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# Abdullah, Hadelich and the Seattle Symphony offer a winter-conquering musical feast

*Thomas May*

4–5 minutes

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Framed by early and late Sibelius, this luminous program pushed the pause button on dank winter anxieties. A warm bond developed between debuting guest conductor [Kazem Abdullah](#) and the Seattle Symphony musicians during the course of the concert, reaching incandescence in their cloud-busting account of the Finnish composer's [Seventh Symphony](#).

Kazem Abdullah conducts the Seattle Symphony

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In *Finlandia*, the American-born, German-based Abdullah tapped into the brooding suspense Sibelius builds into his miniature tone poem from the turn-of-the-century, setting the stage for its hopeful message of resistance against oppressive forces, specifically, as the composer's contemporaries saw it, against the yoke of imperialist Russia. If the impact was diluted by some ragged entrances from brass and percussion, the liberating conviction of the music came through.

Instead of tracing an arc toward triumph, Britten's early [Violin](#)

[Concerto](#) is often parsed as a lamentation for the defeat of the Spanish democracy by Franco's fascists at the end of the 1930s. [Augustin Hadelich](#) reaffirmed his position as one of today's most fully rounded violinists with a performance of shattering potency. It's a hugely virtuosic piece but has an effect very different from that of a "showy" concerto. The violin retreats into lyrical despair at the end of the first movement, while its soul-searching cadenza prepares the way for the devastating finale, cast as a passacaglia. Hadelich was a brilliant storyteller throughout, his deep musical intelligence and incisive phrasing matched by unwavering stamina. He spun lines that ached with expression against the immense machine of the passacaglia's grimly churning pattern.

Hadelich has referred to the piece as on one level a requiem for the dead in the Spanish Civil War. In the final, tonally wavering measures, he leaned into Britten's defiant denial of a happy ending. Abdullah treated the score's unusual timbral combinations with a chamber-like precision, offering sensitive support. Hadelich chose the Sarabande from Bach's Second Partita for his encore, extracting maximal emotion from abstract chords.

Augustin Hadelich, Kazem Abdullah and the Seattle Symphony

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One of the suddenly departed former music director Thomas Dausgaard's big projects was a complete Sibelius cycle pairing a new contemporary piece with each of the symphonies. With *Wavering World*, his response to the Seventh Symphony, the Japanese composer Dai Fujikura contributed the last of these commissions to be finished before the entire project was abandoned. (The other pairings that were completed are for the

## First and Second Symphonies.)

Born in Osaka in 1977 and a longterm resident of London, Fujikura refers to his inspiration from Japanese mythology, in parallel to Sibelius' use of his native Finnish folklore, noting that he wanted to evoke "the humid wetness and wonder of creation" and how the shapeless, incorporeal gods appeared with "the opening up of the world". *Wavering World* artfully blends sophisticated orchestration with the scene-establishing narrative power of film music as mysterious tone clouds expand and contract and shift in texture, like a color field painting in sound; a barrage of percussion punctuates this sound world with indirect allusions to the concert's concluding work.

In Abdullah's hands, Fujikura's alluring new piece seemed to breathe something of the atmosphere of the Sibelius Seventh, which contains worlds within its compact, single-movement span. That very density can strike audiences as formidably cryptic, but Abdullah unlocked its awesome beauties through sensitive, steady sound sculpting. He allowed Sibelius' drama of continually recalibrating light and weight to play out with a remarkable sonic clarity. The pivotal trombone part (Koichiro Yamamoto) resounded with splendid majesty.

Showing a deep understanding of Sibelian ambiguity, Abdullah crested to a close with an unforced, unprolonged articulation of the famous final chord of C major, refusing to play to the gallery with a hollow grand resolution. Which made it all the more resounding.

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