

RECORDINGS
IN REVIEW



D E W E Y F A U L K N E R

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” So says Gavin Stevens to Temple Drake in William Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun*. As if to prove this, in 1972 the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts presented a concert of three works, all written in a space of two years shortly before World War I and all icons of modernism. Two were predictable choices: Igor Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps* (1913) and Arnold Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912). The third, which opened the program, was a surprise to many: Jean Sibelius’s Symphony no. 4 in A Minor (1911). All three are very much alive and present, especially in recordings, in particular in recordings by their composers or by conductors close to the composers. The disturbing world they inhabit and predict was to arrive after 1918 – and it is with us still.

Two of the three were written on commission, intended for the stage. *Sacre* is a ballet commissioned by Sergei Diaghilev for choreography by Vaslav Nijinsky. *Pierrot* is an accompanied recitation commissioned by the diseased Albertine Zehme for her own presentations. Only the Sibelius symphony arose internally, seemingly prompted by the composer’s private compulsions. Their origins have a bearing on each of these works.

The most celebrated of the group is *Le Sacre du printemps*, *The Rite of Spring*. Based in Paris since 1909, Diaghilev's Ballets Russes had been presenting Russia to western Europe, giving both traditional ballets using Russian choreographers, particularly Mikhail Fokine, and, increasingly, newly composed works, at first using Russian composers. Stravinsky, an accomplished pupil of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, had enjoyed a great success with his folklore-based *Firebird* in 1910 and immediately went in search of new Russian subjects. That year he "saw in imagination a solemn pagan rite: sage elders, seated in a circle, watched a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring." Stravinsky consulted on this with the painter, ethnographer, and mystic Nicholas Roerich, and in July 1911 the pair devised a scenario for which Roerich sketched settings and costumes.

The doubting Diaghilev soon steered Stravinsky away from *Sacre* to the Russian puppet clown Petrushka, leading to a ballet that premiered in 1911, with Nijinsky in the title role and conducted by young Pierre Monteux. A success like *Firebird*, it led Diaghilev at last to commission *Sacre*. As this was considered another folk-based subject, Roerich was allowed to execute his "authentic" designs. Monteux would again conduct. But in order to invigorate the dancing – and to placate his lover, Nijinsky – the impresario made the dancer the choreographer, following up on his scandalous 1912 success with Claude Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. At the same time Nijinsky was also choreographing Debussy's *Jeux*, in which he danced the lead. To assist in both he brought in the young Marie Rambert, an expert in Dalcrozian eurhythmics, to help him use its techniques in achieving the abrupt, jerky, rhythmic movements he wanted. Stravinsky's music was extraordinarily difficult to dance to as its bar lengths and rhythms changed constantly, at times in every bar. (When Stravinsky first played the score to him, Monteux later noted, "Before he got very far I was convinced he was raving mad.") And much of the dancing was to be done by the large corps, as the sacrificed girl is the only principal dancer, and further complicated by the corps' being broken into groups, each one performing differently.

Worse, Roerich's costumes covered the dancers' legs and his painted drops were plain, even stark. Still worse, Nijinsky had the

dancers turn their toes and knees in and dance (or move) that way. Instead of another appealing bit of Russian local color in a traditional ballet, this was a recipe for disaster. And as is well known, at its 29 May 1913 premiere (where it followed *Les Sylphides*) a fiasco it was – although like *Faune* it sold out all its performances, to Diaghilev's joy.

Stravinsky, however, was not pleased, for his music was essentially inaudible over the audience's din. Only in the last three Parisian performances could it be heard, and it was not truly acclaimed until 15 March 1914, when Monteux conducted it in concert for a wildly appreciative audience. Since then *Sacre* has become a cornerstone of the symphonic repertoire, a piece every young conductor must master.

But its unique staging was soon lost, replaced in 1920 by a more traditionally balletic conception created by Léonide Massine. Not until the 1980s was the outrageous original dance reconstructed and performed, in particular by the Joffrey Ballet. This reconstruction, by Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer with the assistance of Rambert, has removed *Sacre* from mainstream ballet and restored its ability to horrify audiences much as it did in 1913. Nijinsky's choreography is what caused the riot, even though Stravinsky's similarly abrupt, jerky, driving score would have had the same effect initially had it been heard.

