

Jean Sibelius and Finland's Independence

Jean Sibelius was born on December 08, 1865, today three days short of 150 years ago. There have been several musical, historical and other events in Finland and many other countries, and also in our area. Sibelius is best known as a composer, Finland's gift to the world, but he also had a great effect on the Finns developing a desire and commitment to make Finland an independent country.

Sibelius was driven to compose and present music for an independent Finland for 25 years, from composing *Kullervo* in 1892 onward. The drive intensified towards the end of the century, when the Russian emperor Nicholas II put in place the restrictions on the powers of the Grand Duchy of Finland. The first symphony was composed in 1899 in the middle of the strong patriotic movement in Sibelius' life, followed by the *Song of the Athenians*, composed for boys' and male choirs. This was dedicated Finnish music, never heard or felt before.

In November 1899 Sibelius released eight tableaux written for the episodes of Finnish history known as the *Press Celebration Music*. The last tableau, *Finland Awakens*, was received the best. It was revised in 1900 and performed under several names to avoid Russian censorship in the beginning of the 20th century. It was first performed as *Finlandia* in February 1901 by the Orchestra of Helsinki Philharmonic Society in Helsinki, conducted by Robert Kajanus. We just listened to much of it and at least I felt it in my whole body and mind. I believe many others had the same feelings.

Sibelius and his friends and colleagues in the Finnish art circles worked hard to build the momentum of the people to turn their desire for independence into steps of recognition that the Finns are people with their unique roots and culture. Many upper class people in Finland had Swedish names from the centuries under Sweden. When the Finnish movement developed, people started to change their names to Finnish names. Jean Sibelius' christened names were Johan Julius Christian, but as a boy he was called Janne, a very ordinary Finnish boy's first name. Later, on his way to success and becoming famous he changed it to Jean, in his mind a better fit for an accomplished composer.

When Finland declared independence on December 06, 1917, Sibelius was two days short of being 52 years old. He had been working on his latest composition, *Jäger March*, in the second half of 1917, using words for a military march that were smuggled to Finland from Heikki Nurmio, who was serving in the Royal Prussian 27th Battalion in Libau and fighting against Russian Empire during its last days. The march was an excellent fit for the occasion and was performed the first time in Helsinki on January 19, 1918. The downside was that the Finnish Civil War started the same day.

Creative life is challenging and Jean Sibelius definitely lived through his share of the challenges. Needless to say that the challenges were even bigger for the Sibelius' family. By the time when Finland became independent, Sibelius had composed majority of his major works: *Kullervo*, *Karelia Suite*, *Lemminkäinen Suite*, *Finlandia*, *Porilaisten marssi*, *Violin Concerto* and *Symphonies 1 through 5*. These works had a tremendous influence and contribution to Finland's people on their effort to build an independent country.

'The Silence of Järvenpää', 1927-1957, the last three decades of Jean Sibelius' life with no new published music are a mystery, but I propose that we just accept to enjoy the music he gave us.

We wish you all an excellent Finland's 98-year Independence Day, which is really the 99th Finland's Independence Day Celebration, as we started from the year zero in 1917.

Now we will sing *Maamme* (Our Land), Finland's National Anthem, and *Veteraanin iltahuuto* (Veteran's Evening Call), a song to honor the veterans of Finland's 1939-1945 wars.