that is fundamental to this piece as a whole. A summary diagram (see Example 2) shows a block-like formal architecture – at its most simple, an alternation between solo/tutti contrasts as a basic framework – where the closely-related recurrences of orchestral material almost assume the guise of ritornelli. (It is worth noting the respective durations and character of these blocks of material.) While horizontal/vertical contrasts of texture mark the most obvious delineation between the two forces, different metres underpin a separation between dynamism (the cello passages are distinctively fluid) and stasis (the tutti statements are consistently in 4/4 time).

[insert: full-page, landscape diagram (attached here as a separate docx. file) on facing page so that it may be viewed in relation to this commentary]

EXAMPLE 2: *Notes on Light*, ‘Translucent, secret’: Formal Architecture.

Sections	A + A1	B	A2	B1	A3	B2	A4	B3	A5 + Coda
<b>Concerto Contrasts</b>	Cello bb. 1–14	Orchestra bb. 15–17	Cello bb. 18–28	Orchestra bb. 29–32	Cello bb. 33–42	Orchestra bb. 43–44	Cello bb. 45–52	Orchestra bb. 53–58	Cello bb. 59–66; 67–76
<b>Formal Balance</b>	2 x 7-bar phrases	3-bar ritornello	11-bar episode	4-bar ritornello	10-bar episode	2-bar ritornello	8-bar episode	6-bar ritornello	8-bar episode
<b>Totals</b>	14 bars	14 bars		14 bars		10 bars		14 bars; 10-bar coda	
<b>Character/Expression Marks</b>	<i>Misterioso</i> ; <i>Sempre molto espressivo</i>	<i>Misterioso</i>	<i>Sempre dolce, espressivo</i>	<i>Ben sonante</i> ; <i>rit. molto</i> ; <i>Con tristezza</i>	<i>A tempo</i> ; <i>Dolce</i>	<i>Subito maestoso</i> ; <i>rit. Morendo</i>	<i>A tempo</i> ; <i>Misterioso</i>	<i>Subito doloroso</i> ; <i>rit. molto</i> ; <i>Lamentoso</i>	<i>A tempo</i> ; <i>Delicato</i>
<b>Summary of Main Events</b>	Balancing cello recitatives; 2nd statement intensifies 1st; last 3 bars orch. prepares for....	Vertical contrast. Trills grow out of refractions of the earlier cello line, offering some continuity.	Cello resumes 2nd statement with more assertiveness; 3-bar orchestra prepares for.....	TUTTI <i>mp</i> statement; more sustained and disruptive gesture.	<i>Piu dolce, espressivo</i> version of last recitative.	TUTTI <i>mf</i> statement; more dissonant and assertive.	Reverts to initial <i>misterioso</i> world. Suggests a kind of retreat, relative to the orchestra.	TUTTI <i>mf</i> Most extensive, tense orchestral outburst; crisis point: chromatic descent....	Almost cadenza-like cello response; Coda of 4 bars, then 2 x 2-bars <i>intenso, agitato/calmo, misterioso</i> .
<b>Soloist Pitch-Class Centres</b>									
<b>Orchestral Pedal Points</b>									

Even that balance is brought into question, though. The soloist’s ‘dynamism’ is subtly translucent: it has a thoughtful, meditative presence that, when threatened by orchestral outbursts of increasing intensity, retreats further into a contemplative, more secretive world. Conversely, the ‘static’, tutti statements, limited in both activity and duration, nevertheless gain a gradual dynamic and timbral impulse; the sheer forcefulness of a full orchestral sonority becomes ever-more assertive as concerto conflicts reach a crisis point (see section B3: bars 53–58).[9]

The apparently distinctive nature of soloist and orchestra becomes rather undermined as, during this movement, each undergoes a transformational process in order to explore common ground. Moreover, all of this is underpinned by a more organic, temporal unfolding of pitch-class centres (as shown on the lower system of Example 2) – and these provide narrative continuity to the movement overall. Issues of conflict yet complementation – so fundamental to the concerto genre – help explain the subtle combination of formal impulses at work here. The supremacy of an F sharp centre is particular to the cello soloist and stands in apparent conflict with orchestral focus on C natural: each element has its own pitch-space or focal point. But if you consider them together, the so-called ‘polarity’ of the tritone also offers balance: there is stability in a symmetrical division of the octave. What they also share is their use of semitone neighbour-notes either side of these centres: F sharp/F; C/D flat. Yet these are also distinctive: falling cello motif/rising orchestral figure. The cello chromaticism is, therefore, essentially decorative in relation to an orchestral ascending motion that might take on a more functional role: as a kind of leading note; what is ornamental versus fundamental – and its potential for constant redefinition over time – is reflective of the changing roles of tutti/solo contrasts within the overall form. Typical of Saariaho is the way in which such surface details – the mere interval of a semitone – can encapsulate larger structural issues in this way.

