

Twenty-First Century Reflections on *Finlandia*

Sibelius composed the first version of his famous tone poem *Finlandia* in 1899—just over 100 years ago. Over the next year, he substantially revised and recomposed its ending twice more, and by 1900 it finally became the version that we all know. It's sometimes difficult to hear such a familiar piece with fresh ears—to imagine how we might have heard it for the first time a century ago...and what different (or similar) kinds of thoughts we might have had about it. But that's just what I'd like to have us try to do this afternoon—to think about *Finlandia* in perhaps a slightly different way, from a different perspective.

We all know, I think, that from the beginning, Sibelius intended it to convey an essence of purely *Finnish* culture and experience—a ringing declaration of self-identity: “This is our voice!” What's more: No listener a century ago could possibly have overlooked its atmosphere of protest against what was then the increasing Russian oppression of Finland—the Czarist Russia tightening the noose around Finland's freedoms in the later 1890s and early 1900s, as if trying to wipe out the distinct flavor of Finnish culture altogether. Protest was one thing—it's surely there in the piece—but, more specifically, it was easy to misunderstand *Finlandia* as a revolutionary battle-piece, perhaps modeled on other battle-pieces, such as Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. And since the famous *Finlandia* hymn toward the middle of the piece also came to serve as a musical emblem of Finland—virtually a second national anthem of the country, even set to words around 1940, as we shall hear in the version performed this afternoon—it was even easier to hear the piece directly in the *1812 Overture* tradition of battle-depiction and projected victory.

But in fact *Finlandia*'s originally intended images were somewhat different. At least on the surface, this was not supposed to be a battle piece in the manner of the *1812 Overture*. As it happens, it was more about Finland's “internal” grand drive toward its own self-realization throughout the nineteenth century as a whole. What I'd like to do this afternoon is to bring us back to the piece's original meaning, which it received its first performance in 1899. Let's look not so much at what *Finlandia* came to mean—a public

declaration of national essence to the world—but at what Sibelius originally intended it to represent to its Finnish audience when he first wrote it, not dreaming that it would become his (and Finland’s) most famous composition.

First, let’s situate the piece—from 1899—within the broader span of Sibelius’s compositional life. As a whole, the 1890s represent the “first stage” of young Sibelius’s career (Sibelius seeking to “become Sibelius,” so to speak). He was in his late 20s and early 30s and was ardently trying to establish himself locally—within Finland only, in and around Helsinki—as that country’s boldest and most promising composer. In the 1890s he was still unknown outside of Finland: he would start touring publishing in larger Europe, with the brand-new First Symphony and other works, only in 1900. This Finnish career-trajectory of the 1890s began in earnest with the first piece on this afternoon’s program, the five-movement symphonic poem *Kullervo* (with vocalists), written in 1891 and 1892. For the Finns in the early 1890s *Kullervo* was a revelation in the “authentic” setting of Finnish-language texts and Finnish mythic subject matter, taken from the national epic, the *Kalevala*: It was music that seemed simultaneously to be “primitive” and modern.

MUSIC (first movement)

MUSIC (second movement)

Young Sibelius cultivated his growing reputation as a specifically local Finnish composer throughout the 1890s, and by the late 1890s he was even making musical contributions for explicitly political ends. In the late 1890s Russian policy within Finland turned toward harsh repression. In 1898 Czar Nicholas II appointed Nikolai Bobrikov Governor General to carry out a program of “Russification,” and in 1899, with the much-despised February Manifesto, Bobrikov began the process of stripping Finland of its political autonomy, limiting free speech and assembly, shutting down newspapers, arranging deportations, and the like.