Thus to comprehend *Sacre* and its impact on the modern, one must see it. This can be done, more or less, by watching the Maryinsky Theatre's 2008 production conducted by Valery Gergiev either on DVD or Blu-Ray (Bel Air BAC241). This film's main problem is that Nijinsky often created patterns on the full stage with the entire corps dancing, whereas the camera necessarily focuses on individual groups and dancers. The Joffrey production was shown years ago on PBS, and it suffered from the same difficulty. (Bits of this film can be seen embedded in Michael Tilson Thomas's DVD *Keeping Score: Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring."*) Yet in the house, *Sacre*'s effect is overwhelming, seen either from stage-level seating or, especially, from a balcony, where Nijinsky's effects are more clearly visible. Staged, *Sacre* emerges as a complete disavowal of ballet as it had been practiced, either in Russia or anywhere else.

Wholly musical accounts are easier to come by: everybody has to do *Sacre*, and does. For the 2013 centennial, Decca released a box with thirty-eight recordings of the piece on nineteen CDs, while Sony released ten additional recordings of it on ten CDs. (Both boxes are still available.) In all this there are a few readings that bring out most strikingly the character of the work, particularly its rhythms. Two are by the composer and have been recently reissued by Sony in substantially improved sound (Sony 8544269; 2 CDs). The first, from 1940, is with the New York Philharmonic and was among the first performances on record to offer the score accurately played. The second, from 1960, is with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra and was also recorded in New York – that is, much if not all the orchestra is the Philharmonic. And the conductor of the premiere, Pierre Monteux, made two recordings late in life with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, one commercial in 1951 (RCA 61898; Arkiv CD) and one captured from a broadcast in 1957 (Guild Historical GHCD 2342).

With both conductors the later readings show greater orchestral familiarity with this complex score. But all four have two things in common that are missing in most other accounts: absolute clarity of the rhythms and absolute precision of the beat. For both Stravinsky and Monteux, *Sacre* is a score to be danced – and could be, under their batons. Monteux generates more orchestral color, in keeping with the score's descent from Rimsky-Korsakov, while Stravinsky in 1960 deemphasizes this, making the sound more raw, fierce, and savage. In all four recordings the listener is confronted with something rhythmically primal and untamed, something ancient and utterly modern at once.

For those more interested in the score's orchestral colors, especially its harsh discords and their shadings, there are two readings of special interest, both by Pierre Boulez with the Cleveland Orchestra. The first (1969), on Sony, is compromised by the CBS sound engineering, with microphones zooming in and out. The second (1991), on DG (435769), is clearer and more natural sounding, allowing Boulez's command of the score's sonic richness and anti-harmonies to dominate, if at the expense of drive and danceability. (The DG has exceptionally fine notes by Richard Taruskin.) For those requiring "authentic" sounds, François-Xavier Roth and Les Siècles perform *Sacre* on French instruments of its

time, a 2013 performance that inappropriately suffers from soggy rhythms (Actes Sud ASM 15).

A useful key to *Sacre*'s relationship to its era is its subtitle, "Tableaux de la Russie païennes," "Scenes from Pagan Russia," depictions of the savage antique injected into a more civilized modern culture. Its essence is terror. Stravinsky and Roerich in a 1913 interview with *Montjoie!* magazine said that *Sacre* depicts "the total, panic-stricken rising of the universal sap . . . the obscure and immense sensation that all things experience at the moment that Nature renews its forms." *Sacre* is about panic, fear, human sacrifice. It incarnates T. S. Eliot's "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain." To many in 1913 it would have sounded and looked like living fragments shored against the ruins of two cultures, music and dance. Properly done it still can.

In December 1912 Stravinsky and the Ballets Russes were in Berlin, a city the Russian composer detested. But Diaghilev arranged a dinner with Arnold Schoenberg, who was concluding the German tour of his new *Pierrot Lunaire*, and Stravinsky was invited to its final performance on 8 December. The Russian was greatly impressed by *Pierrot*, "wherein is most intensively displayed the whole extraordinary stamp of [Schoenberg's] creative genius." Stravinsky would later term *Pierrot* the "solar plexus" of twentieth-century music.