To begin to see this on a more middleground level, we note that chromatic gestures operate on different timescales here. The four orchestral statements (sections B–B3 inclusive) outline a large-scale semitone ascent: G–A flat–A–B flat (see

Example 2) and that peak, the crisis point of bars 53–58, is characterised by a chromatic descent (from B flat to D). Thereafter, the orchestral closing stages pursue that stepwise motion, falling in semitones to a C natural ‘outcome’, which the cello confirms. Any further analytical detail is not useful here and a full analysis is provided elsewhere (as noted above), though that chapter deliberately makes no mention of the Sibelius legacy – it is neither necessary nor appropriate in this context.

### **Casting a New Light on the Sibelius Shadow**

By way of conclusions, I would suggest that the following issues deserve further consideration. When reviewing new music in relation to Sibelius, it is important not to be side-tracked by differences in musical language as this can result in confusions between ‘reference’ and ‘influence’. In the case of Magnus Lindberg, the Sibelius influence is a conscious process; for Kaija Saariaho, it’s a subconscious one. For both composers, however, there is a natural absorption of a deep-rooted attitude to musical time and a creative interplay between architectural and organic formal processes. Time becomes important in terms of chronology as well. We tend to view history as simply one-thing-after-another: that Sibelius’s shadow was to cast light on subsequent generations – and continues to do so. What is more interesting though, is to turn things around and look in the other direction. My recent studies of contemporary Finnish music have encouraged me to appreciate more fully – in retrospect – the progressive thinking of Sibelius’s work. Trends in issues of formal processing are discernible within the modernist language of today’s music and may be traced back to Sibelius’s engagement with equivalent concerns. Remember Kaija Saariaho’s comment that composing is about ‘capturing time and giving it a form’: clearly Sibelius felt the same. Some 25 years ago, when analysing Sibelius’s symphonies and tone poems for a PhD thesis,[10] I could not have had any idea about how things would develop: what seemed potentially to be progressive had not yet been born out in reality. Now, it is possible to retrace my steps and be reminded of the sheer modernity of Sibelius’s compositional thought process. New music in Finland can be seen to shed light on Sibelius’s achievements; it offers us a different perspective on the far-reaching effects of his creative process and thereby enables us to redefine his legacy.

[1] Those who have access to the academic website Alexander Street, can find the score at the link: [https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezproxy.uniarts.fi/view/work/bibliographic\\_entity%7Cscore%7C2194830#page/1/mode/1/chapter/bibliographic\\_entity|score|2194830](https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezproxy.uniarts.fi/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cscore%7C2194830#page/1/mode/1/chapter/bibliographic_entity|score|2194830)

[2] I have discussed this issue in more depth in *After Sibelius: Studies in Finnish Music* (Ashgate Publishing, 2006).

[3] This comes from an interview with Peter Szendy in Risto Nieminen (ed.) *Compositeurs d’aujourd’hui: Magnus Lindberg*, Editions IRCAM – Centre Georges-Pompidou, Paris (in French); trans. N. Le Quesne (1996), Helsinki: Finnish Music Information Centre, pp. 7–25.

[4] This comment is taken from a programme note to the full score, published by Chester Music.

[5] For a discussion of a range of views, see Tim Howell ‘Sibelius Studies and Notions of Expertise’ in *Music Analysis*, Vol. 14: pp. 315–340 (1995).

[6] This interview took place in Paris in 2005 and its details inform parts of a Chapter, ‘Kaija Saariaho: The French Connection’ in Tim Howell (2006).

[7] This is quoted in Pirkko Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, University of Illinois Press, 2009:54.

[8] For the full analytical account of this work from which some of these comments are taken, see ‘Dualities and Dialogues: Saariaho’s Concertos’ in *Kaija Saariaho: Visions, Narratives, Dialogues*, ed. Tim Howell with Jon Hargreaves and Michael Rofe (Ashgate Publishing, 2011).

[9] Those who have access to the academic website Alexander Street, can find the score at the link: [https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezproxy.uniarts.fi/view/work/bibliographic\\_entity%7Cscore%7C2195771#page/1/mode/1/chapter/bibliographic\\_entity|score|2195771](https://search-alexanderstreet-com.ezproxy.uniarts.fi/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cscore%7C2195771#page/1/mode/1/chapter/bibliographic_entity|score|2195771)

[10] Tim Howell, *Jean Sibelius: Progressive Techniques in the Symphonies and Tone-Poems*, PhD thesis, University of Southampton: 1985; published by Garland Press, New York: 1989.

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