Such policies drew fierce opposition from the Finns. At this time Sibelius composed a number of frankly patriotic, “protest” pieces in a simpler, more populist (even incendiary) style. Some had sensational results within the borders of the country but proved to be crafted for local

consumption only. The most politically charged of these was the Swedish-language resistance-march for accompanied chorus, “Song of the Athenians” (1899). To current ears and current times: perhaps, crude and simple (and certainly never performed outside of Finland); at the time, a lightning-bolt of protest, with text: “Death is splendid when you fall courageously.....Rise up, with your furious strong arm” and so on. (As we listen to a moment of it, notice the voices singing in unison or octaves, not in four different parts....a standard sign of universally shared, populist resolve:)

MUSIC

Other such “local” political pieces included works with titles such as “The Breaking of the Ice on the Oulu River” (1899), “To the Fatherland” (1900), and “Do You Have Courage?” (from 1904). But one of Sibelius’s local resistance-pieces of the period proved to be more exportable—and this, of course, was *Finlandia*, which helped to establish the composer throughout Europe and rapidly became not only his signature-piece but also the signature-piece for the country of Finland itself.

Finlandia began life not as a separate tone poem, but as a piece entitled “Finland Awakens.” It was one of a set of six pieces of music to accompany six historical tableaux depicting the history of the country. *Finlandia*’s original, 1899 version, “Finland Awakens,” served as the conclusion and culmination of a theatrical protest-event in the center of Helsinki. The whole protest-evening was known as the Press Celebrations—a public display of support for the beleaguered Finnish press, censored and shut down by the Russian governor-general of Finland.

The main attraction of these Press-Celebration demonstrations in November 1899 centered around a popular stage-practice of the day—the staging of historical tableaux or “living pictures.” For these tableaux, as you probably know, people on stage posed while dressed in historical or national costumes (frozen still). Each posed scene was then accompanied by stirring poetry readings or music, or both. Helsinki’s Press Celebration protest of November 1899 featured six of these historical tableaux representing stages of the chronological progress of Finland from primeval to modern times. Each tableau brought us closer to the present. Sibelius contributed around thirty-five minutes of music for these six

tableaux. The final seven minutes—the last tableau of the six—were eventually twice revised (given a new ending) and published separately as *Finlandia*.

What was this Press Celebrations Event really like? New research in Finland (research that’s now only about five years old) has at last made it possible to reconstruct that evening and all of Sibelius’s original music (most of it still unknown today). The Press Celebration protest began with a simple musical prelude setting the tone. Before the new Finnish recording of 1998, this music—never published—had not been heard since 1899: [TRACK 11: 0:00-0:30]

Then: six tableaux in historical order. The first tableau, with its posed figures on stage accompanied by Sibelius’s music, conjured up the ancient times and singing bards mentioned in the rugged national epic, the *Kalevala*—and the music represented a shimmering, pagan Finland mythically at one with nature [TRACK 12; 0:00-0:30]. The second brought us into real historical time, with the twelfth-century religious conversions of the Finns, their baptism into Christianity. For it Sibelius prepared music (again, unheard since 1899) that centered around sober ecclesiastical chant and religious bells [TRACK 13; 0:00-0:30]. The third depicted life at the court at Turku castle in the 1500s; the fourth, the seventeenth-century struggles of the Thirty Years’ War; the fifth, the onset of Russian power and influence in the eighteenth century, “the Great Hostility” (as it was called, stressing above all the destruction of the homeland and the suffering of the Finnish people.

But now we come to the sixth and last allegorical tableau—our *Finlandia* tableau and the grand climax of the protest evening on behalf of the Finnish press. This represented the nation’s astonishing cultural transformation in the nineteenth century and was given the title “Finland awakens!” (“Suomi herää”). Bear with me, because I’m going to read from the official description from the original program of all that was shown on stage: [QUOTE] “The powers of darkness menacing Finland [at the opening of the nineteenth century] have not succeeded in their terrible threats. Finland awakens. . . . [On stage, we can see Czar] Alexander II, [under whose rule early in the century Finland’s renaissance began to stir] . . . [also on stage, the mid-nineteenth-century national poet] Runeberg listens to his muse; [the political figure] Snellman inspires his students [to think of the possibility of Finnish independence]; Lönnrot transcribes the runes [of the epic, *Kalevala*, the main literary source of national consciousness]. Also [present on stage] are: four speakers of the first parliament;

the beginnings of elementary education, and the first steam locomotive.” A very busy tableau indeed! (Notice: no references here to the current Russian situation—only to the great nineteenth-century surge of the Finnish spirit. The unexpected element in the tableau, of course, would seem to be the piece of heavy equipment—the railroad train, which, as we’ll soon see, played a significant part in Sibelius’s climactic piece of music for the evening, also entitled, “Finland Awakens.” The music electrified the audience and was instantly successful.

