

# Back to the future – the modern world of Melartin's songs

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*The music and destiny of Erkki Melartin (1875–1937), a contemporary of Sibelius, have recently been topics of growing interest in Finland. Musicians and researchers have started questioning whether this prolific composer possibly got accidentally trampled underfoot by the modernism and aesthetics of the post-war era. His name is well known, but few can really say what sort of composer he was. Were the favourites with the big shots in the musical world allowed to shine while others were deliberately eclipsed? Was Melartin – a composer of weighty symphonies, symphonic poems, a violin concerto and four string quartets – later dismissed as a writer of little lyrical mood pieces simply because he was rumoured to have had homosexual leanings?*

A mere decade or so ago Erkki Melartin's name was practically never to be found on any concert programme or disc. The recent performances and recordings of his six symphonies, *Violin Concerto*, opera *Aino* and string quartets may thus be regarded as truly momentous. They allow professionals and audiences alike to form a personal picture of his music. This is also important in the sense that apart from the piano score of his opera *Aino*, his large-scale works still await publication.

The solo songs by Melartin have in some respects been more fortunate. Since almost all of them were published during his lifetime already, they have been available at least in music libraries and in some solo song collections. In honour of his 120th anniversary in the year 2000 Warner/Chappell published two volumes containing 60 of his solo songs in different styles composed between 1896 and 1931. The first volume concentrates largely on songs written to the very classical lyrics by the Finnish poets Runeberg, Leino and Koskenniemi, while the second reveals the variety of European poems that also inspired Melartin.

Choosing solo songs by Erkki Melartin requires some effort from singer and pianist alike. They may have to spend some time searching before they find

songs, styles and lyrics that speak to them. Melartin's solo song output is, indeed, extensive. He has about 60 solo song opuses – roughly four times as many as Sibelius or Madetoja.

A hundred years ago it was, of course, extremely difficult to make a living merely as a composer, and Melartin had to rely mainly on concerts of his own or publishing agreements on his works. Publishers preferred little pieces; this explains the large volume of vocal (and piano) music by Melartin. Sheet music was also a means of making a composer's name and works known in the days before the radio and the recording industry.

Erkki Melartin composed many of his songs with a particular singer in mind. Many of his friends were singers and commissioned new repertoire from him. So did some of the prominent singers of the day. In particular **Aino Ackté**, star of the Paris Opera and certainly the best-known Finnish opera diva a hundred years ago, held him in great esteem. It was she who suggested in 1914 that he should compose a great orchestral song (*Marjatta*) in the wake of Sibelius's *Luonnotar*. She gave, in addition, a recital in 1915 dedicated entirely to Melartin's works. Ackté appears to have sensed the profundity of his vocal music, its late-Ro-

mantic rhetoric and its at times ecstatic moods. This was possibly due to her skill, acquired in the course of her international career, at tackling his very modern idiom. She also made an exhaustive study of his post-Wagnerian opera *Aino* and sang the magnificent title role as early as 1909. Unfortunately her voice lost its beauty and her international career was cut short rather early. The music of Melartin did not therefore find in her a champion in foreign fields.

From today's point of view, Melartin's sound world may seem enigmatic to anyone looking primarily for more evergreens such as *Miriam's Songs*. True, these early songs set to poems by **Eino Leino** are among the most rewarding to perform. Their charm lies in their folk-like melodies and fresh idiom, added to which they are technically easy. *Miriam's Songs*, for example, were composed for a play called *Meiram* and allowed for the vocal ability of the actors of the time.

Songs such as these nevertheless account for a smaller proportion of his output, for Melartin's real ideals and aspirations lay elsewhere. In most cases it is necessary to shake off any preconceived ideas in order to get to the heart of the songs and to bring out their finest points. This may require considerable effort: the phrases need an outstanding breathing technique, the texture is sometimes quite chromatic, the music often avoids any clear sense of key, the words demand frequent changes of rhythm and metre, etc. Melartin was himself a pianist: hence the accompaniments likewise demand an impressive keyboard technique.

