

# TEMPO

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF MODERN MUSIC

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In his new book on Sibelius, discussing the relative stature of the composer, Robert Layton suggests that ‘great though he is, Sibelius does not belong to the ‘super-giants’ of the order of Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, whose numbers barely exceed a dozen’. Reviewing the book in this issue (p. 29), G. W. Hopkins challenges this, contending that it is still premature to rank Sibelius as ‘second-rate’—though that term is perhaps too rigorously logical a simplification of Mr. Layton’s carefully worded judgment. Most readers, including Sibelius’s admirers, would certainly take Mr. Layton’s side on this matter, and would probably also agree when he goes on to say that ‘it is arguable whether a master of this [i.e. the ‘super-giant’] order has yet come to light in the present century.

It is not only this century that is in doubt. None of the composers on Mr. Layton’s list was born after 1800, and the youngest even of these would not be admitted by all. Why it should be impossible to name a single composer (let alone enough to complete Mr. Layton’s dozen) born even in the first half of the nineteenth century who would be admitted by more or less universal consent (say a vote of two-thirds of those aurally capable of recognizing the candidates) is a fact of musical history as difficult to explain as to controvert, but it puts into perspective Mr. Layton’s reservations about our own century. But whether or not music has really been in decline since Beethoven (just as, according to an older view, everything before Bach and Handel was in a similar sense a gradual preparation for these first two universally recognized giants) Sibelius’s place is certainly among those who have added a genuinely new voice to music, and among the major figures of his epoch.

Like Strauss’s, his brief eclipse has been partly due to the recent ascendancy of Mahler, whose area of activity overlapped to a certain extent with his. Whereas Strauss worked within much the same musical-linguistic territory as Mahler but in different forms, Sibelius, who put his best work into the same task as Mahler’s—upholding the dying symphony—worked in an entirely different linguistic tradition. The essential distinctions however between them and Mahler are that Sibelius and Strauss were truly original creative figures, while Mahler’s work, for all its grand aspirations, was fundamentally unoriginal, uncreative and in the most objective sense decadent—a kind of brilliant collage of the remnants of the great Viennese musical tradition. Technically and instrumentally it is still full of interest, some more, some less superficial (which is partly why it appeals so much to so many composers today) but whereas once that interest has been absorbed, the Mahler symphonies will almost certainly be rejected again by posterity, it is equally certain that the Sibelius symphonies (like Strauss’s tone-poems) will continue to be admired and enjoyed, not for their ‘interest’ but purely as profoundly original and enduring artistic creations—not to be placed alongside the symphonies of Beethoven but probably on more or less equal terms with the finest ‘second-rate’ masterpieces of Brahms and Tchaikovsky.