



Resource 22: Sibelius

How did migrating swans give inspiration to a well-known composer?

Background

Finland is a country that is located close to the Arctic Circle. During the winter months, northern parts of Finland remain frozen. As summer comes and daylight extends, the top layer of the tundra thaws and the seasonal warmth encourages swarms of insects to hatch. It is an ideal nesting ground for migrating birds. The birds arrive to feed on the plentiful sources of food and raise their chicks in the long daylight hours.

In April 1915, the Finnish composer, Jean Sibelius, was walking in the countryside near Helsinki, wondering how he might finish his latest symphony. Overhead, he saw a flock of swans arriving from their long flight from west and central Europe:

'I saw 16 swans... that beauty! They circled over me for a long time... disappeared into the solar haze like a gleaming silver ribbon. The swan call... a trumpet... a low-pitched refrain reminiscent of a child crying...'

The migrating swans gave him the inspiration that he needed and he named this 'swan theme'. Whilst it had been the end of a long migration for the swans, it had also been the end of the long search for the finale to his symphony for Sibelius.

Task

- Play the final movement of Sibelius's *Fifth Symphony*.
- Just after a minute into the movement, the swan theme is played repeatedly by the horns. Continue playing until the fade-out at around the three-minute mark. Ask pupils if they can recognise the theme that came to Sibelius when he saw the swans.
- In the end, Sibelius did not give the theme to the trumpets. Which instrument did he give the theme to first?