One hundred years ago in the small classical music circles of Finland, underhand dealings and power plays could have an unexpected impact on the career development of particular individuals. Recent research has shown that composer Erkki Melartin was one of the big names who fell prey to intrigue.

By **Tuire Ranta-Meyer**

Melartin, Sibelius and Kajanus:

Connections, conspiracies and collusion

Until the early 1910s, the position of **Jean Sibelius** and **Erkki Melartin** (1875–1937) as Finland's only symphonists was unchallenged by any other composer. The two gentlemen were on polite collegial terms from the first. Sibelius showed a courteous interest in his younger colleague's work in the corridors of the Music Institute, and Melartin became Sibelius's substitute and then his successor in teaching theory of music.

Sheltered and shadowed by Sibelius

Immediately after beginning his studies in autumn 1892, Melartin had an unparalleled opportunity to get to know the music of Sibelius. He heard the early Kalevala-inspired works before the composer withdrew them completely. He was a first-year student when he wrote to his father about the performance of *Kullervo* in 1893: 'I understood it better than I had imagined. I had heard people saying all possible and impossible things about it beforehand, so I thought it would be something so original and incomprehensible that it would be far beyond me to understand. But on the contrary, it made a most wonderful impression on me. The final movement in particular, *Kullervo's Death*, is quite excellently beautiful. I cannot see why people do not understand it.'

The young student observed Sibelius at work on the *Lemminkäinen Legends* in 1896: 'Sibelius has a concert on Monday. His great new *Lemminkäinen* suite will be performed. He says that he has never felt as inspired as when working on it. And certainly it is true that he has worked very hard and led an exemplary life.' No music had touched Melartin as profoundly as the *Lemminkäinen Suite*: 'I must say that I returned home in a joyous mood, full of gratitude towards Sibelius, so that I was in many ways quite a different person than before.'

Sibelius's influence on Melartin was also apparent in Melartin going to Vienna to study with the same teacher as Sibelius and seeking to ally himself with the German tradition just as Sibelius did. He followed his older colleague's choice of musical forms, writing symphonies, tone poems, orchestral suites, chamber music and music for the stage, pieces for male voice choir and orchestra, solo songs, and piano music. He never became

Erkki Melartin.

Daniel Nyblin / The Sibelius Museum

The Society of Finnish Composers

Robert Kajanus was one of the best-known and most controversial figures on the Finnish musical scene.

a Sibelius imitator stylistically, although he did have a Sibelian tool or two in his kit.

The building and reinforcing of the national identity was another field in which Melartin seemed to strive for the same goals with which Sibelius had achieved his greatest domestic victories. It was in Sibelius's wake that he wrote for instance the overture *Siikajoki*, which resembles the former's tone poem *Finlandia* in its programmatic content progressing from struggle to triumph and which concludes similarly with a lucid hymn. He had hopes that its patriotic and symbolic power would mark his breakthrough as a composer. Despite its enthusiastic reception by the audience, the work was never published, and it never entered the standard orchestral repertoire.

Unlike Sibelius, Melartin created a career as a conductor. He also demonstrated pedagogical and organizational skills in founding a music school in Viipuri (Vyborg) and holding the post of director and composition teacher at the Music Institute (today the Sibelius Academy) for 25 years.

Perceptive Sibelius

Melartin was extraordinarily industrious and disciplined in his composing. Sibelius noticed this, and on September 21, 1909 he wrote in his diary: 'Melartin! How I admire how he works. How to attain the principle of "nulla dies sine linea" [no day without a line]! And his technique!'

Melartin's personality also apparently prompted an intuitive reaction in Sibelius, which he recorded on December 15, 1909 in two short sentences, the only entry for that day: 'Melartin, the neuter, visited me today. A fine character.'

