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# Sibelius Violin Concerto


16-17 Jan 2025



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# Sibelius Violin Concerto

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**Thursday 16 January, 7.30pm** The Queen's Hall, Edinburgh  
**Friday 17 January, 7.30pm** City Halls, Glasgow

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**BACEWICZ** Concerto for String Orchestra  
**SIBELIUS** Violin Concerto

*Interval of 20 minutes*

**SIBELIUS** Symphony No 6

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**Joseph Swensen** Conductor  
**Geneva Lewis** Violin



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## **Second Violin**

Marcus Barcham Stevens  
Gordon Bragg  
Hatty Haynes  
Michelle Dierx  
Niamh Lyons  
Rachel Smith  
Sian Holding

## **Viola**

Oscar Holch  
Asher Zaccardelli  
Brian Schiele  
Steve King

## **Cello**

Hugh Mackay  
Su-a Lee  
Donald Gillan  
Eric de Wit

## **Bass**

Ronan Dunne  
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## **Flute**

André Cebrián  
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## **Harp**

Sharron Griffiths

**Louise Lewis Goodwin**  
Timpani / Percussion



# WHAT YOU ARE ABOUT TO HEAR

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## **BACEWICZ (1909-1969)**

### **Concerto for String Orchestra (1948)**

**Allegro**  
**Andante**  
**Vivo**

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## **SIBELIUS (1809-1847)**

### **Violin Concerto in D minor, Op 47 (1903-1904, rev. 1905)**

**Allegro moderato**  
**Adagio di molto**  
**Allegro, ma non tanto**

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### **Symphony No 6 in D minor, Op 104 (1914-1923)**

**Allegro molto moderato**  
**Allegretto moderato**  
**Poco vivace**  
**Allegro molto**

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The towering figure of Jean Sibelius dominates tonight's concert, though the two works we'll hear show a somewhat restrained, focused, even vulnerable side to his music – and certainly a deeply personal perspective on the classic concerto form. Before them, however, we'll get acquainted with a composer who should be far better known than she is.

Grażyna Bacewicz, who wrote tonight's opening piece, was one of Poland's most respected composers in the early part of the 20th century, as well as a celebrated violinist. She's been considerably overlooked, as so many women composers have shamefully been, although today there's increasing interest in her distinctive, sometimes idiosyncratic music. It blends a wit and clarity that she no doubt picked up during her studies in Paris – where she learnt composition with Nadia Boulanger and violin with Carl Flesch – with an earthier, more folk-like flavour that lends her works a rougher, sometimes more uncompromising edge.

Bacewicz proved adept at navigating the restlessly shifting restrictions of Poland's political landscape, too, adapting her style as Polish music was steered away from supposedly bourgeois modernism and towards a state-approved, folksier style intended to appeal to the broader masses, and managing to satisfy political demands without compromising her own, gently acerbic language.

Indeed, her Concerto for String Orchestra – written in 1948, just as Bacewicz was adapting to the demands of the recently established socialist system in Poland – sits at just that intersection in her music. Rather than embracing her own country's folk



*Grażyna Bacewicz*

**She's been considerably overlooked, as so many women composers have shamefully been, although today there's increasing interest in her distinctive, sometimes idiosyncratic music.**

music, however, it looks back directly to the music of Bach, Corelli, Vivaldi and others, celebrating a bracing Baroque musical style while injecting it with distinctly 20th-century flavours. It was a huge success at its 1950 premiere – given by the Polish Radio Symphony Orchestra under Grzegorz Fitelberg, at the General Meeting of the Polish Composers' Union – and went on to become the composer's most popular piece in her native country.

The Concerto's bold, purposeful first movement opens with a striding theme that seems determined to escape the note to which it's anchored, and after a short, hushed transition that introduces a violinist and cellist as soloists, its second main theme is even more rhythmic, punctuated by aggressive pizzicatos. Bacewicz combines and recombines her various elements in ever more complex and witty

ways across the rest of the movement, always with a strong sense of purpose.

