

Stephen Johnson: What is a Symphony?

When composers first started using the term Symphony in the Baroque era, it more or less meant whatever a composer wanted it to, but by the end of the 18th century it had really begun to stabilise out into a particular musical form. This was a piece for orchestra, later it could include voices, chorus, soloists, but originally it was for orchestra and it was usually in several movements, and the best way to think of movements is probably like the acts of a play or the chapters of a book, which is a good analogy because they're not complete in themselves, they form part of an evolving, dynamic drama which is heading somewhere, and taken together they all add up to more than the sum of the parts. Now the number of movements could be, well that was fluid, four was fairly soon arrived at as the kind of standard version and you would have something like a Minuet, or later a Scherzo, a dance movement, as the third movement of the symphony. But there were symphonies in five movements, symphonies in three movements, and by the time you get to the 20th Century you could have any number of movements including Sibelius' famous one movement ***Seventh Symphony*** which has elements of the traditional movements of the symphony: the fast movements, the slow movements the more moderately paced movements, and it all merged together into one continuously evolving drama. But, in essence, it's a piece about becoming. It's a kind of journey, which is more or less formally articulated but which nevertheless feels continuous. In the early days of the symphony you could sometimes have them broken up in a concert and there would be items played between the movements of a symphony and yet still there was the

feeling that when you went back to the symphony you were returning to a kind of unfinished business, something that only made sense when you got to the end and you could look back where you'd come across. And that's one of the reasons why I think it fascinated people because it involved such a sophisticated and creative level of listening on behalf of the audiences.