



Erkki Melartin's *Marjatta* for soprano and orchestra, op. 79

Erkki Melartin (1875–1937) considered himself primarily as a composer, although he also acted as a professional conductor, a professor of music theory and composition and, since 1911 held the post of director at the Helsinki Conservatory – later renamed as the Sibelius Academy – for a whole 25 years. In Melartin's large oeuvre, e.g. his symphonies and the opera *Aino* were significant works when considering their artistic importance. However, they were left in oblivion after the composer's death and during post-war Modernism.

Since Melartin's large-scale works were left unpublished during the composer's lifetime – apart from Symphony No. 6 –, there has been an unnecessarily high threshold to bring up or get acquainted to these works. In order to promote their performing and to help them become a living part of the music culture in Finland and abroad, the Erkki Melartin Society launched an editing and clean-copying project for Melartin's symphonies in 2006. Besides knowing the oeuvre of **Jean Sibelius**, the public of today should be given an equal possibility of hearing the more lyrical symphony music of Melartin, which has been more influenced by Finnish folk songs, the Finnish scenery, and the idyll of summer. The symphonic poem *Traumgesicht* (opus 70) from 1910 and the work at hand, *Marjatta*, op. 79 for soprano and orchestra from 1914, were also included as side tasks in the actual symphony editing project.

Erkki Melartin saw himself first and foremost as a symphonist. Between 1903 and 1925, he composed six symphonies which mainly lean on Austro-German symphonic tradition. At the time, their premieres were substantial, festive events that highlighted the importance of the fatherland, and these works were also performed abroad, e.g. in Stockholm, Copenhagen, Riga, Moscow and Berlin.

Before and after 1910, Melartin was at the peak of his creativity as a composer. For example, the opera *Aino*, the symphonic poems *Traumgesicht* and *Patria*, the *Violin Concerto* and the *Fourth Symphony* were written in the years between 1909 and 1913. The same artistic supply of significant work series also includes *Marjatta* from 1914. It was

referred to by the composer with the subtitle “the legend for soprano and orchestra (the 50th poem of Kalevala)” or sometimes “a legend of the Kalevala, for soprano and orchestra”.

In the summer of 1914, **Aino Ackté**, Finland's most internationally famous opera diva of that time, contacted Melartin in hope of receiving a new piece for her repertoire; a large orchestral song for domestic and international concert performances. Melartin immediately began looking for a suitable text. The autonomy of the Russian Grand Duchy of Finland was experiencing the second period of oppression during 1908–1914, which once again raised the Finns’ patriotic feelings to the surface. Therefore, Melartin definitely wanted his composition to elicit his own country's language and culture. Melartin justified his choice by saying the following: “One thing is certain: it will have to be Finnish. For now, as we are forced to be downtrodden and being ‘russianized’, it is in every way to be emphasized that we are Finnish, and that we have the Kalevala and corresponding works.”

A few weeks later, the composer had already finished drafting out *Marjatta*, whose subject he took from the final poem of the *Kalevala*, although considerably shortening it. In the legend of Marjatta, a young woman will be immaculately conceived after eating a lingonberry and thus gives birth to the future king of Karelia, the importer of Christianity. The composition process was, as was typical for Melartin, quite short. In mid-August, Melartin completed the orchestral score, less than a month and a half after starting to work on the piece.

The work was first performed by Ackté in November 1914 in Vyborg with piano accompaniment. The first performance of the orchestral version took place in January 1915 in Helsinki. In newspaper reviews the Karelian spring landscape description was seen as particularly well compatible with the quality of Melartin as a composer, and the work was recognized for its sophisticated tone colours, the apotheosis-like culmination at the end, and the translucent orchestration.

Immediately after the premiere, Ackté managed to get her own recital in the Stockholm Concert Association’s “extra solo concert” series in January 1915. The orchestra was conducted by 21-year-old **Nils Grevillius**, who had just been appointed conductor of the association in the previous year. The following occasion where *Marjatta* was performed was already in October 1915 in Helsinki. However, the next time did not take place until the 100th anniversary celebration of the *Kalevala* in 1935, and another following 50 years later, again at the *Kalevala* celebration in 1985.