Capturing the content and mood of the poem was the composer's primary objective; the chamber music element of the songs is thus pronounced. The vocal line stands on a par with the text and the independent, technically difficult piano part. Whereas the Melartin of, say, the string quartets and symphonies is specifi-



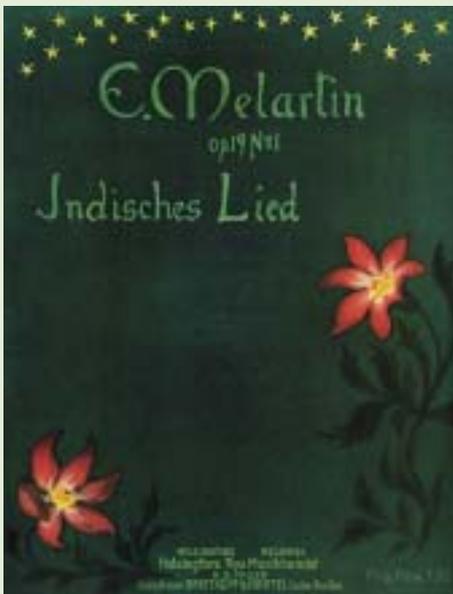
Erkki Melartin (Photo: Helsinki University Library)

cally a melodist, the Melartin of the songs was clearly concerned with something other than unaffected, catchy tunes. In his stage music, for example, he did indeed prove himself capable of impressive melody and the sensitive evocation of moods. He would undoubtedly have had great potential as a composer of film music, but unfortunately, his first and only attempt at this genre came to nothing: the German sound film *Pan* went bankrupt before it was finished.

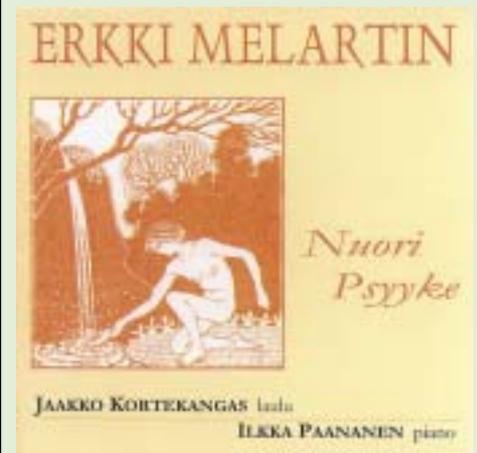
His choice of texts is proof that the bilingual Melartin had no difficulty entering into the mood of poems in either Swedish or Finnish. Contemporary literary trends found an echo in his music: the Neoromanticism of the turn of the century that fostered the debut collection of poetry by Eino Leino turned his thoughts to such distant subjects as the Bible, Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the myths that made up the national epic, the Kalevala. Melartin and his friends were passionately fond of literature; understandably, it was a natural consolation for him during his periods of serious illnesses and persistent insomnia. The topics of his lyrics ranged from *The Song of Solomon* to Sappho, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, the Kalevala, Italian, French and Danish poets, and finally, in 1913, to the Indian Nobel Prize winner **Rabindranath Tagore**. Possibly in order to distance himself from Sibelius, who tended to favour lyric poetry

in Swedish, Melartin was quick to note the contemporary young poets writing in Finnish. As with the debut collection by Leino, he was the first to seize on the poems of L. Onerva and Koskenniemi and showed an early interest in Otto Manninen and Larin-Kyösti.

The spontaneous emotional experience afforded by a poem, rather than the systematic study of a particular poet, appears to have provided the primary impetus for setting a text to music. During the first two decades of the 20th century Melartin adopted a more psychologising approach, analysing and expressing the message of a poem. Meanwhile, his scores became increasingly through-composed and experimental, in keeping with the ongoing international trends. Magnificent examples of this are the *Koskenniemi songs* op. 45, 46 & 47 and the *Tagore songs* op. 105. These may be regarded as the keys to Melartin's vocal output, unlocking the door on a world of song tinged with tragic longing and unfulfilled love. He himself reckoned that his contemporary audiences would be horrified at the modern idiom of his Koskenniemi songs. The fact that these enchanting songs were not performed in their entirety until nearly a century later, at the 2004 Helsinki Festival and on the initiative of opera singer **Jaakko Kortekangas**, says much about the height of the barriers that have to be surmounted on the Finnish musical scene. The splendid performance by Kortekangas, mezzo-soprano **Riikka Rantanen** and Lied pianists **Tuija Hakkila** and **Ilkka Paananen** aroused the hope that the cycle may very soon be recorded.



A man of many talents, Melartin painted the covers for many of his scores.



Melartin the song composer is an inspiring, rewarding theme for a treasure hunt in which the prize is music of heart-felt content and almost heart-breaking emotion. There are some maps to help the treasure seeker: the recently published solo song collections, a catalogue of Melartin's works by **Heikki Poroila**, and the *Nuori Psykhe* CD of songs performed by Jaakko Kortekangas and Ilkka Paananen. There are nowadays so many good professional and amateur singers that more and more seekers can put their hiking boots on and explore the invigorating musical landscape of Erkki Melartin. ■