

**CBSO**

City of  
Birmingham  
Symphony  
Orchestra

Sibelius & Strauss  
Symphony Hall  
Wednesday 28 February 2024,  
7:30pm

CBSO.CO.UK



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# INTRODUCTION

Our programme is framed by two valedictory works by the great Finnish composer Jean Sibelius.

His take on Shakespeare's *The Tempest* was composed in 1925 to accompany performances of the piece at the Royal Danish Theatre. Just a year earlier, and almost to the date 100 years before the date of this CBSO concert, his 7th Symphony, then still called "*Fantasia Sinfonica*", had been premiered in Stockholm.

Composing was an ever growing struggle for Sibelius in the later years of his career. He often refused to eat or drink when working at home, and the five adolescent or already grown up daughters had to obey a policy of complete silence in the Ainola family home. To maintain his work-life balance, Sibelius often took the train to visit Hotel Kämp, his favourite hangout in the very centre of Helsinki.

Just two years earlier, the composer Aarre Merikanto, 28 years Sibelius's junior, had finished his wonderful tone poem *Ekho*, scored for soprano and large orchestra. *Ekho* (spelling according to Finnish transliteration of Greek) is freely atonal, with orchestral timbres supporting the soprano line rich in shade and nuance. In the composer's own words, *Ekho* is lively, story-like, depicting a woman in love full of unrequited longing and not without elegiac features.

*Four Last Songs*, paradoxically the most recently composed work in this programme, is one of the aging German composer's valedictory works. In 1948, the then 84-year old composer contemplates his unstopably imminent death whilst also giving a glimpse back to his early years in the first song "*Fruhling*". The tone of the work is calm and accepting, and radiates a sense of completeness."



**Sibelius, The Tempest: Suite No.1, 20mins**

- I. Der Eichbaum
- II. Humoreske
- III. Caliban's Lied
- IV. Die Herbstmänner
- V. Canon
- VI. Scène
- VII. Berceuse
- VIII. Zwischenspiel
- IX. Der Sturm

**Strauss, Four Last Songs\*, 24mins**

- I. Frühling
- II. September
- III. Bein Schlafengehen
- IV. Im Abendrot

*Interval*

**Merikanto, Ekho\*, 8mins**

**Sibelius, Symphony No.7, 22mins**

**Sakari Oramo, Conductor**

**Anu Komsu, Soprano\***

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We do ask that you are mindful of disturbing other audience members and therefore ask that you dim the brightness on your phone, take pictures during applause breaks and do not use your flash.

We also regularly take photographs for promotional use, so you may see a professional photographer at our concerts. Please ask a member of the front of house team if you have any questions about this.

To ensure that everyone is able to enjoy the performance, please make sure your mobile phone is set to silent.

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# SAKARI CONDUCTS SIBELIUS & STRAUSS

Friends reunited: there's only one Sakari Oramo – the irrepressible Finnish maestro who became an adopted Brummie during his decade as the CBSO's music director – and no-one conducts Sibelius with more passion or power. He's joined by his wife, soprano Anu Komsu, in Strauss' Four Last Songs: music of heart-melting sweetness and beauty, performed by artists we've taken to our hearts.

**Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)**

## THE TEMPEST SUITE NO. 1

The incidental music to Shakespeare's magical play *The Tempest* was one of the last major works Sibelius composed. He wrote the score in 1925-6, not long after the completion of the seventh Symphony, and only his tone poem *Tapiola* would follow. It is extraordinary that after writing three works of such power and originality he would compose almost nothing for the final three decades of his life, a period which has come to be known as 'The Silence of Järvenpää'.

Sibelius had clearly found much to energise him in *The Tempest*. The score he produced (for a 1926 production in Copenhagen) is much more than standard 'incidental' music, lasting around an hour in total and comprising some 34 numbers (writer Alex Ross called it 'perhaps the greatest Shakespeare opera never written'). Sibelius arranged some of the numbers into two suites the following year. Neither follows the

contours of the drama, but instead play out a series of moments and moods.

The Suite opens with 'The Oak Tree,' in which the sprite Ariel lulls a group of sailors asleep, depicted by Sibelius with a meandering flute solo against some dreamy harmonies in the strings. Several of the other numbers ('Humoreske', 'Canon' and 'Scene') portray, in suitably playful style, the drunken arguments and plotting of Stephano, Trinculo and the half-man, half-beast Caliban, who plan to kill Prospero. Caliban gets his own boisterous 'song' in number 3, at which time (under the influence of 'heavenly drink') he believes Stephano to be a god. There is some merry dancing in the straightforwardly cheerful 'The Harvesters', while Ariel's elusive character dominates the sorrowful 'Interlude.' Prospero gives Ariel his freedom in the beguiling 'Berceuse', heralded by a praise of grace to the goddess of rainbows, Iris. The dramatic 'storm' music – used as a curtain-raiser in the 1926 production – rounds off the Suite in blistering style.

Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

## FOUR LAST SONGS

'Lastness,' hovers over this entire programme, especially so with Strauss's *Four Last Songs*. Strauss wrote the songs in 1948, aged 84, and he died in September the following year, having never heard them in performance. The texts, by Herman Hesse and Joseph von Eichendorff, are meditations on death and its inevitability but in a spirit of acceptance rather than dread. The songs are romantically and lushly scored – somewhat at odds with other new works created in this period: many composers by this time were abandoning traditional harmony, or experimenting with electronics. By contrast, this 'swansong' is a full-blooded statement of Strauss's love of orchestral colour and the power of the soprano voice.

This voice soars over the orchestral texture in the first song which, though titled 'Frühling' (Spring), is considerably more autumnal than most 'spring-like' songs with its rich texture and sober reflection on the passing of time. 'September,' initially by contrast, opens with an uplifting, fanfare-like motif yet mellows at the end into a melancholy horn theme and a gentle rocking figure, embodying the poem's sense of weariness. Fatigue also imbues the words of the third song ('Beim Schlafengehen', or 'Upon going to sleep'), yet it has passages of almost transcendent lyricism, with both solo violin and voice (and later French horn) climbing perpetually upwards, defying the heaviness of the text. The image of the elderly couple contemplating both a sunset and the end of their lives together in 'Im Abendrot' perhaps struck a chord with Strauss, who had been married to his wife Paulina – a former professional soprano – since 1894. The slow-moving, reflective quality of the song, as the text contemplates finality, segues into an

extraordinary moment of looking back: the violas quote a theme from Strauss's tone poem *Death and Transfiguration*, composed sixty years earlier.

Aarre Merikanto (1893-1958)

## EKHO

The career of Finnish composer Aarre Merikanto falls into three distinct phases, characterised by strikingly different musical languages. His early works were romantic and rooted in Finnish tradition - not unlike Sibelius's, and generally popular with audiences. In the 1920s, he began to experiment with a more individualistic style, moving away from conventional harmony and structure. Audiences and critics alike were not convinced and, wounded by rejection, Merikanto destroyed a number of scores from this period. From the 1930s, he reverted to a more conventional mode of expression. *Ekho* (1922) belongs to the central, experimental period and certainly nonplussed Finnish audiences at its first performances. More than 100 years after its composition, while it certainly has a quality of mystery to it, the impression is of a startlingly dramatic beauty.

The text, by VA Koskenniemi, is based on the Greek myth in which Echo falls hopelessly in love with Narcissus, who only loves his reflection. The soprano voice embodies Ekho's yearning over an ever-shifting palette of orchestral colour, which particularly favours the harp (the harp opens the work, and two of them are heard later on in an eerie trio with celeste and clarinets). The ensemble is, technically, large but Merikanto deploys the full sound only sparingly, peaking briefly in a central passage when the soprano is silent. As Ekho's poem fades into hopeless repetition, the orchestra becomes ever more fragmented. By the end, only a few instruments remain.

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

## SYMPHONY NO. 7

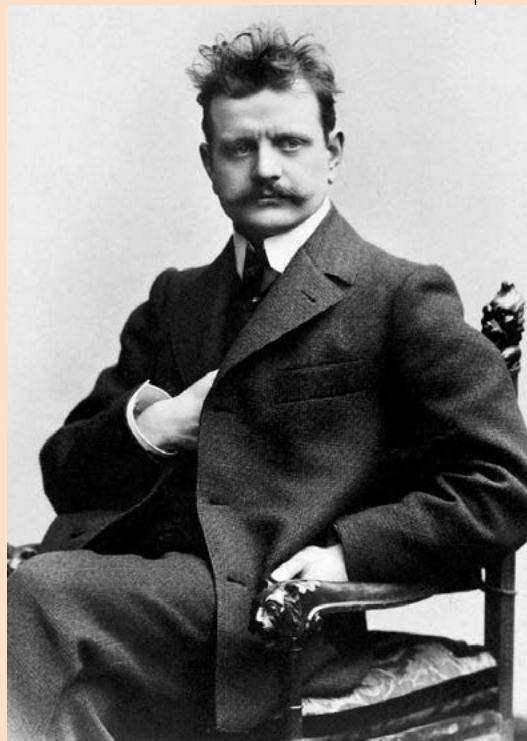
The composition of Sibelius's Symphony no. 7, completed in 1924, was more or less alongside number 6, and at the same time as the revisions of number 5. Yet he originally hesitated to call this one a 'Symphony': up until its publication it was known as 'Fantasia sinfonica'. Unlike the others, number 7 is in one continuous movement and, in theory, in the conventionally upbeat key of C major. However, (as Simon Rattle once put it) 'it's the most depressed C major in all of musical literature. There's no other piece that ends in C major where you feel it's the end of the world.'