Her atmospheric second movement sets a meandering melodic idea – first heard on a solo cello – against shimmering, heavily perfumed harmonies from the rest of the strings, which she subdivides into a rich, thick texture of up to 13 separate lines at one point. Bacewicz's final movement is exuberant and strongly rhythmic, with switchback cross-rhythms and sudden harmonic twists. Its folk-like recurring theme, first heard high in the violins, ultimately drives the Concerto to its resolute conclusion.

There's a subtle sense of folk-like freedom, too, in some sections of Jean Sibelius' Violin Concerto – certainly in the winding violin melody that opens the piece, which might sound like the soloist is spinning it

**Perhaps the identity of its inaugural soloist was less than crucial to Sibelius himself since it was the Concerto he'd imagined himself performing, but knew he couldn't, and wouldn't. Indeed, it's a deeply personal piece, and one of the most challenging in the repertoire – not just in terms of technique, but also in musical insights and emotional intensity.**

into creation on the spot (it is, of course, carefully notated). It's the only concerto that Sibelius wrote for any instrument, which itself might suggest a special significance. Indeed, the Violin Concerto – which Sibelius began in 1903, then revised in 1905 – was a crucial, pivotal work for the composer, for a couple of reasons.

Firstly, because of the violin itself. Sibelius had first studied piano as a child, and only discovered the violin as a 15-year-old. But his immense love and passion for the instrument (which bordered on obsession) quickly grew. As a young man, he wrote of the violin: 'When I play, I am filled with a strange feeling; it is as though the insides of the music opened up to me.' He dreamt of becoming a virtuoso soloist, but his dreams were dashed. In 1891, aged 26, he auditioned for a prestigious position with the Vienna Philharmonic,

and was turned down. After the news, Sibelius reportedly wept deeply, then put his violin away, and effectively abandoned it entirely. With a certain restraint, he later confided to a friend: 'I wanted to be a celebrated violinist. From the age of 15, I played my violin for ten years practically from morning to night. It was a very painful awakening when I had to admit that I had begun my training for the exacting career of an eminent performer too late.'

The second reason that his Violin Concerto is such a crucial, pivotal work is to do with Sibelius' lifestyle. By the early 1900s, Sibelius had become something of a celebrity in Finland, and was beginning to gain recognition across Europe too. But fame and the expectations it brought only intensified the heavy drinking that he'd first begun as a student. One of the composer's friends and benefactors, Axel Carpelan,

even took the unusual step of writing to Sibelius' wife, Aino, in 1903, advising her to take matters in hand: 'Jean can only be saved by the efforts of those closest to him; left to himself he will go to pieces. He has hobnobbed far too long and often with the dregs of Helsinki "culture" for him to be able to drag himself out of their clutches of his own free will.'

Aino was hardly unaware of her husband's drinking, which put enormous strain on her and their three daughters. Sometimes he'd disappear for days on end, and she'd have to search Helsinki's bars and hotels, eventually dragging him home so that he could do his work. She eventually managed to convince her husband to leave the temptations of the capital entirely for a countryside retreat. When an uncle died, leaving Sibelius a substantial inheritance, it seemed like a sign. The family moved north of Helsinki to the villa they named Ainola (literally 'Aino's place') – then in the countryside, now effectively a Helsinki suburb – in September 1904. They would live there for the rest of their lives.

So, Sibelius created a Concerto for the instrument he once loved but had been forced to renounce, at a time of deep personal and family turmoil. No wonder, perhaps, that its genesis was far from smooth. The idea for a Violin Concerto was planted in Sibelius' mind by the respected German violinist Willy Burmester, one of the composer's most ardent supporters, and a fierce champion early in his career. It seemed clear that Burmester would also give the Concerto its first performance. When it came to the 1904 Helsinki premiere, however, Sibelius unaccountably entrusted it to another violinist – Viktor Nováček – who struggled

to get to grips with the music. Burmester was disappointed, but Sibelius had in any case decided to revise the Concerto. When it came to premiering the new version, however, Sibelius again passed over Burmester, preferring a performance from the Berlin Philharmonic under Richard Strauss, with Karel Halíř as soloist. Ignored not once but twice, Burmester was incensed, and never played the piece at all.