When considering the specific compositional genres and not so much the style of composition, research has shown that Melartin was influenced by his colleague, Jean Sibelius, who was ten years his senior. It is probably not entirely a coincidence that Melartin used the term ‘legend’ in connection with *Marjatta*. The Sibelius’ *Lemminkäinen Suite* (op. 22), which was originally called *Lemminkäinen, the Four Legends* may have been a role model for Melartin’s choice of subtitle.

The name 'legend' may also be a gesture or hint that Melartin himself was familiar with both its versions in the late 1800s and was among the very few Finnish composers who knew *Lemminkäinen* entirely, before Sibelius withdrew two movements from public performance. By using this subtitle, Melartin possibly wanted to connect his piece to the tradition of Sibelius' works based on the *Kalevala*.

Additionally, the word 'legend' can certainly be connected to the topics of *Marjatta*: the *Kalevala* nevertheless depicts the arrival of Christianity and the way in which old beliefs moved aside to make way for it. In this sense, the word can also be associated with Christian legends.

It is also noteworthy that only half a year before writing *Marjatta*, Melartin had been listening to Sibelius's premiere of the tone poem *Luonnotar* (op. 70). The demanding task of the soloist had been fulfilled by Aino Ackté, to whom both Sibelius' tone poem and the soon afterwards written Melartin's *Marjatta* are dedicated. Even so, Melartin gave a personal, intrepid and broad-minded execution to his work's Kalevala-based theme, and he did this through a compositional style which was untypical for Finnish composers at that time.

In this piece, Melartin used some startlingly modern and forward-looking sonic effects. In particular, the static ostinato patterns in flutes, the harp, and the celesta create an impression of 'Waldrusch-type' forest sights, and the clarinet's cuckooing motive is sometimes marked rhythmically independent of the basic pulse. Also, the soprano part has places where the soloist is rhythmically independent of the orchestral accompaniment. Melartin also uses lots of divisions of the strings. As it is, the orchestration is very colourful.

In the spirit of the times, Melartin seems to have waived the vocal belcanto-like handling of the voice and shifted towards a declamative style in the same way as Schoenberg and Janáček did later. Although impressionistic features had occurred in Melartin's past works, in *Marjatta* this style feature is most vividly present in his music. It is an interesting observation that also Sibelius was interested in impressionism at that time.



In 2006 and 2008, The Finnish Cultural Foundation gave the Erkki Melartin Society a considerable grant for the engraving and editing of the composer's symphonies. Thanks to the Foundation's support, Melartin's symphonies No. 3, 4 and 5, and *Traumgesicht* have all been edited. The scores of these works and their prefaces can be browsed and downloaded on the society's website <http://erkkimelartin.fi>. The orchestral materials are available from the publisher Fennica Gehrman (www.fennicagehrman.fi). A lot of Melartin's autographs and drafts can be found at the digital asset management system Doria at www.doria.fi.

This edition is based on Melartin's autograph orchestral score located in the City Archives in Helsinki, and two piano-vocal scores belonging to Kalevala Society's collection in the Finnish National Library. The original orchestral parts are located at the Helsinki

Philharmonic Orchestra. Editor and Melartin Society Board Member **Jani Kyllönen** has been responsible for the engraving and editing of both *Marjatta*, the symphonies and *Traumgesicht*. From its very beginning, the project has been led by society chair, Melartin researcher, Dr. **Tuire Ranta-Meyer**. More information on this project is available on Melartin Society's website <http://erkkimelartin.fi>, or Mrs. Tuire Ranta-Meyer (+358 50 5262002 or tuire.ranta-meyer@metropolia.fi).

Helsinki, September 8, 2014

Tuire Ranta-Meyer

Jani Kyllönen