Pierrot Lunaire was for decades a primary monument of modernism, but increased familiarity with Schoenberg's work has relegated it somewhat to a more isolated position. Most of the composer's influential pre-dodecaphonic scores were written before *Pierrot*, including the Chamber Symphony no. 1 in 1906, the second string quartet in 1907, *The Book of the Hanging Gardens* in 1908–9, and, in 1909, the *Five Pieces for Orchestra*, the opera *Erwartung*, and the 3 *Piano Pieces* of opus 11. His *Harmonielehre* text was completed in 1911, as was the massive and romantic *Gurrelieder*, which gave him his life's greatest success at its premiere in 1913.

Unlike all these, *Pierrot*'s creation in 1912 was subject to constraints. First, its commissioner, Albertine Zehme, merely wanted

background music. Then too, its text was specified: Zehme was taken by Otto Erich Hartleben's German translations of Albert Giraud's fifty French rondels on the moonstruck character from Italian commedia dell'arte, the clown Pierrot. A cabaret artist, she had been performing these to a score by Otto Vriesländer but wanted something more suited to her delivery. Schoenberg had managed the Überbrettel cabaret in Berlin briefly during 1901–2, so he was a strong candidate to provide such a setting. And he needed the money.

Schoenberg began by selecting twenty-one poems, arranged by him in three groups of seven. Zehme initially wanted only a piano over which she would recite in her Pierrot (or Columbine) costume, with a bit of mime here and there. The composer soon discovered that *he* wanted more sonic variety and began adding instruments, necessarily clearing each addition and its cost with Zehme. He wound up with five instrumentalists, three of whom doubled their instruments: piano, violin/viola, cello, flute/piccolo, and clarinet(s)/bass clarinet (two separate clarinets are used). Zehme approved the musicians but insisted that all five stay behind a screen, giving herself the spotlight and necessitating a conductor to coordinate singer and players.

A major contributor to this conductorial requirement, in addition to the complexity and spareness of the scoring, is that *Pierrot's* entries and rhythms must be precise. In a method that would become characteristic of Schoenberg (and even more so of his pupil Anton Webern), content is minimal, everything is audible, and rhythms in every measure require strict control. Such control extends to the instrumental lines as well, since each one is independent, and on only a few occasions do they unite in anything resembling supporting chords. Their colors must be controlled, as in several songs players switch from one instrument to another. Forms are also controlled: in some of his settings Schoenberg uses preexisting forms (waltz, passacaglia, canon, and so on), while in others he devises his own. And everything is brief, as each poem is brief, and much is accomplished in little time.

Schoenberg selected poems with texts about moonlight effects, blood, religion, sadism, sickness. In the final group are three unexpected poems expressing deep nostalgia, especially the final two, "Heimfahrt" (Return Home) and "O alter Duft aus Märchenzeit"

(O ancient scent of legendary times), which express the speaker's longing to escape from reality and sail into the fancied world of Pierrot, Guiraud's "bleus Elysées / Où Watteau s'est éternisé" (the blue Elysiums / where Watteau is eternalized), a world far different from that of the poems.

In keeping with the nature of his commission, in most pieces Schoenberg is content to support his texts with mood and atmosphere, which can range from vaguely symbolist to oppressively expressionist to achingly nostalgic, with many less specific tonalities interspersed. Yet, as Schoenberg noted, "it is never the task of the performers to re-create the mood and character of the individual pieces out of the meaning of the words, but solely out of the music." It was Schoenberg's show. He conducted many of the 1912 performances and supervised the rest.

The scandal of the work arose (and arises) from its mode of recitation. It would appear that there was a potential conflict of control between what Frau Zehme wanted and what Schoenberg wanted. His compromise, if it is that, is called *Sprechstimme*. In it every syllable is assigned a pitch "but immediately leaves it again by falling or rising." Occasionally this is done by notated glissandi, but Schoenberg appears to be thinking of a kind of portamento, an ornament common at the time that has been purged from most modern performances of anything. In *Pierrot* it necessarily survives.

