

First Time at the San Francisco Symphony

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On the brisk evening of April 29th, San Franciscans flooded the doors of The Davies Symphony Hall. Mayhem ensued as a crowd of people packed into the lobby to scan their tickets and enter the show. It was my first time ever going to the San Francisco Symphony, an SF tradition I had heard of my whole life but never experienced. This crowd was eager to enter and experience the magic of the Grammy award-winning violinist Joshua Bell¹ as he would soon be playing a variety of compositions by the Finnish musician and composer Jean Sibelius. Emerging from the crowd and entering the symphony hall, a sense of grandeur immediately washes over you. The luxuriously carpeted red staircase lined with organ pipe-shaped trim wraps around the building and leads the common person into a chamber of the highest art. The endless window elevates the symphony-goer above the bustling civic center. Entering the hall, one can begin to study the layout and atmosphere of the venue. The crowd murmured as everyone prepared for the show. The seating sections surrounded the stage, even wrapping up and around it, surrounding it from all sides, allowing the music to be absorbed at every possible angle. Every seat in the hall faces the conductor. The warm lighting and abundance of wooden accents create a comfortable environment for the viewer. One could nearly fall asleep if it weren't for the tantalizing anticipation of what was yet to come. The venue is arranged to focus all attention on the music, yet also create a welcoming environment.

As the orchestra entered, they began the first piece. This piece was titled *Nautilus*, composed by Anna Meredith, an artist whose music overlaps between the genres of symphony

¹ Steinberg, Michael. "At a Glance: The Music." In San Francisco Symphony Program. Excerpt from San Francisco Symphony Program, April 29, 2023, 36-37.

and EDM.² To the naked eye, these genres would seem like polar opposites. The piece builds itself up with a suspenseful scale full of dissonance backed by a kick-snare-like drum pattern reminiscent of new-wave house and EDM music. The piece then shifts into a triumphant major scale, stressed by the movement of the orchestra. Every little movement by the orchestra members adds to the suspense and eventual resolution of the track, beginning with sharp back-and-forth movements of each string player's violin and ending with slow pulses of movement back and forth of their entire bodies. The piece feels like an action-packed story contained within a six-minute arrangement. The piece completely shifts the novice listener's previous idea of what orchestral music can be. *Nautilus* put the crowd on the edge of their seats for what was next.

As Joshua Bell entered for the second piece from the side of the stage with violin in hand, a sense of awe seemed to rush through the crowd. This was what everyone had come for, *Concerto in D minor for Violin and Orchestra, Opus 47* by the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius.³ As Bell emerged from the side of the stage, He immediately disrupted the meticulous preparation and arrangement of the orchestra. He stood adjacent to the conductor and became the only person in the theater who was not facing her. As the piece begins, the rest of the orchestra hinders their volume and allows Bell's violin to overtake them. Bell's powerful climbing and falling melody floats above the soft accompaniment and is reminiscent of scaling peaks and descending into valleys. After Bell's introduction, woodwinds and other soft accompanying instruments join in, gradually building up momentum. As the piece comes to a close, an intense flurry of strings

² Steinberg, Michael. "At a Glance: The Music." In San Francisco Symphony Program. Excerpt from San Francisco Symphony Program, April 29, 2023, 36-37.

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create a triumphant finish, occasionally halting to allow Bell's sharp changes in pitch to emerge. Bell serves as a storyteller in this piece. While it contains no lyrics, the piece is an intense ride with triumphant and bombastic sections that contrast with mysterious and haunting ones.

As the crowd settled for a brief intermission, the orchestra subtly rearranged as the crowd prepared for the grand finale, Symphony No. 2, also composed by Jean Sibelius. The piece opens with a light and airy melody, with the brass players standing out as the most prominent accompaniment. The first two movements feel like a journey through nature, the grand rising major scales of the strings supported by the booming accompaniment by the brass section exude the same feeling of breathtaking natural beauty. The orchestra creates a humongous sound that sends chills down the spine of every viewer, giving off the same feeling as seeing Yosemite Valley or the Grand Canyon for the first time. The instruments convey a sense of natural beauty through their triumphant swooping brass swells and booms created by timpanis. While these themes of awe are present, the symphony also feels like a journey through nature, as the different sections blend together to create a story. The second movement seems more dark and ominous than the first, but both convey the same sense of awe. The conductor Dalia Stasevska transitions each section and makes sure to distinguish them from each other by changing her body language and directing the orchestra to do so as well. The final movement engulfs the audience in a bombastic and triumphant rain of sounds and rising scales. This section ignites a fire in the listener reminiscent of themes of nationalism and pride for a place or land. According to the program, Sibelius was inspired by his travels across Europe to Italy and eventually back to his

nation of Finland to create this symphony.⁴ The piece seems to reflect this journey and concludes with a prideful section that reflects his return to his homeland.

I entered Davies Symphony Hall with little to no expectations. Yes, I had listened to symphonies and orchestral music during CIV, but never had I seen them performed live. The thought of a 90-minute symphonic performance did not exactly thrill me. Aside from CIV music listening, concertos and symphonies were never my go-to Spotify selections, just the typical rock, hip-hop, and electronic music. These genres have always enticed me more because of how they can change my emotion. Whether that is through a happy and catchy beat or melody, or sad and thought-provoking lyrics. From my experience, the stereotype surrounding classical music had always been that it was sleepy, boring, and old-timey. So naturally, this is what I expected from Joshua Bell's Performance of Sibelius. I left with a completely reimagined idea of what classical music could accomplish. I came to the realization that emotions and stories can be conveyed and the listener's mood can be altered without lyrics that explicitly *Nautilus* showed me that the lines of genre are blurred in orchestral music. *Concerto in D minor* showed me that a thrilling story could be conveyed without lyrics and by only one violinist. Finally, *Symphony in D minor* showed just how intense and prideful a message surrounding nationalism is able to be conveyed through an orchestra. I entered thinking I was in for a long haul of sleepy music. I exited back into the chilly evening not only stunned at the performance, but that it was already over.

⁴ Steinberg, Michael. "At a Glance: The Music." In San Francisco Symphony Program. Excerpt from San Francisco Symphony Program, April 29, 2023, 36-37.