

Notes from Finland

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of Finnish composer Jean Sibelius, a remarkable artist whose piano works deserve greater praise, writes pianist *Joseph Tong*

LAST SUMMER, AS PART OF MY research for my Sibelius disc for the Quartz label, I came across a recording of the Japanese pianist Izumi Tateno performing Sibelius on the composer's Steinway at Ainola. The beauty and originality of the music aroused my curiosity and I quickly set about acquiring scores – a mission that resulted in a rewarding voyage of musical discovery. Arriving at Ainola early one morning during the July heatwave, I was thrilled to be given special permission to play the composer's beautifully maintained Steinway. To feel the keys under my fingers was both humbling and exhilarating.

Later the same day, I took a train to Hämeenlinna, the birthplace of Sibelius (the house where the composer was born on 8 December 1865 is now a museum).

Among other items on display, I was fascinated to see the original upright piano (complete with candelabra which Sibelius used for his practice from the mid-1870s onwards, as well as an autograph score of the opening bars of *Finlandia*.

In this article, I will restrict myself to writing about the repertoire on the Quartz disc, which I will also be performing in an all-Sibelius solo piano recital at St John's Smith Square this spring. With the possible exception of the early Sonata in F major of 1893, *Kyllikki* Op 41 (1904) is probably Sibelius's most significant large-scale piano work of more than one movement. There is no complete certainty of its connection with the Kalevala, the Finnish national epic, but it can nonetheless be seen as a triptych portraying *Kyllikki* and her three successive states of mind.

Whereas *Kyllikki* marks the end of Sibelius's national romantic period, *The Trees* (1914) is a fine example of his later, highly cultivated piano style. Impressionist and expressionist influences are detectable in these exquisite nature-inspired miniatures. The fragility of the gradually unfolding right-hand melody suggests the long-awaited flowering of the mountain ash (*When the Mountain Ash Blooms*), while the absolute steadfastness of the pine tree (*The Solitary Fir Tree*) was at the time interpreted as a symbol of Finland standing firm against Russian influence. Within the third piece, *The Aspen*, there is a growing harmonic ambiguity and an increasingly inward-looking expression. Of particular note are the tremolo passages, perhaps depicting branches quivering in the icy breeze, and the mournful 'cello' theme with its sparse accompanying chords. *The Birch* is the most energetic piece of the set, the favourite tree of the Finns, which 'stands so white.' The rich tenor register is the natural home for *The Spruce's* slow waltz theme, answered by an equally poignant melody in the soprano before the sudden, dramatic arpeggiations of the *Risolto* section recall the inner determination and strength of *The Solitary Fir Tree*.

COMPOSED IN THE YEARS 1916-17, *The Flowers* Op 85 is an indispensable companion set to *The Trees*. *Bellis* (daisy or daisies) is music-box-like in style, using the white keys of the piano and tiny, pinpointed staccatos to depict perhaps a cluster of daisies sparkling in the spring breeze. *Oeillet* ('Carnation') is more overtly romantic, a beautiful waltz with a brief minor variation and whimsical, decorative passages in the upper melody. *Iris* has a more improvisatory feel and serious character, with its nuanced, leggiere runs



Joseph Tong pictured outside the home of Jean Sibelius

REPERTOIRE



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Tong is given a rare opportunity to play Sibelius's original Steinway

Sibelius's *Esquisses* (1929) are the last pieces that he composed for solo piano. Remarkably, these were not published until 1973 and are still not very widely known. Written towards the end of the composer's last active creative period, they explore modal tonality and other compositional devices such as tonal meditation (for example in *Forest Lake*) while reflecting an increasingly personal response to nature, coupled with a bold, more radical approach to harmony. For me, the most striking of the set are *Forest Lake* and *Song in the Forest*. Beyond the immediate pictorial associations there lurks a darker, more disturbing undercurrent and blurred edges are perhaps what the composer had in mind when considering the important role of the sustaining pedal in both pieces. Finally, *Spring Vision* has a deceptively straightforward opening but its restless *Animoso* theme also suggests that a feeling of springlike optimism may be no more than fleeting.

THE MOST SUCCESSFUL AND frequently performed of Sibelius's orchestral transcriptions is his celebrated version of *Finlandia* Op 26 (1899-1900). In addition to virtuoso semiquaver flourishes, double octave cascades and swirling arpeggiations, Sibelius also uses the different registers of the piano to great effect in recreating something of the warmth of the string sound in the hushed, cantabile 'hymn-theme' and its subsequent development. There is also something irresistibly spine-tingling about launching into *Finlandia*'s powerful opening chords, complete with menacing tremolos, on a full-size concert grand, and the translation of the tone poem to the sound world of the piano seems to work very successfully.

Whatever the underlying reasons for the relative neglect of Sibelius's piano music, I hope that this year's anniversary celebrations will prompt a resurgence of interest in this rich seam of repertoire which spans virtually the entire period of Sibelius's creative life. ♪

Joseph Tong will perform an all-Sibelius solo piano recital at St John's Smith Square, London, on 13 May. His recording of the same repertoire is available on the Quartz label

and delicate trills, while No 4, *Snapdragon*, has a rhythmically taut opening theme and later reveals some Schumannesque accompaniments and harmonic sequences. *Campanula* begins with a succession of reverberating bells in the form of split octaves in the treble, later conveying a more nostalgic mood through ruminative arpeggiations and expressive appoggiaturas before ending poignantly with distant, repeated bells in the top register.

The first of Sibelius's three Sonatinas Op 67 heralds a noticeable change in style. It opens with a joyful, sparsely harmonised theme and expresses a wealth of musical ideas, through pithy two-part writing and other extraordinarily economical means. The work's slow movement is particularly beautiful and provides its emotional core. The quirky and pianistically challenging finale is characterised by some unexpected harmonic diversions, an agitated minor key melody in the left hand set against a recurring, somewhat unsettling broken octave accompaniment in the high register.

The two Rondinos Op 68 (1912) are also distinctive and notable in a stylistic sense, similarly dating from Sibelius's period of 'modern classicism'. The G sharp minor Andantino is full of questioning

pauses, sighing motifs and extremely delicate, pianissimo winding melodies. Its companion piece is remarkable for its sharp dissonances and waspish humour, together with nimble right hand tremolo effects (in tenths) resembling string-crossings on the violin.

The Five Romantic Pieces Op 101 (1923-1924) reveal a richer handling of the piano and Sibelius's growing preference for orchestral sonorities, with occasional similarities to the Sixth Symphony. The opening Romance was written in a suitably tender, heartfelt vein as a reconciliation gift to his wife Aino. *Chant du soir*, on the other hand, is more succinct and less lavish in texture and harmony, though no less touching in its overall effect. A serenely unfolding Andante introduction to *Scène lyrique* gives not a hint of what is to come; a rapid, polka-like Vivace which rattles along in a violinistic fashion. *Burlesque* is full of swagger and comical touches such as teasing harmonic twists and hilarious 'crushed-note' chords, closing with a light-hearted, scampering coda. Calm is restored with the dignified and beautifully crafted *Scène romantique*, in which Sibelius shows his mastery of the miniature forms and paces the moment where the imagined reconciliation occurs to perfection.