



# Armas Järnefelt

## – a Finnish Wagnerian

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**Armas Järnefelt** (1869-1958) first made his mark as a composer in the 1890s, when Finnish music was being shaken up by new trends. For alongside the marked rise in national awareness and the dawn of National Romanticism in Finland, the novel ideas of Wagner and the “neo-German” school were also gaining ground. Both were reflected in the music of Järnefelt.

Armas Järnefelt belonged to one of Finland's foremost cultural families. His brother Eero was a painter and Arvid a writer; his sister Aino married **Jean Sibelius**. Armas was not only a composer: he was also one of the finest conductors in the Nordic countries, celebrated especially for his Mozart and Wagner. He was also an eminent pianist, a pupil of **Ferruccio Busoni**, and he often accompanied his first wife, Maikki (a singer), on her tours.

### Tossed on a storm of influences

As a composer Järnefelt was best known in his day for two charming orchestral miniatures called *Prelude* (1895) and *Berceuse* (1904), both of which were to be found the world over on the programmes for popular concerts. His larger-scale works for orchestra were, by contrast, lesser known, one of the main reasons being that his career was oriented more to conducting. His position as Sibelius's brother-in-law was also the cause of some tension, and Järnefelt himself sometimes said that Sibelius's genius had a paralysing effect on his own composition.

The roaring 1890s were the best and most active creative decade for Järnefelt, who ranked second

only to Sibelius as Finland's greatest composer. His first orchestral work was the *Lyrical Overture* of 1892, and over the next ten years or so he produced most of his works in this genre. These included several orchestral suites and works in one movement in the nature of symphonic poems. In them he combined, to varying degrees, not only National Romantic and Wagnerian traits but also influences from Russian and French music. His solo and choral songs were another major item in his portfolio.

The biggest and weightiest of Järnefelt's orchestral suites is the half-hour *Serenade* (1893) in six movements, its sentimental idiom coloured by many instrumental solos. Some contemporary critics even claimed to hear an erotic charge in it. This was followed by a work that was to be one of Järnefelt's most popular, the symphonic poem *Korsholma* (1894) marrying National Romanticism with Wagnerism.

Järnefelt's main orchestral work is the *Symphonic Fantasy* of 1895, its richly expressive textures bearing echoes both of Wagner and often of **Richard Strauss**. But the modernist *Symphonic Fantasy* proved too difficult for Finnish audiences to swallow; it got a cold reception and Järnefelt never again experimented with such a progressive style. The *Suite in E Flat* (1897), for example, is more traditional.

### From composer to conductor

The reception of the *Symphonic Fantasy* may partly explain why Järnefelt's conducting career gradually left his work as a composer in the

shade. From 1898 to 1903 he was conductor of a local orchestra in Viipuri and over the next few years he organised performances of operas in Helsinki, the core repertoire being a selection of Wagner operas. The most significant stage in his conducting career was the period 1907-1932, when he was conductor of the Royal Opera in Stockholm. He also had engagements in Finland, including a term as Artistic Director of the Finnish Opera 1932-1936, but for the rest of his life he spent most of his time in Sweden.

Järnefelt did continue composing in later life, his output taking in several sets of incidental music for the stage and the score for Mauritz Stiller's film *Laulu tulipunaisesta kukasta* (The Song of the Blood-red Flower, 1919) – a pioneer of Nordic music for the silver screen. He also composed a dozen or so cantatas for various festive occasions, but these are more conventional in style than his orchestral works of the 1890s.

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