We do not know whether Zehme actually recited the piece according to Schoenberg's specifications (probably not), but the composer's favored Pierrot in the early 1920s and later, Erika (Stiedry-)Wagner, recorded it with him in 1940, so we must assume that she performs it in an approved style. And she is variable: in some places she hits the pitches, in others not, though she does observe the contour of each line and executes the implied portamenti throughout. And she is spot-on in re-creating the mood and character of each piece, far more so than most recorded performers since. Many modern critics consider her overly hysterical and prefer a more decorous performing style. Schoenberg clearly did not.

Schoenberg's 1940 Columbia recording must be considered an authoritative baseline. Its pianist, Eduard Steuermann, had played on the 1912 tour with Zehme, and violinist/violist Rudolf Kolisch

was Schoenberg's favored string player. As producer, Schoenberg was determined that the players should be heard, so he pushed reciter Stiedry-Wagner into the background. And we now know that he recorded twelve of the songs more than once, some four times; these exist as test pressings (there may have been more) from which he selected the final sides. There is also a private live recording of part of a New York *Pierrot* concert later in 1940. All these have been examined and discussed by Avior Byron, who shows that Stiedry-Wagner performed differently each time, although she accurately preserved the contours of the written lines throughout. As Erwin Stein wrote in 1927, "Though shown in absolute pitch notation, the intervals are only meant to be relative. . . . What is essential is that the proportions of the melodic line be retained." And this she does.

So what we have in *Pierrot Lunaire* are conflicts and inconsistencies. Texts vary widely in tone. Some appear to be spoken by Pierrot, many not. Some pieces are in strict forms, some are free. Musical sounds (chords, lines) vary from one to the next, as does the treatment of instruments. And in Schoenberg's own performances one apparently never heard the speaker perform the same way every time. Perhaps *Pierrot*'s truest modernism consists in its juxtaposition of fixity with indeterminacy, of what goes on behind the curtain with what occurs in front of it. Any performance of *Pierrot Lunaire* that insists on consistency throughout is largely missing the point.

Recent recordings of *Pierrot* differ meaningfully, mainly in their reciter's approach to or method of Sprechstimme. Some few follow Stiedry-Wagner (and Schoenberg), while most carefully, audibly preserve the score's pitches and approach singing. The most assiduous of these is singer Yvonne Minton, working with Pierre Boulez and his Ensemble InterContemporain (Sony). Boulez's later recording with Christine Schäfer and the same Parisian group brings the singer far closer to speech (DG 457630). But Schäfer's approach is still *not* speech, and Schoenberg insisted from 1912 on that Sprechstimme should "not call singing to mind." In her and most other recordings we are only too clearly reminded that we are listening to a singer. There is too much definite tone in their words.

A few succeed in following the composer's instructions and

example. Salome Kammer is one, with the Ensemble Avantgarde under Hans Zender (MDG 6130579), although she is somewhat restrained histrionically. Marianne Pousseur is suitably farther from sanity with the Gruppo Montebello (Et'Cetera KTC 1484), as is Barbara Sukowa at the 2011 Salzburg Festival with an unconducted ensemble led by pianist Mitsuko Uchida. Sukowa's is a carefully filmed DVD presentation, allowing one to watch how *Pierrot* works as an ensemble, though not given in costume or mimed (Belvedere 10130). Still, the truest successor to Zehme and Stiedry-Wagner is Bethany Beardslee, whose 1961 CBS recording with Robert Craft has shamefully never been transferred to CD. Having seen Beardslee perform *Pierrot* with Boulez, I can testify to her complete histrionic involvement with the score and her total mastery of words and music. Most important, Beardslee embodied the neurosis and extreme angst at the heart of Schoenberg's work, and of much modern life.

Pierrot Lunaire was an uncomfortable score for audiences in 1912 and should be one still. As a stage commission, it exists totally outside Schoenberg's normal formats. Yet it draws together his previous work and thought on music while embodying features whose shadow would fall balefully across music from 1945 to 1965 and from which modern classical music has yet fully to emerge.