So now we’re getting to the heart of it. Let’s summarize again: The allegorical tableau for which Sibelius wrote *Finlandia* was not about waging battle against the Russians (though it’s a clear subtext in the context of the event). Instead, the many details on stage celebrated the reawakening of nineteenth-century Finnish national consciousness and self-identity from the devastation and “powers of darkness” that had prevailed around 1800. What it envisioned was a new, finally-awakened Finland greeting that future equipped with its own poetry, with modern resources (education), and with modern technology (the unstoppable steam locomotive in this tableau, an image of progressive Finland—a steam-propelled Finland racing, by implication, toward an even more modern form of eventual self-rule). Much of this detail, as we’ll see, is easily read into Sibelius’s music. But then, upon revision and retitling in 1900—and life as an independent piece with the very general title, *Finlandia*—this original set of images was lost, or perhaps left behind. Almost nobody is even aware of them today.

But knowing the originally intended images of “Finland Awakens” clarifies a good deal of what happens in *Finlandia*. So let’s now turn to the music itself. As an entire composition, *Finlandia* subdivides into four basic musical sections, arranged 1, 2, 3, 4, 3 (again). Taken together, these sections move from utter darkness to brilliant light, from instability to stability, from slow to fast, from minor to major, from snarling, clipped motive to the broadly unfurled melody of the *Finlandia* hymn. The minor-mode snarls at the opening, of course—Section 1—represent “the powers of darkness”: Finland’s utter devastation and futile despair at the opening of the nineteenth century. [MUSIC: TRACK 17, first 30’]. Thus Finland’s plight around 1800. This music continues for about two minutes, with a sense of prolonged, unending bondage.

The actual “awakening”—the broad array of famous nineteenth-century poets, scholars, statesmen, educators, along with the drive toward Finnish-language legitimation—is given over to the brief section 2. This section is suddenly faster and dominated by intrusion of an important rhythm [SING], the rat-a-tat volleys of what is surely the “awakening rhythm” [SING], first heard in minor, then more optimistically in major. This “awakening” is juxtaposed directly with the “powers of darkness” motive from the introduction, which are gradually dispelled [TRACK 17: 2:07—40: “Awaken!”].

In almost no time we arrive at the central image of the original piece—the rapid Section 3. This section vividly and unmistakably represents the huffing and puffing of that steam locomotive, its heavy mechanical wheels rotating . . . rotating . . . pulling with enormous force. (Remember: in 1899 the audience was looking at that train on stage while the music was playing. This section, by the way, is one of the earliest musical depictions of large iron-built industrial objects in the history of music. Such images would become more commonplace in the avant-garde 1920s.) Remember also that in the 1899 event the locomotive was surely the image of unstoppable Finland itself. One can easily imagine how proud Finland, at the turn of the new century, must have been of that first locomotive—the very emblem of being up-to-date, progress on the move and technological modernity. Here Sibelius was identifying Finland’s progress (and its drive to self-identity) with that steam-powered train. And do notice that the rat-a-tat “reawakenings” are still here, even more intensified, more unstoppable themselves [TRACK 17: 2:44-3:03]

One other point about this “locomotive” Section 3. This is a technical point, but a poetic one nonetheless: it is only here, where Section 3 begins, that Sibelius finally solidifies the tonality once and for all. The piece has now reached its goal, its home key, its major-key destiny, A-flat major, and in that A-flat major it will remain fixed—on the rails—for the rest of the piece. The subliminal message: “locomotive” Finland has now found itself, has stabilized; we’re now unflappably on course. “No power can stop us now.”