Perhaps the identity of its inaugural soloist was less than crucial to Sibelius himself since it was the Concerto he'd imagined himself performing, but knew he neither could nor would. Indeed, it's a deeply personal piece, and one of the most challenging in the repertoire – not just in terms of technique, but also in musical insights and emotional intensity. And its very familiarity to many listeners – not for nothing is it one of the violin repertoire's most deeply loved pieces – might also mask certain aspects of the piece's rawness, its dark and brooding, sometimes menacing, music, and also its sublime beauty and vulnerability.

Sibelius' first movement is by far his longest, and after the briefest of introductions, the violin soloist slowly unfolds a haunting, folk-like melody that sounds almost like an improvisation. (It's perhaps tempting to imagine it evoking snowy Finnish woods, but Sibelius first sketched the theme in Italy, calling it 'Bells in Rapallo'.) The movement's second main theme – far hotter and more overtly Romantic – emerges from a turbulent orchestral texture, and just as momentum seems to have drained entirely, the orchestra's strings enter with a new, rustic dance of a theme, dark in





*Jean Sibelius*

**Unashamedly understated, even enigmatic at times, undoubtedly chilly and clean, the Sixth is one of the composer's least performed symphonies, yet also one of his profoundest utterances.**

hue, but full of angry energy. Showy solo cadenzas were once simply a moment for an instrumentalist to demonstrate their technical talents. Here, however, the lengthy solo cadenza that Sibelius inserts into the middle of the movement serves a fundamental structural purpose in developing the material we've just heard, and when the orchestra returns, the three opening themes eventually reappear to bring the movement to a stormy close.

Brooding intensity seems dispelled entirely by the long, song-like melody of the serene second movement, though the theme is interrupted by a stormier central section. Musicologist and scholar (and long-time Edinburgh resident) Donald Tovey famously described the Violin Concerto's finale as a 'polonaise for polar bears', and it's a characterisation that neatly captures the movement's rustic, lumbering energy,

kicked off by the soloist's dancing theme. The orchestral strings introduce an equally memorable alternative melody, which the soloist takes up and makes their own, before the Concerto heads towards its luminous, visionary conclusion.

Despite its troubled genesis, the Violin Concerto was warmly received at both its Helsinki and its Berlin premieres. It's perhaps that positive reception that encouraged Sibelius to begin tentative sketches for a Second Violin Concerto in 1915. It would never come to fruition, but the composer reworked some of his sketched material into another piece – his Symphony No 6.

'Whereas most other modern composers are engaged in manufacturing cocktails of every hue and description, I offer the public pure cold water.' That's Sibelius writing

to a friend about his Sixth Symphony. In another letter in 1943, he wrote that the Symphony reminded him of 'the scent of the first snow'. They're apt descriptions. Unashamedly understated, even enigmatic at times, undoubtedly chilly and clean, the Sixth is one of the composer's least performed symphonies, yet also one of his profoundest utterances.

And it's a deeply strange work for a composer to have completed in 1923. It flies in the face of prevailing European musical trends of the time, those multicoloured cocktails that Sibelius referred to – the angst-ridden atonality of Schoenberg and his pupils, as well as the arch, witty neoclassicism of Stravinsky and Les Six. It stands in stark contrast, too, to Sibelius' own neighbouring symphonies – the heroic grandeur of the Fifth, and the super-compressed drama of the single-movement Seventh.