For its third prewar modernist composition, the BBC might well have chosen Claude Debussy's *Jeux* (1912) or Charles Ives's Symphony no. 4 (begun 1910), but instead it chose Jean Sibelius's Symphony no. 4, a piece seldom heard in concert but apparently fascinating to conductors, many of whom have recorded it along with others whose live performances have been preserved: Sir Thomas Beecham, Leopold Stokowski, Arturo Toscanini, Artur Rodzinski, Otto Klemperer, George Szell, Herbert von Karajan, Leonard Bernstein, Lorin Maazel – the list goes on and on. Yet at its premiere under the composer in 1911 it baffled and disappointed its audience, who were expecting something more positive and uplifting, like its three predecessors. Nor do contemporary audiences that occasionally encounter the work find it any more comforting or less disturbing than those of 1911, despite its lack of extreme dissonances, atonality, or clashing rhythms, such as are found in our other two pieces.

The Sibelius Fourth appears to be a normal symphony in four movements, two slow alternating with two fast. It is almost entirely based on the unsettling four whole-note motif announced at its opening, a rising tritone followed by a whole-tone drop. The two slow movements are progressively slower (“Tempo molto moderato, quasi adagio” to “Il tempo largo”) while the two fast movements are progressively faster (“Allegro molto vivace” to a cut-time “Allegro”). It follows the standard German Romantic pattern of concluding with a busy, assertive finale full of rising fanfares – at least until the end, when the fanfares reverse and the entire pattern deteriorates, driving forward and down without slowing. It doesn’t die away – it just stops. As Karajan said of it, “The Fourth Symphony . . . is one of the few symphonies . . . that ends in complete disaster.”

Sibelius had personal and musical reasons for treating his materials this way. In 1908 he had been diagnosed with throat cancer, which was successfully removed in Berlin. But he was forbidden to drink or smoke cigars, two favorite pastimes, and for years he lived in fear that the cancer would return. He was also in financial difficulties. Consequently, his large-scale music became more austere, as may be heard in the tone-poem *Night-Ride and Sunrise*, his only mature string quartet (*Voces Intimae*), and the funeral march *In Memoriam*. Life had lost its appeal.

Musically Sibelius was dismayed by the course of music in his time, particularly Germanic symphonies. In late 1907 Gustav Mahler had visited Helsinki and spent time with Sibelius, with whom he discussed concepts of the symphony. Sibelius later remembered, “When our conversation touched on the symphony, I said that I admired its style and severity of form, and the profound logic that created an inner connection between all the motives. . . . Mahler’s opinion was just the opposite. ‘No!’ he said, ‘The symphony must be like the world. It must be all-embracing.’” (Mahler had just finished his Eighth Symphony, but his remark applies especially well to his Third.) Sibelius wanted none of this, and his Fourth Symphony is a bleak demonstration of his response. As he wrote his future biographer Rosa Newmarch after the Fourth’s premiere, his symphony “stands as a protest against present-day music. It has nothing, absolutely nothing of the circus about it.”

The reference to Mahler's orchestral writing, and that of other contemporary Austro-German composers, is all too pointed.

The plan of his symphony is ironically that of Anton Bruckner's Eighth Symphony: an abbreviated opening movement that ends inconclusively, a delirious Viennese waltz where Bruckner has a bumptious dance, a slow movement that progressively attempts to scale heights but ultimately collapses, and a jubilant finale, full of brass fanfares, jubilant bells, and busy strings, but that unlike Bruckner's contradicts itself and simply terminates. Sibelius's pervasive motif has the same contour as the four quarter notes in the opening theme of Bruckner's Eighth, although the Finn transgressively makes his intervals those of a tritone, the "diabolus in musica." Sibelius's symphony is also far more concentrated and brief, being not much longer in toto than the Bruckner Eighth's third movement. It is a stunning rebuke to the Austro-German symphony and all it stood for, especially its triumphant conclusions.