OK—We’ve had three sections so far: 1) the slow, enslaving “powers of darkness” (Finland’s situation around 1800); 2) the jolting, rat-a-tat “reawakening” of nineteenth-century Finnish culture from minor to major; 3) the “locomotive” of progress and further reawakening of national awareness. Sibelius now builds the affirmative railroad image further and further through repetition—and finally brings it to the *fortissimo* point of full arrival and resolution—the image of a now-self-aware Finland pulling with enormous energy into the station of arrival: “we’ve overcome the past”; “Here we are!” At this powerful moment of epiphany—arrival and disclosure—Finland’s past culminates in Finland’s present: “Here we are!” Past time now becomes present time. And that *fortissimo climax of cultural arrival* is immediately followed by Section 4: After the grand arrival, the musical curtain parts to reveal the new Finnish sense of centeredness and identity at the end of the century—the famous *Finlandia* hymn. At first this seems to be something of an epilogue—a grateful epilogue after the struggle and arrival (something like the finale of Beethoven’s *Pastoral Symphony*, a hymn of thanks following the storm—or something like a *Te Deum*, a hymn of thanks after victory). We’ll hear the grand, climactic arrival and epiphany at the end of Section 3 (“Here we are!”), followed by the present-time disclosure of essential Finnishness, now recognized by its people, the familiar hymn of Section 4. [TRACK 17: 4:10-4:33]

All right: Sections 1, 2, 3, and 4 (the hymn of a hard-won self-identity). To end the whole piece with a rousing conclusion, Sibelius now brought back Section 3, the unstoppable “locomotive” of progress. Its original meaning in 1899 could hardly have been more self-evident: the now-centered Finland continuing to forge ahead into the future. The original, 1899 version (completely unknown until two years ago) ended on this futuristic industrial note—although the final 35 seconds or so is precisely the section of the original that Sibelius would discard completely and recompose in 1900. In other words, for those of us that know *Finlandia* well, it’s this original ending that is the startlingly different moment in the 1899 version. Here’s what Sibelius originally wrote and what was performed at that Press Celebrations protest-event in 1899: [TRACK 17: 6:36-7:14]

Very shortly thereafter—in late 1899 or early 1900—Sibelius concluded that this piece could be ended more effectively than with this “steam locomotive” conclusion. Surely he realized by now the power of that Finlandia Hymn on his audiences, and so, in his first of two revisions, he decided to provide a complete, reharmonized version of the hymn as an apotheosis-ending. In other words, he now he decided to tip the balance of the whole piece toward this final grand statement. (I should add that Sibelius may never have heard this ending: it was reconstructed from manuscript only in the late 1990s and provided with a premiere recording only last year—it’s still basically unknown, even among many Sibelius scholars outside of Finland.) For today’s listeners, who know the final version so well, this “unknown” second version’s effect of a *complete* statement of the hymn provides us with a delicious and unexpected ecstasy of suspension, a prolongation of the great moment. Sibelius also highlighted this “added” third stanza with an idiosyncratically defiant, neo-primitivist harmonization, embellished with emphatic and sinuous string-twistings.

MUSIC

But of course today nobody knows that ending. In the revision of 1900 Sibelius instead brought back—as apotheosis—the first phrase of the *Finlandia* hymn, the new declaration of self-awareness, *fortissimo*, gained in the nineteenth century and now to be carried forth forever as a beacon to the future. Surely he realized now the power of that melody and the reaction of the first audience to it...and now he tipped the balance of the whole piece toward this final grand statement—and followed it up with a heartfelt orchestral “Amen!” And that revision, of course, is what we’ll hear in this afternoon’s concert.

MUSIC

Only we’ll hear the piece this afternoon, as I understand, with an added, sung patriotic text written by V. A. Koskenniemi. Just to complete the story, then, the *Finlandia* hymn alone, with this new text grafted onto it, was first performed in December 1940, in the immediate period following now-independent Finland’s bitter “Winter War” with the Soviet

Union. In other words, in the middle of the twentieth century yet another layer of national meaning was added to *Finlandia*—another layer of significance which those who understand the history of the piece bring to their performances. And that, surely, is the case with the Helsinki Philharmonic today in their concert from *Kullervo* to *Finlandia*. I thank you for your attention, and now let's go into Avery Fisher Hall to hear the real thing.