In terms of drama and conflict, the best the Sixth can seem to muster is a rather abstract opposition of harmonic modes – between C major and a Dorian mode on D – gradually worked through across the course of the Symphony. It begins quietly and ends more quietly still. Even its orchestration sticks firmly to the middle ground, with a bass clarinet (making its sole appearance in a Sibelius symphony) the only slightly unusual addition.

Ironically, Sibelius wrote his Sixth Symphony during another time of turbulence and uncertainty. He started work on it as early as 1914, and by the time he finished it in 1923, Finland had suffered the devastating impact of the First World War, proclaimed its independence from Russia in 1917, and then lost tens of

thousands of its citizens in its own civil war. Sibelius himself spoke of armed soldiers invading his home, and of fleeing several times with his family to seek refuge with friends.

He sought refuge, too, perhaps, in the chilly clarity of ancient music, specifically the intertwining polyphonic choral lines of the Renaissance. He'd long admired the vocal works of Palestrina, and the disarming purity of the great 16th-century Roman composer's sacred music is key to grasping what Sibelius was getting at in his Sixth Symphony. Palestrina's influence can be clearly heard in the simple, slow-moving lines of the Symphony's opening, as well as on a larger scale across the Symphony's broader form, which is more reliant on contrasts of density and texture than the conventional opposition and development of themes.

The first movement drifts quietly into our awareness, with violins playing intertwining melodic lines that bring to mind the Renaissance choral polyphony that Sibelius was studying. The music soon breaks into a swifter section, though, with a pulsing harp accompanying what feels like a more traditional melody in the woodwind and violins. This gradually morphs into enigmatic-sounding figures passed back and forth within the string section, with a few discreet woodwind interjections, before the bass clarinet kicks off another big tune, taken up by the cellos. As the movement heads towards its conclusion, Sibelius revisits some of his opening material and moves into a brighter section, but it's not quite the end yet: the violins suddenly remember their Renaissance-style opening, and after what seems like a definitive, brassy ending in the

**Sibelius essentially repeats the same material three times, each repetition richer and denser than the last, before the music suddenly drops away to nothingness with just some scurrying strings – and anyone looking for music to illustrate Sibelius’ reference to snow need search no further than here.**

brighter major, things in fact come to rest in a hushed minor key.

The second movement begins like a traditional slow movement, but when the violins join the slow-moving figures on flutes and bassoons, it’s soon clear that the tempo is actually much quicker. Sibelius essentially repeats the same material three times, each repetition richer and denser than the last, before the music suddenly drops away to nothingness with just some scurrying strings – and anyone looking for music to illustrate Sibelius’ reference to snow need search no further than here.

The brief third movement comes closest to its traditional form of a witty scherzo with contrasting central trio section – a quicksilver, dashing theme for violins and woodwind against propulsive accompaniment, driving it ever onwards.

Time seems to stop abruptly in the central trio, though, as the same obsessive, march-like material is passed back and forth across the orchestra, before the energy of the opening returns to bring the movement to a confident conclusion.

The fourth movement also falls into three big sections, and creates an atmosphere of pomp laced with melancholy right from its grand, opening chords. Its second section is bolder and more urgent, with distinctive melodies based on simple rising scales – it might seem like the Symphony is going to end on this vigorous note, but Sibelius has other ideas. After a sonorous climax, he slowly leads us back to the archaic world of the Symphony’s opening, with intertwining melodies and strange, modal harmonies, before the work dies away to nothingness.

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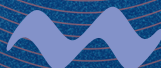


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Conductor

## JOSEPH SWENSEN



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Characterised by the strength of the bonds forged through long-lasting and loyal relationships with numerous orchestras and their audiences, Joseph Swensen's activity as a conductor extends throughout Europe and beyond, without regard to geographical or cultural borders. Praised by critics in particular for his interpretations of the great romantic repertoire such as Mahler, Bruckner and Sibelius, he is also a musical explorer who ventures into much more experimental terrain when working with smaller ensembles, and whose programmes regularly include 21st century composers alongside works from the classical period.