Sibelius knew this dominant Romantic tradition all too well. He had known Bruckner's symphonies since his student days in Berlin, and they had provided a template and an inspiration for him in writing his program symphony *Kullervo*. His *In Memoriam* (1909) is the greatest Mahlerian funeral march not written by Mahler, as is evident in Sir Thomas Beecham's searing reading, splendidly restored in Warner Music's new set, *Jean Sibelius: Historical Recordings and Rarities, 1928–1945* (552772; 7 CDs).

Unlike *Sacre* and *Pierrot*, we have no composer-led recordings of Sibelius's Fourth Symphony to tell us just how he wanted it to sound. It was first recorded in 1932 by Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra (Naxos 8.111399), but its first "official" recording was by the composer's friend Georg Schnéevoigt and the Finnish National Radio Orchestra in 1934 for the Sibelius Society. Sibelius rejected the test pressings for this (they have been reproduced on LP and CD) and in 1935 sent the producer Walter Legge a detailed list of fixes to Schnéevoigt's interpretation that he had worked out with Beecham. He said of this version, "As this symphony is hardly suitable for the gramophone one needs to perform much of it with a different balance than indicated in the full score. The solo passages sometimes cannot be heard at all." He

also was concerned that the opening movement was too slow and sent a list of tempi for the entire work. Legge proposed Beecham to record the work, which he did in 1937 with his London Philharmonic Orchestra. This was the version released, although Sibelius later said he was unsatisfied with some of the balances in it as well. The 1937 Beecham is in the Warner historic box, though in a dull transfer by Keith Hardwick. (It's the only old transfer in the set, which is otherwise updated and sounds splendid.) Much better is the Naxos transfer by Mark Obert-Thorn (8.110867).

Complicating matters, in 1953 Legge produced a recording of the symphony with Herbert von Karajan leading the Philharmonia Orchestra and sent it to Sibelius, who replied approvingly, "Karajan is the only man who really understands my music." In 1955 he went farther: "Karajan is the only conductor who plays what I meant." Karajan's recording, like the 1937 Beecham, must be considered authoritative, though Sibelius's views had apparently changed in the intervening sixteen years.

Certain points need to be considered in listening to the Fourth Symphony, three deriving from Sibelius's comments. First, instrumental balances must allow everything to be heard. Second, tempi, especially in the first and last movements, should approximate his metronome marks. As a general rule, any performance of these movements that lasts over (or near) ten minutes is too slow. Finally, Sibelius specified of the concluding measures: "The last six bars: *mf*. As solemn as possible and without *ritardando* (tragic, without tears, irrevocable [*unwiederrufflich*])." It must not die softly away but move implacably forward and stop.

To these I would add that decisive attacks are needed throughout, especially in the first and final movements. Lines in these two simply appear and disappear for no discernible reason, but all of them must sound as though they begin, are going somewhere important, and mean something, especially when they do not, which is most of the time. Failure to do this is usually the mark of a conductor's attempt to create warm, blended sounds rather than dissociated lines. Particularly in the finale this suppresses the assertiveness of the fanfares required — they simply are made to blend in. Such performance characteristics attempt to make the Fourth a Romantic symphony rather than the modern astringent piece it really is.

Despite its lack of immediate audience appeal, Sibelius's Fourth Symphony has been recorded numerous times, especially recently, as a result of the composer's birth sesquicentennial in 2015. Of older interpretations, Arturo Toscanini's 1940 concert with the NBC Symphony is skillfully done. Tempi are as Sibelius wished, balances are fine, lines are clean and direct. It lacks only the appropriate bleakness and a proper ending (it fades away). Its sound is well restored on both Pristine Audio PASC 087 and Guild GHCD 2298/99, the latter including the rehearsal (2 CDs)

Beecham gave two live performances that were recorded, in 1951 with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and in 1955 with the Royal Philharmonic. Both have adequate sound, though the 1951 is marred by intermittent surface noise (Somm-Beecham 18). Balances are excellent on both, lines begin clearly and cleanly and have the proper feeling of tension and direction. The 1955 reading (BBC Legends 4041) is the more convincing of the two, having a slightly frantic feel in the finale. In better sound this would be the near-ideal performance, a notable improvement on Beecham's 1937 recording.

