

The Critic

Jean Sibelius: Orchestral songs (LAWO)

The themes are cruel and cold

★★★★

LEBRECHT'S ALBUM OF THE WEEK

By

Norman Lebrecht

4 September, 2022



Sibelius, like Mahler, stuck to what he knew. He wrote no opera and hardly any chamber music, just symphonies and songs. His concentration of means and expression is as intense in a two-minute song as it is in a forty-minute symphony.

Unlike Mahler, Sibelius is sparing with his orchestration, sometimes leaving it to solo clarinet and lower strings. He uses Swedish texts, only rarely reverting to his national language, Finnish, which he spoke imperfectly. The Sibelius songs are seldom heard below the Baltic, which is a pity since they tell us more about him than yet another season-opening *Finlandia*. In all, Sibelius wrote 109 songs. I challenge you to name three.

The Norwegian Radio Orchestra has delivered an ice-box of 18 tracks with the excellent mezzo-soprano Marianne Beate Kjelland as soloist. The themes are arctic, nature cruel and cold. Every now and then a visitor stops at a child's sickbed; like him, you fear the child will die (Sibelius lost his youngest daughter in February 1900).

Two major song cycles, opus 17 and 36, belong to the turn of the century, the time of his first two symphonies and violin concerto, a time of grief-induced addiction to alcohol and tobacco. The songs, however, are as clear as a glass of iced water (a favourite Sibelius metaphor) and these accounts are exemplary and uplifting. I don't know where Ms Kjelland has been hiding but I wish she'd get out more; she has a gorgeous instrument. As for the radio orchestra under the Czech conductor Petr Popelka, they match the Oslo Philharmonic for lush textures. Name one song? *Svarta rosor*, opus 36/1, is coming with me to the shower.

[Jean Sibelius: Orchestral songs \(LAWO\) | Norman Lebrecht | The Critic Magazine](#)