The result of an exceptional musical encounter and a relationship that has developed over the last decade, Joseph Swensen took up his new position as Music Director of the Orchestre National de Bordeaux Aquitaine at the start of the 2024-25 season. He is also Principal Guest Conductor of the Orquesta Ciudad de Granada in Spain, and since the 2023-24 season, at the conclusion of his six-year tenure as Artistic Director of the NFM Leopoldinum Orchestra in Wrocław, he has continued his collaboration there as Principal Guest Conductor. He also holds the title of Conductor Emeritus of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, of which he was Principal Conductor from 1996 to 2005.

A multifaceted musician, Joseph Swensen is an active composer and orchestrator. His orchestration of Prokofiev's *Five Songs Without Words* (1920) is published by Boosey and Hawkes and Signum recorded *Sinfonia in B* (2007), an orchestration of the rarely performed 1854 version of Brahms' Trio Op 8. His work also includes orchestrations of Nielsen Quartet in G minor, *Four Movements for Orchestra* (1888) as well as arrangements for string orchestras of Beethoven String Quartet Op 131 and Debussy String Quartet, which he recorded with the NFM Leopoldinum. His most notable compositions include *Shizue* (2001) for solo shakuhachi and orchestra, and the Sinfonia-Concertante for Horn and Orchestra (*The Fire and the Rose*) (2008) as well as *Sinfonietta* (2017) for strings and synthesizer.

A sought-after pedagogue, Joseph Swensen teaches conducting, violin and chamber music at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. An American of Norwegian and Japanese descent, he was born in Hoboken, New Jersey and grew up in Harlem, New York City.

***For full biography please visit [sco.org.uk](https://sco.org.uk)***

***Joseph's Chair is kindly supported by Donald and Louise MacDonald***



Violin

## GENEVA LEWIS



© Matthew Holler

New Zealand-born violinist Geneva Lewis has forged a reputation as a musician of consummate artistry whose performances speak from and to the heart and who has been lauded for the “remarkable mastery of her instrument” (CVNC) and hailed as “clearly one to watch” (Musical America).

Named a BBC New Generation Artist (2022-24), Geneva is also the recipient of a 2022 Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award and a 2021 Avery Fisher Career Grant. She was also Grand Prize winner of the 2020 Concert Artists Guild Competition, winner of the Kronberg Academy's Prince of Hesse Prize (2021), Musical America's New Artist of the Month (June 2021), a Performance Today Young Artist in Residence and a YCAT Concordia Artist.

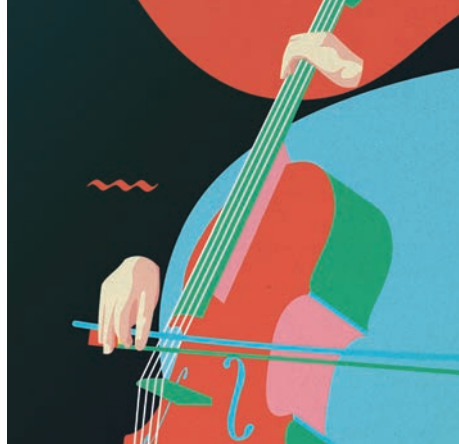
In August 2023, Geneva made her BBC Proms debut with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales and Jaime Martín; the 2023-24 season included further performances with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales and debuts with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, the Orchestre National de Bordeaux Aquitaine, Kremerata Baltica (alongside Gidon Kremer in Schnittke's Concerto Grosso No1), as well as the Knoxville Symphony, Santa Rosa Symphony and Orquesta Filarmónica de Jalisco.

