

SIBELIUS VIOLIN CONCERTO

The Sibelius Violin Concerto is surely one of the mainstays of the violin repertoire. I have attempted to point out some of the issues encountered in conducting this wonderful piece. The comments below are what I've found to be helpful.

The concerto has a scarcity of rehearsal figures. I suggest adding rehearsal letters – I add 23 rehearsal figures to the first movement alone.

FIRST MOVEMENT

Be sure that the tempo is steady and even. Half note = 56

Cue the violas 4 bars before #1

Stay in 2 until 12 bars after #1, at which time go into 4

13 bars after #1, violas and cellos: on the string

The first beat 17 bars after #1 will be slightly elongated for the soloist

At #2, quarter note = quarter note, so that the beat slows down. Violas need to play with a big, bold sound

2nd bar of #2, bassoons: add a diminuendo, as in the cellos. Bassoons and cellos, come down to p, and crescendo to f

3rd bar of #2, bassoons: add a staccato marking over the F and separate, as the cellos do

7 bars after #2, tutti: diminuendo to p, and crescendo to f

15 bars after #2, first violins, flutes, oboes, horns: conductor must decide whether or not to lift after the downbeat

Stay in 2 until #3, then go into 6 at #3

5 bars after #3, quasi fermata on beat 4, no crescendo until the soloist starts the B flat arpeggio

Largamente 6 bars after #3, stay in 6 and follow the soloist all the way to the fermata

11 before #4, watch the soloist, and give first beat again, allowing the basses and timpani to enter. This bar is in 6, and the following bars are in 2

At #4, wait for the soloist to roll the chord and catch the top note with the downbeat

#4, violins: the bowing comes out well if they start up bow. If starting down bow, the bowing can work if they then retake to a down bow for the half note in the 6th bar. If starting up bow is what is decided, the players need to really whip the bow to get a strong attack

13 bars after #4, trumpets and trombones: trumpets increase the volume with each bar as written, ff with the timpani can be really powerful

28 bars after #4, strings f; 38 and 40 bars after #4, strings sfz only on the second quarter note, and p for the rest of the bar

Second bar of #5, trumpets: sustain the second beat, as it needs to connect with the strings and woodwinds; same for clarinets and horns 8 bars after #5

13 bars after #5, bassoons, and 9 bars later, cellos: expressive

8 bars before #6, cellos: slight accent on each note of each new bow

#6, cellos and basses: fermata in the parts for the long B flat and cut off when solo violin finishes high B flat

The bar before the cadenza: I make the 4th beat a 2/8 bar, and conduct the bar in 2

End of the cadenza: the 16th notes at #7 are more or less twice as fast as the last 16th notes of the cadenza

17 bars after #7, strings: quarter notes a little heavy and perhaps slightly held back

Note that Sibelius often uses half and whole notes for pizzicatos for the basses

#8 for 16 bars, tutti: same as in exposition

5 bars before #8, tutti: listen carefully to the soloist, and make sure that the basses change exactly with the top note of the solo violin

1 bar before #9, tutti: last beat will probably be slightly stretched

#9, tutti: in 2; violins and violas, off the string

3 bars after #9, second clarinet and horns: watch intonation on the concert C sharp

5 bars after #9, basses: very strong on the triplets here and 4 bars later

12 bars after #9, violins: still off the string

13 and 17 bars after #9, bassoons, violas, cellos, and basses: ff

18 bars after #9, violins: expressive

20 bars after #9 (key change), violins and violas, lift on an up bow; retake to down bow in the next bar

22 bars after #9, violins and violas: p so that high woodwinds and horns can be heard; cross out f in the next bar and start the crescendo in the bar after that, which will go to the fff

29 bars after #9, trombones and timpani: small spaces between the notes, and a big, but not rough sound

#10, tutti: although the music is virtually the same, the notation is different. Stay in 2 all the way until the fermata

6 bars after #10, tutti: as before, fermata, and wait until the arpeggio to indicate the crescendo

Fermata after #10, tutti: horns can cut off as conductor shows the next bar, which is in 1

4 bars before #11, tutti: in 2, watch that 2 bars before #11 is an echo

5 bars after #11, violas and clarinets: they need to project, and play with a strong but soft articulation. Everyone else needs to be very soft. Be sure that starting at #11 that the soloist is always heard clearly.