Karajan's 1953 reading with the Philharmonia Orchestra (Praga Digitals PRD 250354), praised by the composer, has good sound and follows Sibelius's tempo indications, though the third movement, where Sibelius granted leeway, is *very* slow. Balances are clear: everything can be heard. Attacks, however, are somewhat blunt, and the sound is smoothed out in a warm acoustic. (This is Karajan, after all.)

Leonard Bernstein's idiosyncratic 1966 recording with the New York Philharmonic was remastered in 2015 in generally excellent sound (Sony 502614; 7 CDs). Its tempi are unfortunately quite slow, especially in the final bars, but the lines in movements 1 and 4 are properly detached, having tension and purpose. The fanfares in the fourth movement are overly restrained, which they were not on the LP. (The remastering engineers have been timid.) This is a reading approaching real comprehension.

Other often recommended conductors closer to the present are less insightful, although all have good, clear sound. Herbert Blomstedt and the San Francisco Symphony in 1991 are poorly balanced internally (Decca 689202; 4 CDs). Paavo Berglund and the Helsinki Philharmonic in 1984 smooth over and blend lines roman-

tically, though balances are good (Warner 76963; 2 CDs). This kind of thing typifies most recordings of the score.

Recordings of the Fourth made for the 2015 anniversary are mostly with Scandinavian conductors and in complete sets of the seven symphonies. Osmo Vänskä and the Minnesota Orchestra (2012) follow Schnéevoigt in playing the opening movement slowly but the finale fast and, as with Berglund, everything is smoothed out and romanticized (Bis 1996; SACD). Okko Kamu with the orchestra of Vänskä's previous version, the Lahti Symphony, has excellent balances and sound but no tension at all: everything is quite bland – and the bells are barely there in the finale (Bis 2076; 4 SACDs).

Perhaps the most disappointing new issue is by Hannu Lintu with the Finnish National Radio Orchestra, a video version only (Arthaus 101796, 5 DVDs, or 101797, 3 BDs). Most of the other symphonies in the set are extraordinary in execution and the Blu-Ray sound is the best available, as is the video. But tempi in the fourth movement are slow, while lines throughout, though distinct, are often blended, with softened contours. Frustratingly, at times Lintu is dead on in balances and drive. But mostly he isn't.

The most interesting of the newer lot is by John Storgårds in 2013 with the BBC Philharmonic, also part of a box set of the symphonies (Chandos 10809; 3 CDs). Sound is excellent, with everything audible, and Storgårds follows Sibelius's tempi in the first and fourth movements. Entries are generally clear and sharp, and lines are distinct if not quite astringent or purposive enough. It's as if Storgårds knows what Sibelius is doing but cannot quite believe it.

Like *Sacre* and *Pierrot*, the Sibelius Fourth Symphony sets out to subvert and re-create its genre. But its genre was the most significant of the preceding century, the pinnacle of music from Beethoven to Mahler and Richard Strauss. Its greatest exemplar was Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, whose characteristic four-note rhythm is quoted by the lower strings' pizzicato at letter D of Sibelius's opening movement. Its public wanted, and wants still, symphonic uplift. What Sibelius gives instead is fragmentation, disconnectedness, collapse, and dissolution, not romantic warmth but cold and despair. Even its composer turned away from it.

Conductors and record producers continue attempting to turn

all three of these pieces into something softer, more comfortable, more romantic, in keeping with the still primitive tastes of too many contemporary listeners. Edges are softened in *Sacre* and its driving dance beat is lost, though not in readings by both the composer and its first conductor. Sprechstimme in *Pierrot* is sung or nearly sung in the hopes of avoiding the near-demented quality implied in the score and in Schoenberg's own interpretations. Sibelius's Fourth Symphony is reduced to musical mush by most conductors in the hopes of turning it into the neo-Tchaikovskian mess that typifies their performances of his Second Symphony (and much else). Yet performed appropriately, as by the composers and their representatives, all three scores still possess their original ability to startle, to shock, to render audiences uncomfortable – as they should.