Deeply passionate about chamber music, Geneva has had the pleasure of collaborating with prominent musicians such as Jonathan Biss, Glenn Dicterow, Miriam Fried, Kim Kashkashian, Gidon Kremer, Marcy Rosen, Sir András Schiff, and Mitsuko Uchida; she has performed in venues and festivals such as London's Wigmore Hall, the Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Marlboro Music Festival, Kronberg Festival, Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, Ravinia and Chamberfest Cleveland.

Geneva currently performs on a composite violin by Giovanni Battista Guadagnini, c. 1776 generously on loan from a Charitable Trust.

*For full biography please visit [sco.org.uk](https://sco.org.uk)*

## SCOTTISH CHAMBER ORCHESTRA



The Scottish Chamber Orchestra (SCO) is one of Scotland's five National Performing Companies and has been a galvanizing force in Scotland's music scene since its inception in 1974. The SCO believes that access to world-class music is not a luxury but something that everyone should have the opportunity to participate in, helping individuals and communities everywhere to thrive. Funded by the Scottish Government, City of Edinburgh Council and a community of philanthropic supporters, the SCO has an international reputation for exceptional, idiomatic performances: from mainstream classical music to newly commissioned works, each year its wide-ranging programme of work is presented across the length and breadth of Scotland, overseas and increasingly online.

Equally at home on and off the concert stage, each one of the SCO's highly talented and creative musicians and staff is passionate about transforming and enhancing lives through the power of music. The SCO's Creative Learning programme engages people of all ages and backgrounds with a diverse range of projects, concerts, participatory workshops and resources. The SCO's current five-year Residency in Edinburgh's Craigmillar builds on the area's extraordinary history of Community Arts, connecting the local community with a national cultural resource.

An exciting new chapter for the SCO began in September 2019 with the arrival of dynamic young conductor Maxim Emelyanychev as the Orchestra's Principal Conductor. His tenure has recently been extended until 2028. The SCO and Emelyanychev released their first album together (Linn Records) in November 2019 to widespread critical acclaim. Their second recording together, of Mendelssohn symphonies, was released in November 2023. Their latest recording, of Schubert Symphonies Nos 5 and 8, was released on 1 November.

The SCO also has long-standing associations with many eminent guest conductors and directors including Principal Guest Conductor Andrew Manze, Pekka Kuusisto, François Leleux, Nicola Benedetti, Isabelle van Keulen, Anthony Marwood, Richard Egarr, Mark Wigglesworth, Lorenza Borrani and Conductor Emeritus Joseph Swensen.

The Orchestra's current Associate Composer is Jay Capperauld. The SCO enjoys close relationships with numerous leading composers and has commissioned around 200 new works, including pieces by Sir James MacMillan, Anna Clyne, Sally Beamish, Martin Suckling, Einojuhani Rautavaara, Karin Rehnqvist, Mark-Anthony Turnage, Nico Muhly and the late Peter Maxwell Davies.

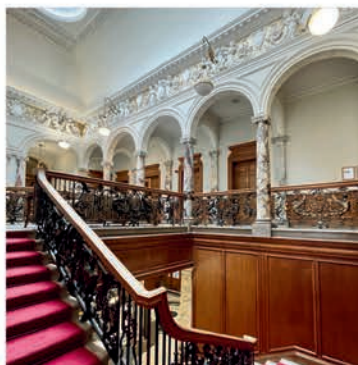
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*An SCO Academy participant performs on Glasgow City Halls' stage with the full Orchestra, May 2024 © Christopher Bowen.*

# INSPIRE THE NEXT GENERATION

At the SCO, we deeply value our incredible community of regular donors.

Each year, we must raise £1.2 million to continue delivering outstanding musical performances on-stage and innovative education and community work off-stage. Every donation has a positive impact on our work, and, in return, we bring our donors closer to the Orchestra and our wonderful array of visiting artists.

For more information on how you can become a regular donor, please get in touch with Hannah on **0131 478 8364** or **[hannah.wilkinson@sco.org.uk](mailto:hannah.wilkinson@sco.org.uk)**

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