

**Joseph Tong**, St John's Smith Square, 13 May 2015. Reviewed by Arcana.FM

It is surprising, the number of famous composers with piano works that are rarely if ever heard in concert. Tchaikovsky, Elgar, Dvořák and Wagner – all wrote a considerable amount of keyboard music that remains relatively unheard.

To that list can be added Jean Sibelius, whose canon of piano works runs from early juvenilia to the late *Five Esquisses* of 1929. Sibelius wrote at the piano in his Ainola house, but the suspicion persists that a lot of his work was a necessary complement to the popular orchestral works we do hear a lot of – and that it wasn't always designed for outings in the concert hall.

Joseph Tong sought to challenge that notion with a concert composed entirely of Sibelius piano works, given at St John's Smith Square in the presence of the Finnish Ambassador. While the attendance suggested the music was not a great draw, the end product was never less than intriguing and often provided clues to Sibelius's overall style.

Tong constructed a logical program that took us to the outer edges of the Finn's piano output, from earlier pieces with a nationalist bent (the three movement suite *Kyllikki* and the five-piece suite *The Trees*) to some of the more rigorously structured pieces from Sibelius' neo-classical period (a surprisingly touching *Sonatina* and two *Rondinos*) and finally to a strikingly effective transcription of the great *Finlandia*.

Tong was the ideal exponent, enjoying the intimacy of Sibelius' writing and the occasionally abrupt manner in which he finishes his musical phrases. The *Sonatina* was a particular treat, its last movement hanging on the air like a branch after a bird has flown from it. Also notable was *The Spruce* last of *The Trees*, a popular work Tong played again as an encore. The later works were deeper and darker, suggesting winter claustrophobia in Sibelius' house at Ainola, with only the hint of brighter times in evocations of spring.

To understand Sibelius as a composer the piano works are an invaluable and private aside, and in the right environment – such as this – they work very well as an intimate concert experience. Even the bluster of *Finlandia*, brilliantly played here, had its tender moments in the slow chorale theme that Tong gave lovingly. For an anniversary tribute with a difference, the pianist deserves great credit.

Joseph Tong has recorded a CD of Sibelius piano works, structured in a very similar way to the concert. It can be heard [here](#) on Spotify, with a second volume apparently in the pipeline for 2016.