

# SOLO SONGS *by* FINNISH COMPOSERS *Past and Present*

*Warner/Chappell Music Finland has published a gratifying number of Finnish solo song collections over the past few years. There are many reasons for this, one being a desire to honour major Finnish song composers on various anniversaries. The primary reason has, however, been the practical need for collected editions of songs by a given composer in a single volume rather than on individual sheets.*

The collections cover a considerable time span in the history of the Finnish solo song. **Thomas Byström** (1772-1839) even belongs to the period that predated the “post-Schubert” era proper headed by the most popular 19th century Finnish song composer, **Karl Collan**. Among the conventional vocal romances by Byström are some real gems that still have a surprisingly fresh appeal and a musical quality above and beyond that of most 19th century Finnish songs. The songs by Collan clearly reflect the influence of the great European Lied composers in both the handling of the text and the construction of the piano part.

In speaking of 19th century Finnish song composers it is impossible not to include **Fredrik Pacius**, a man who, though of German descent, composed the first real Finnish opera, *The Hunt of King Charles* (Kung Karls jakt), and some 70 songs that laid the foundations for the Finnish solo song. In style these songs come close to German Romanticism with their numerous Lied influences. Unfortunately, they are almost totally overlooked by singers today, even though Edition Fazer did publish a comprehensive collection in the 1950s to mark the 150th anniversary of his birth.

## National Heritage

Some of the finest songs by **Oskar Merikanto**, the most popular Finnish song composer, have been rescued for posterity in a one-volume edition entitled “*Oskar Merikanto: The Most Beautiful Songs*”. Merikanto composed some 150 songs in all that may well be termed part of Finland’s national heritage. They are characterised by a folk-like style of composition – so much so in fact that many are frequently thought to be genuine folk songs. The melodies are in places of the type associated with Lieder, and often bear the dramatic brilliance of Italian opera. The accompaniment tends to make great demands of the pianist, but this is hardly

surprising considering that Merikanto himself was an excellent pianist and organist. The Merikanto songs cover the entire gamut of human emotion and thought, in moods transformed in a flash from mystical meditation to nostalgic longing and utmost jubilation, yet always over an undercurrent of flowing melody.

**Toivo Kuula**, who met an untimely death in 1918, left only 24 solo songs, but they are among the finest of their kind ever composed in Finland. They perfectly reflect the serious mindscape, the richness of melody and underlying melancholy of the national soul. The broad, dynamic range of expression calls for a good vocal technique, a wide vocal span and considerable powers of interpretation. Most of the songs are settings of Finnish poems. This possibly explains why his songs speak so closely to singers here, who look upon them as staple repertoire. A new, revised edition of the Kuula songs is being planned.

The solo songs of **Leevi Madetoja** (1887-1947), a versatile composer, are in Finnish National-Romantic vein mixed with influences drawn from French music. Most of his 50 or so songs are settings of poems by his wife, **L. Onerva**, and include the *Autumn songs*, Op. 68, one of the best-known Finnish song cycles. Also a successful symphony and opera composer, Madetoja avoids unnecessary drama and external effects in his songs and meditates on such themes as loneliness, death, and the enigma of eternity. A new critical edition of the Madetoja songs, some of the finest in Finnish solo song literature, is in preparation.

## Manuscripts Discovered

The collection of the main solo songs by **Armas Järnefelt** in a single volume was accelerated by a donation made by his son, Arvi, in Stockholm to the University of Helsinki: dozens of previously unpublished manuscripts thus found their way home to Finland. Sweden

was father Järnefelt’s second home, since he spent a couple of decades as conductor of the Royal Opera in Stockholm. He concentrated almost exclusively on solo songs, the reason no doubt being that his father-in-law was **Jean Sibelius**, a master of large-scale form. Järnefelt’s vocal lyrics spring from the National-Romantic ethos nurtured on the archaic rune-singing of the national epic, the Kalevala, and the distant lands of Karelia. The folk-like elements of his youthful songs were in time joined by Impressionistic and in places even Expressionistic timbres.

The publication of the songs by **Heino Kaski**, a contemporary of Järnefelt, in a separate volume was likewise decided partly by chance: the discovery only recently of a large number of previously unpublished manuscripts in a private Helsinki home. These songs have filled out the picture of Kaski as a true lyricist and the composer of direct, melodic music devoid of mighty dramatic build-ups. The strength of his songs lies in their warm, lyrical mood and simple construction rather than complex experiment often seeking to emulate the fashionable trends of the time. Apart from the songs, most of the music by Kaski is for piano.

Two volumes containing the main solo songs by **Erkki Melartin** were published in spring 2000 on the 125th anniversary of his birth. Melartin was one of the most prominent musical personalities of his day: composer, pianist, conductor and administrator. As a composer he was exceptionally prolific and versatile, but he is best remembered today for his three hundred solo songs and hundreds of piano pieces. His choice of song texts reveals that he was extremely well-read, and equally at home with Finnish and foreign poetry. Stylistically the songs range from National-Romantic mood pieces to Impressionistic and at times distinctly Expressionistic tones. One of his favourite poets was **V. A. Koskenniemi**, 24 of whose texts he set to music. Volume I contains popular songs in nationalistic spirit to Finnish lyrics, while volume II examines Melartin from a broader stylistic and linguistic perspective.

## From Kilpinen to Rautavaara

**Yrjö Kilpinen** is, after Jean Sibelius, the Finnish song composer best known to international audiences. All in all he composed more than 700 songs, a good half of which have been published. His early songs were tinged with National Romanticism, and like Melartin, he was inspired most profoundly by V.A. Koskenniemi, choosing no fewer than 40 of his poems to set to music. These songs also marked the beginning of Kilpinen’s career as a Lied composer.