8 bars before #12, tutti: subito pp, not too much crescendo

5 bars after #12, tutti: not too loud; same 9 bars after #12

17 bars after #12, strings: softly but very well articulated, starting up bow at the tip

SECOND MOVEMENT

I give a very clear 1+2+ for the clarinets. I suggest articulating the 16th notes with the dashes, and holding the eighth note on beat 2 of the second bar full value. The same is valid for the oboes in the next bars, and flutes in bar 3

Bar 5, bassoons and horns: build the pyramid of the B flat arpeggio with clear accents on each entrance

Bar 9, cellos and basses: arco, not pizzicato

Bar 13, tutti: listen to the soloist, who may like to move ahead here

8 bars and 4 bars before #1, strings: at the tip, down bow, followed by two up bows

5 bars before #1, tutti: a decision to lift or not after the third beat needs to be made

3 bars before #1, strings: disappear to pppp

#1, basses: strong and very well articulated. Tempo can move ahead here.

#1, strings: warm, expressive; full value on the eighth note on the second beat of the second bar of #1. Same on the sequence 4 bars after #1

2 bars before #2, violas and cellos: on the string

#2, violins: bowing should come out so that the passage starts up bow, followed by down bow, and 2 up bows, as earlier. Violas and cellos may have to play 2 down bows, and then 2 up bows to accommodate the pattern

#2, tutti: soloist may want to move ahead

1 bar before #3, tutti: not too loud; again, listen to soloist if he or she would like to push the tempo, especially starting with the trills in the second bar of #3

4 bars after #3, tutti: relax dynamic and possibly tempo a bit after climax

4 bars before #4, tutti: listen carefully to the soloist

#4, tutti: not too loud

5 bars after #4, violins and violas: same bowing and dynamics as before

7 bars after after #4, horns: possible to move ahead

Last 2 bars, strings: separate the two half notes

In general, in the second movement, the conductor needs to be sensitive to the technical difficulties and projection issues of the soloist, listening carefully to the passages that need to move ahead or pull back.

THIRD MOVEMENT

Setting the tempo in this movement is crucial, due to the extreme technical difficulties, most noticeably the parallel thirds, octaves, etc. Notice that the timpani and lower strings play opposite rhythm patterns.

Whatever tempo is established must work for the thirds and other difficulties involved.

Starting with the second bar of #2, notice that many passages feature 6/8 rhythm against 3/4 rhythm

Second and third bars of #2, second violins and violas: 4 down bows

6 bars after #2, violins, violas and cellos: 3 down bows here, and subsequent similar passages

7 bars and 5 bars before #3, violins, violas, cellos, and flutes: clip second eighth note of each beat

#4, tutti: soloist may push the tempo here

#5, clarinets: need to project beyond mp dynamic, then even stronger when indicated mf

9 bars after #5, tutti: not too loud for the soloist

13 bars after #5, tutti: start quietly enough to make a substantial crescendo, especially brass and timpani

17 bars after #5, brass and timpani: diminuendo, then crescendo 5 bars later so that strings and woodwinds may always be heard

#6, violins: I prefer using the front 3 stands of each section

Pickup to 4 bars after #8, bassoons and violas: I suggest forte, with diminuendo as written

7 bars after #8, tutti: very quiet

15 bars after #8, tutti: playing as quietly as possible for this passage with violin harmonics creates a mysterious and ethereal quality

8 bars before #9, tutti: a bit louder

1 bar before #9, strings: all down bow

#10, tutti: tempo may move ahead a bit here

#12, tutti: not too loud

#12, basses for 6 bars: octave lower D for perhaps 3 players with extensions; same 9 bars after #12 for 6 bars

1 bar before #13: possibly slightly held back

#13 and 5 bars after #13, horns: possible crescendo with the strings; strings may add a crescendo 5 bars after at #13, as is written at #13