

Jean Sibelius: Karelia Suite, Op. 11 (1893)

Karelia Suite, Op. 11, by Jean Sibelius (1865-1957) is drawn from a commission by the Viipuri Students' Association for a lottery to aid the education of the people of the Viipuri Province, and premiered in the Imperial Alexander University in Helsinki, Grand Duchy of Finland. The complete tableau music under the title "Karelia Music" was premiered on November 13, 1893 with Sibelius conducting, and the behavior of the audience was however far from ideal. The orchestra was hidden behind pillars, and many in attendance did not know there was music being played. As Sibelius noted later in a letter to his brother, Christian, "You couldn't hear a single note of the music — everyone was on their feet cheering and clapping."

Karelia Music was written in the beginning of Sibelius' compositional career, and the complete music consists of an Overture, 8 Tableaux (some with vocal soloists), and 2 Intermezzi. The music runs about 44 minutes, as opposed to the suite, which lasts about 12 minutes.

The rough-hewn character of the music was deliberate - the aesthetic intention was not to dazzle with technique but to capture the quality of "naive," folk-based authenticity. Music historians have noted the nationalistic character of the music.

The movements in the all-orchestral suite are all borrowed from the Karelia Music tableau music that Sibelius was commissioned to write in 1893. The suite is orchestrated for 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes (2nd doubling English horn), 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 French horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, tambourine, and strings.

On November 23, 1893, Sibelius conducted a popular concert that included the overture and the three movements that would become the Karelia Suite and Overture. These pieces were sold to Fazer in 1899, and the rest of the pieces that were yet to be printed, ended up in the hands of Breitkopf & Härtel in 1905. The Overture and Suite, at Sibelius' request, was published as Op. 10 & 11, respectively. It is this edition that is being played this evening.

The score to the tableau music was at some point left in the possession of Robert Kajanus, and in 1936, Robert's wife Ella, returned it back to Sibelius. It is thought that Sibelius burned his along with his eighth symphony along with most of the Karelia Music in August 1945. Only the 1st and 7th tableaux were spared from the fire. The viola, cello and double bass parts are also missing from the 1st and 7th tableaux, and the flutes are completely missing from the 7th tableau.

The suite is in three movements: the Intermezzo is the only "original" movement of the suite. Sibelius borrowed the brass theme in the middle of Tableau 3 and made it into its own movement. The Intermezzo is a jaunty Allegro march-like theme, the orchestra portraying the atmosphere of marching contingents. The Ballade was based on Tableau 4, and is "sung" by a bard (on English horn), reflecting the mood of a fifteenth-century Swedish king, Karl Knutsson, reminiscing in his castle while being entertained by a minstrel. Alla Marcia is an exhilarating march, which was originally incidental to Tableau 5½ and is practically the same as the original music, except for some minor chord changes. Completions of the original complete tableaux score were made by various Finnish composers in 1965 and 1997 and have been commercially recorded by Finnish orchestras. The melodies are very memorable, and in popular culture, the Suite was one of the 17 classical compositions used to create the title track of the 1981 *Hooked on Classics* project.

--notes adapted from Internet sources by Stephen Larmore