The musical trends of 1920s Central

Europe had a decisive effect on Kilpinen’s style, emboldening him to adopt a more radical idiom that at times was almost free-tonal. Paving the way for this bolder idiom were the settings of poems by **Ernst Josephson** (*Fantasi och verklighet*) and **Pär Lagerkvist** (*Reflexer*), in which his intellectual approach is increasingly succinct and animated. He reached the peak of his artistic powers in the settings of German poets, especially **Christian Morgenstern**, and it was here that his chamber music-like and at times sparse and ‘difficult’ Lied style was taken to extremes. The 75 *Morgenstern songs* are among the ones best known in the international arena. Some of the most popular at home in Finland are the *Songs of the Fells*, drawing on texts by the Lapp poet **V. E. Törmänen**. *The Kanteletar* op. 100 collection of 64 songs may be regarded as Kilpinen’s testament.

Like **Hugo Wolf**, Yrjö Kilpinen concentrated on producing portraits of selected poets rather than settings of individual poems. The result was an all-round perspective of the poet’s works. In this sense Kilpinen was, though by nature a miniaturist, a master of large-scale form. It is regrettable that his songs have to a great extent fallen into almost complete oblivion in the past few decades. The new Kilpinen collections are therefore all the more welcome, for he was, after all, one of the few masters of the Lied in Central Europe in the period before the Second World War. Another incentive to publish some of the major songs was the international singing competition held in Stuttgart in April 2001 with a repertoire built round the works of **Richard Strauss**, **Hans Pfitzner** and Yrjö Kilpinen.

**Einari Marvia** contributed about a hundred solo songs to the Finnish Lied tradition established by Yrjö Kilpinen but drew his musical influences more from his teacher, Erkki Melartin, than from Kilpinen. Marvia turned for inspiration to ancient Finnish folk poetry and the nature lyrics of Finnish poets. His songs are characterised by rich musical, melodic invention enhanced by colourful, distinctive harmonies. The texts are taken from a number of sources, which proves that he read widely and was familiar with poetry.

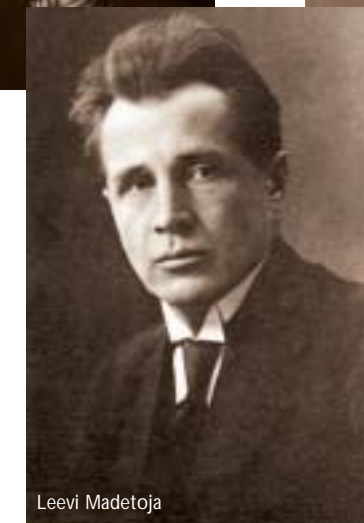
**Aarre Merikanto** was a second-generation composer and differed from many of his Finnish contemporaries who began with National Romanticism and later experimented with Impressionism and Expressionism. For Aarre Merikanto started out as a Modernist who sought to put as much distance as possible between himself and the folk-like idiom of his father, Oskar, and to follow the star of the 1920s Modernists further south in Europe. His early songs thus bear the stamp of Modernism but the fate of his opera *Juha* – the biting criticism it received and its rejection as being too difficult for the times – appears to have driven him back to a more traditional idiom.



Heino Kaski



Yrjö Kilpinen



Leevi Madetoja



Oskar Merikanto

Aarre Merikanto was nevertheless a composer of rare vitality regardless of his style.

The very latest project at Warner/Chappell Finland is the publication in two volumes of the major songs by **Einojuhani Rautavaara**, the best-known Finnish composer outside Finland. The Rautavaara vocal works have been inspired by poets both Finnish and foreign: the former headed by **Edith Södergran** and **Aaro Hellaakoski**, the latter by **Rainer Maria Rilke**. Rautavaara has also composed songs to texts of his own.

Like the works of Einojuhani Rautavaara in general, his songs are unusually broad and varied in scope, covering numerous styles from Neo-Classicism to varying degrees of dodecaphony, serialism and finally neo-tonality. The early *Three Sonnets of Shakespeare* (1953) and *Fünf Sonnetten an Orpheus* (1956) are clearly Neo-Classical, whereas the *Die Liebenden* song cycle represents dodecaphony, though not of the strictest variety. A man of numerous dimensions, Rautavaara often displays a mixture of the cosmopolitan and the man-in-the-street, and this is reflected in his songs. The Three Sonnets and Fünf Sonnetten thus represent the cosmopolitan Rautavaara, the *Sacred Feasts* (Pyhiä päiviä) cycle, for example, the more homeward-looking.

Volume I of the solo songs by Rautavaara contains items that have by now become classics, volume II songs of the past few decades – some of them extremely exacting both tonally and technically. There are also some arias and monologues from his operas *Aleksis Kivi* and *Thomas*. Volume II ends with four duets from four seasons to texts by four poets in four languages.

Scheduled for publication at the end of 2001 is a collection of solo songs by **Selim Palmgren** to mark the 50th anniversary of his death. Palmgren is looked upon as the first real Finnish piano composer and the father of the Finnish piano concerto. He also wrote a hundred or more solo songs and a large volume of choral music. The works for male choir are among the finest in this genre. Also appearing shortly is a collection of solo songs by **Taneli Kuusisto**, Finnish composer, pianist, musicologist and a great musical influence in his day.

*Matti Tuloisela*

*The author is Emeritus Professor in Singing from the Sibelius Academy.*