

Sibelius: Finlandia, Op. 26 No. 7

Finlandia is as much an expression of proud nationalism to the people of Finland as Elgar's Land of Hope and Glory is to the English. Sibelius strongly supported the protest movement against Russian oppression of Finland. His music was a focal point for protestations and could not easily be censored. Finlandia was composed in November 1899 when Sibelius was invited to contribute music to a special gala performance of historical tableaux from Finnish history, at the Swedish Theatre.

This event was to be staged as the culmination of a series of events ostensibly concerned with the 'Press Pension Celebrations'. The official purpose of these festivities was to raise money for the pension funds of newspapermen, but the reality was to provide moral and practical support to maintain a free press against the Tsarist establishment.

Sibelius composed seven short pieces: a prelude and then introductory music for six tableaux, following each of which commissioned texts were to be declaimed. What was later to be known as Finlandia was written for the final tableau entitled 'Finland Awakes'. Five of the pieces composed by Sibelius for this event were performed separately by Robert Kajanus at one of his symphony concerts in Helsinki the following month in December 1899, after which Sibelius decided to publish Finlandia as a separate piece in its own right.

The title was suggested by Axel Carpelsen, who proposed it in the context of encouraging the composer to write a nationalist work for the 1900 Paris World Exhibition. Sibelius was happy to use the music already composed but did adopt Carpelsen's suggestion of Finlandia as the title. Music and title were thus launched at the beginning of the new century that was to see Finland freed from the rule of Russia.

In his diary Sibelius wrote that the melodies of Finlandia came to him directly. 'Pure inspiration' he wrote, of the music that was to rally those at home and to personify Finland internationally to many for whom the name of the country might initially have meant little. The central hymn-like melody has subsequently taken on connotations of the fight for freedom as well as its more precise location within turn of the century Finland, evidence of Sibelius's genius and understanding.

Rachmaninov: Piano Concerto No. 1 in F sharp minor, Op. 1

Vivace
Andante
Allegro vivace

In 1891, at the age of eighteen, Rachmaninov won the highest honours for his piano playing at the Moscow Conservatory, after studying with Alexander Siloti, who himself had studied with Tchaikovsky, Nicholas Rubinstein, and Liszt. In addition, as a student of composition with Taneyev and Arensky, he had written a number of works in different genres, before feeling able to give one of his compositions an opus number. This was to be the First Piano Concerto, by far his most ambitious work to date. The last two movements were written in a rush during July 1891, while still a student: as Rachmaninov himself wrote to a friend 'I could have finished it much sooner, but after the first movement I idled for a long while...composed and scored the last two movements in two and a half days.'

Dedicated to Siloti, the Concerto was first performed at the Moscow Conservatory the following year, in March 1892, with Rachmaninov as soloist and Safonov conducting. The reception was not especially enthusiastic. Rachmaninov was disappointed but not as devastated as he was to be following the disastrous premiere of his First Symphony in 1897. The weak performance, conducted