

The Sibelius piano miniatures

The piano miniatures by Jean Sibelius are expressions of a momentary vision; captured in a miniature format are experiences nothing short of monumental.

“I know they have a certain future. I know this even though they are virtually forgotten at the moment,” said Sibelius himself of his works for the piano. His complaint that he had to compose some piano pieces to earn a living, and the irritation he reports in his diary at having to interrupt his work on his great symphonies because he is short of cash speak of the drive that characterises the artist. Or to put it another way: when faced with an external need to compose, he is a professional with a vast capacity for concentration and inspiration; a capacity for drawing on endless invention – and in an instant, in much the same way as a performing artist. Like the composers of the Baroque, Sibelius had all the skills at his command, including keen self-criticism and attention to detail. Some have compared the little pieces to shavings hewn by a master carpenter from a block of wood (meaning the great symphonic works), but this does not allow for the care and polishing which Sibelius lavished on them; nor does it do justice to the original ideas embodied in them.

Enchanted by piano playing

The custom of making music in the home, still common in Sibelius's day and one for which the smaller pieces were well suited, has been waning for a century now, and his miniatures have often been dismissed as mere “stop gaps” or “trifles”. By this logic, poems or short stories could be regarded as trifling compared with novels.

Sibelius's own instrument was the violin, but there are many indications that the piano meant a lot to him. As a young man he was enchanted again and again by the playing of his friend **Feruccio Busoni**. And one summer, when he was spending a few weeks by the sea, a local boatman said of his piano playing: “It's crazier even than his swimming. Because he only swims during the day, but he never stops playing night and day.”

The Sibelius works for solo piano comprise 21 opuses, most of them each with a number of pieces. Together they total 120 opus-numbered items and dozens more without a number. Sibelius composed for the piano from his school and college days

right through to his last opuses, and made piano transcriptions of many of his works for orchestra.

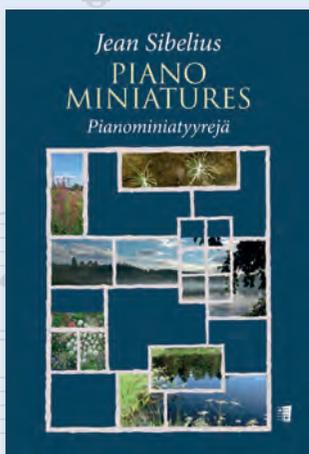
The colourful world of the piano miniatures speaks of a cultured composer, of a broad knowledge of music and a curiosity about the things in life. There are stories about his sensitive feel for mood and his ability to “enter into the part” even as a young man. He would go about “fantasizing” with his violin, playing what he experienced and saw in nature and in the life around him.

The piano miniatures by Jean Sibelius are expressions of a momentary vision; captured in a miniature format are experiences nothing short of monumental. Some have but a single core musical idea that no longer needs to be developed, to be turned into or made out of something; the idea and its incarnation in sound are one and the same.

Different styles and sources of inspiration

The piano works were inspired in different ways. Those of the early period show the influence of the national epic, the Kalevala, of Runeberg and other poets and to some extent the romantic Slav tradition, though this has sometimes been exaggerated. Sibelius composed virtually no “salon” pieces, and he was always more Nordic, solitary, stern and mythical than, say, Tchaikovsky.

Nor did he feel any affinity with the version of melody rooted in early German Romanticism and epitomised in Finland by such composers as **Oskar Merikanto**. The piano forms of his middle and late periods look to various eras and countries. Sibelius had a gift for adapting to different styles: he could compose in French pastoral vein, in court style, sometimes aphoristically, sometimes poetically, with echoes of folk music or whiffs of the Vienna of last century; of medieval instruments, ballet, runic poetry, commedia dell'arte, nature scenes, hu-



Fennica Gehrman has published the 24 most popular Sibelius piano miniatures in this new edition (See: New publications).



morous cameos and dramas. Among them are introvert reflections, outgoing pieces, glimpses of the world of children and his own childhood – always changing but always inherently Sibelian and defying generic classification.

In his essay on the piano works of Sibelius, **Glenn Gould** clearly identified the maestro's merits: Sibelius never wrote against the grain of the keyboard; he never made the piano compete with an orchestra; he favoured lean, contrapuntal thinking and created a piano idiom of his own with no recourse to Neoclassicism. Gould placed the best piano works on a par with the *Violin Concerto* and *Luonnotar* and saw in them a dignity and severity that shunned brilliance.

The piano music of Sibelius is resonant and colourful, heard with the ear of a sensitive composer – but unlike the keyboard style of others. It is not rooted in the tradition of Chopin or Schumann; it does not tie in with the Impressionism of Debussy or Ravel or with the Expressionism of his contemporaries; despite drawing from time to time on folk music, it cannot be compared to Bartók or Janáček. The expressive force and timbres of the Sibelian sound need seeking out. Sometimes the listener may catch an orchestral, “philharmonic” murmur and a panoply of harmonics that should not be allowed to cloud the contrapuntal clarity.

Eero Heinonen