

Ajean

Ajean is a trio for violin, cello and harp written as a homage to Jean Sibelius, whose music I find an inexhaustible source of fascination. I don't think it possible that one could ever reach a point where one could say "I *know* Sibelius": his works are capable of infinite relistening, and each relistening throws up more questions, opens more doors, requires further listening. As clear as they may appear on one occasion, on another they come across as hugely mysterious.

The start material for *Ajean* comes from two bars of the introductory section of his *Violin Concerto*, one of the most unique in the repertoire. This material is developed through a double harmonic cycle, throwing up "variations" of great variety and secondary constructions along the way.

What is it about Sibelius? Above all, he swam against the tide – something I happen to admire. At a time when composers were all for exploiting the high registers of instruments, he created unique sonorities from the low. When composers were eschewing the classical lineage of the symphony for a more "world-embracing" approach, he placed himself firmly in the line of descent from Haydn and Beethoven – believing that form was as important as content. When speed was regarded as the essence of modernity, he would create an individual sound world within slowness. When the fashion was for busy lines and the constant chatter of instruments, he would say volumes with a long held note followed by a brief flurry of short ones. His ability to spin long sections over pedal points is matchless. He constantly surprises by doing the unobvious with common material, avoiding cliché and creating something new but which sounds oddly familiar.

It was said of Sibelius that he could make a C major chord sound like nothing on earth. An expert in saying so much through so little, his (on paper) threadbare textures are in fact rich with sound, implication and meaning. Only two other composers could rival him in this aspect as far as I am concerned: Mussorgsky and Holst.

And perhaps the most interesting of all: he is, as few other composers are, accepted or declined by national boundaries: venerated by the Nordic and Anglo-Saxon nations, dismissed out of hand by the Teutonic. An acquired taste perhaps? Perhaps, but the process of acquisition is both rich and endless.