The single movement is delineated by some eleven changes in tempo markings and mood, with the opening 'Adagio' lasting for at least a third of the running time. Strings rise up through what sounds like a simple scale, landing on a dramatic minor chord and followed by a rippling woodwind figure. A solemn string chorale comes next, expanding into a passage of extraordinary yearning for so early in a Symphony, intensified by horns and woodwind. Rising out of this texture is the first hearing of a trombone theme, which will appear twice more before the end. Moving towards the next section – marked 'Vivacissimo' – the opening themes start to recur with more urgency. The strings are now considerably more agitated, punctuated by thumps on the timpani, but the music gradually – in a reverse of earlier – returns to an 'Adagio.'

In the section marked 'Allegro molto moderato,' there is the briefest of pauses on a held chord. This rare moment of repose seems to fling the Symphony into a completely different musical world – a graceful waltz, a lighter texture, and a general sense of whirling elegance. A nod to folk-dance follows, before a string

tremolando heralds the re-emergency of the intensity of the start. The music builds towards what could be the conclusion – listen out for the whole horn section blasting into the stratosphere – but in fact is not. Instead, there is a gradual transition into an unexpected, deeply atmospheric coda. The Symphony winds down with a series of reminiscences from earlier in the work. After an almost outrageously long suspended chord, C major finally – definitively – reveals itself.

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JEAN SIBELIUS (c. 1898-1900)  
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Conductor

# SAKARI ORAMO



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Chief Conductor of BBC Symphony Orchestra, Conductor Laureate of Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra, Honorary Conductor of Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, a guest conductor at the highest international level and a prolific recording artist, Sakari Oramo's performances combine crystalline structural cohesion with authority, elegance and passion. The 2023/24 season sees Oramo debut with Tokyo Symphony Orchestra and returns to Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra and Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra amidst his ongoing collaborations with BBC Symphony Orchestra. Notable engagements from previous seasons include those with Berliner Philharmoniker, Wiener Symphoniker, Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchester, Gürzenich-Orchester Köln, Staatskapelle Dresden, Boston Symphony Orchestra, New York Philharmonic and Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia.



Soprano

# ANU KOMSI

BIOGRAPHIES

Known for her “technical daring” (*The Times*) and “captivating crystalline quality” (*Bachtrack*), Anu Komsa is one of the world’s foremost singers. A regular collaborator with a myriad of contemporary composers, Komsa’s performances often serve as the blueprint for future productions. Throughout her eminent career, she has worked with leading conductors including Sir Roger Norrington, Sakari Oramo, Andris Nelsons, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Alan Gilbert, Franz Welser-Möst, Peter Eötvös, George Benjamin, François-Xavier Roth, Dalia Stasevska, Nicholas Collon, Hannu Lintu, Santtu-Matias Rouvali, Anna-Maria Helsing, Tarmo Peltokoski, and distinguished directors such as Pierre Audi, Barrie Kosky, Lydia Steier, Achim Freyer, Karin Beier, Juho Kuosmanen and Leea Klemola. In the 2023/24 season, Komsa performs alongside Sakari Oramo with the likes of BBC Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre philharmonique de Radio France, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Tokyo Symphony Orchestra and appears at Dvořák Prague Festival and Kissinger Sommer. Ever-dedicated to contemporary music, she sings local and world premieres of works by Kaija Saariaho, George Benjamin, Sebastian Hilli, Lara Poe, as well as continuing to perform Bach’s oratorios, Strauss’ *Vier Letzte Lieder*, Mahler’s symphonies and Sibelius’ songs.



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Wed 10 Apr, 2:15pm



### PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION

Dancing chickens, glowing skulls, a paris jazz-bar and a lost princess.

Wed 1 May, 7:30pm



### NEW WORLD SYMPHONY

A longing for home meets the wonder of a new world.

Wed 15 May, 7:30pm

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Book online at [cbsocook.uk](http://cbsocook.uk) or call the B:Music Box Office on 0121 780 3333

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But it is the people themselves who are at the very heart of our membership. CBSO members can enjoy the chance to share the company of musicians and artists and meet new like-minded friends.

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