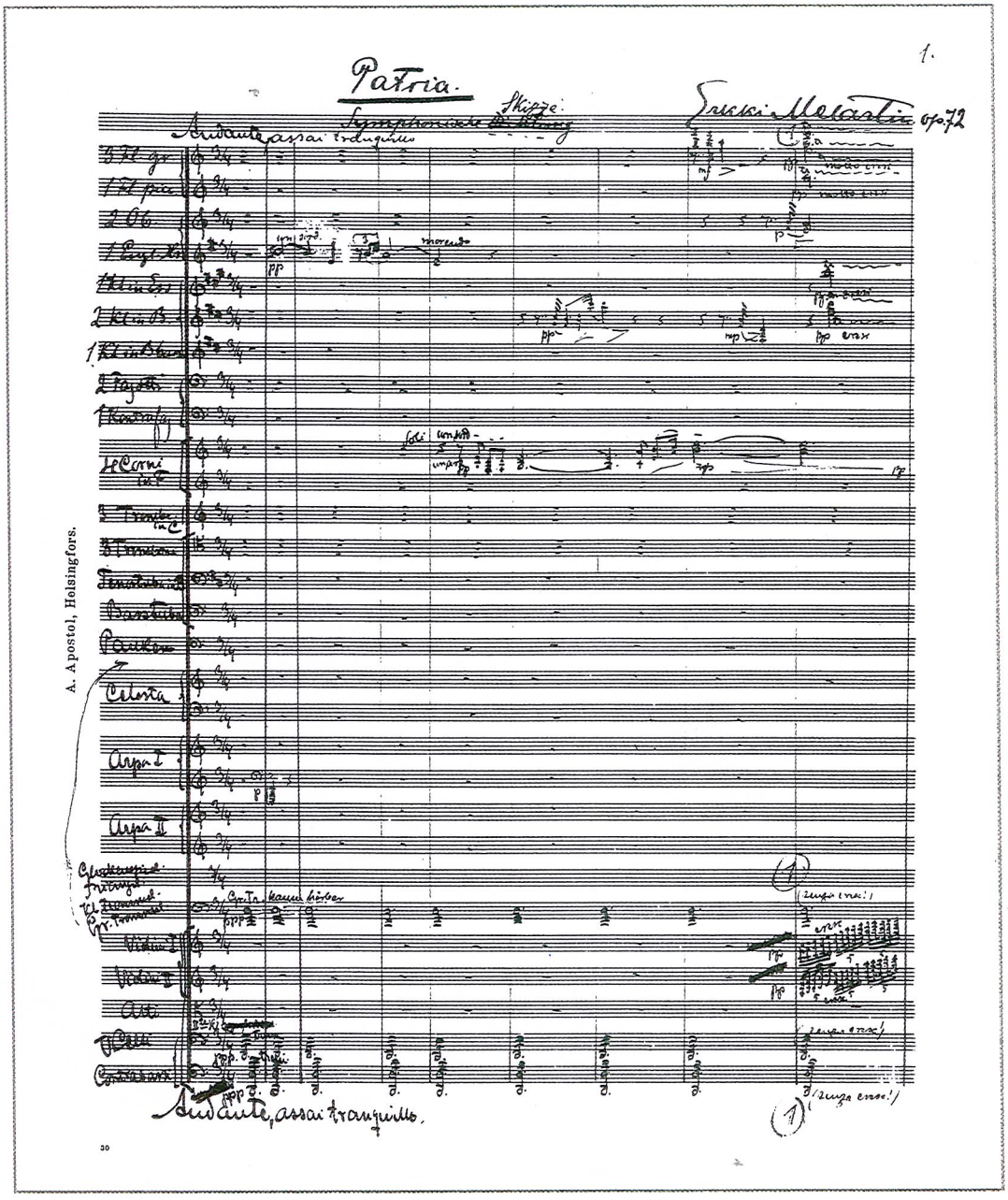
Sibelius was well connected with the arts world in central Europe and thus presumably well up to date with current cultural phenomena and art philosophy trends.

Reincarnation, migration of the soul, exploration of Christianity, seeking a higher level of consciousness and seeing love as compassion: these elements could be found in the world view of Mahler, for example.

The word *neuter* may have been chosen by Sibelius to describe Melartin's lack of attraction towards the opposite sex or his idealized striving for sublimation: in repressing passion and sexuality, he aimed to attain a level of spirituality and universal love from which he believed his artistic power to spring. (The German word *Neutrum* employed by Sibelius can be used figuratively and somewhat pejoratively to refer to someone who presents no erotic attraction [towards the opposite gender].)

Career prospects in a giant's shadow

Melartin expressed his admiration for his 'dear elder brother' Sibelius in his dedication of the piano work *Der traurige Garten* [The melancholy garden] to the latter in 1909: 'You must have realized deep down that I have for years now been a sincere and warm admirer of yours for all the beautiful things that you have made – and someone who understands you, insofar as one man can understand another.'



Patria Op. 72 for orchestra (1911) is a good example of Melartin's contribution to patriotic music.

Despite his aspirations, Melartin never attained anything like the status of his 'elder brother'. No publisher would touch his orchestral works, and European conductors would not perform his music. Although Sibelius was a rare talent and his music had merits in its own right which cannot be overlooked, it is nevertheless interesting to consider how the Finnish musical scene may have conspired to block Melartin's career.

Although the myth of being overshadowed by a mighty oak is sometimes dismissed as a fiction created by later writers, Melartin – exactly 10 years younger than Sibelius – did feel his disadvantage sharply at times. In 1930, he complained to the manager of the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra that his music was played very little; the manager answered: 'I can assure you, that after you said to me that you would like us to perform something by you, I have tried to do whatever

is in my power – but you know very well which way the wind is blowing in symphony concerts today.' And in 1935 the same man said: 'It is true (strictly between ourselves) that the name of Sibelius features prolifically in our programmes!'

Sibelius attained the status of a Finnish icon at an early date. He was cast into the role of a Hegelian superman, a hyperbole which caused Melartin to comment in 1908: 'What fun to see Sibelius worshiped like a pagan god.'

The forging of the national identity needed its ideals and historical great men whose birthdays were important national festivals in the early decades of the new republic. The 70th birthday celebrations of Sibelius were just such an occasion, and they inevitably overshadowed Melartin's 60th birthday in the same year, even though Melartin was known to be in poor health. Opera singer **Aino Ackté** reported in the year before how Melartin was already calmly talking about the moment when he would depart this world.

Champion and nemesis

Sibelius also had a tireless – and in some sense ruthless – champion in Finland: the authorized 'Sibelius conductor' **Robert Kajanus**, who was an expert member of the government's composition prize board and lobbied influentially for Sibelius. A letter from Melartin to his father in 1907 reveals a slight bitterness over that year's composition prize being engineered into Sibelius's hands, even though Sibelius had not had any new works to present by the application deadline in the spring and was thus not formally eligible for the prize at all. By 1910, some were ready to exclude Sibelius from the running altogether, but Kajanus was adamantly opposed to any such suggestion.

For all this, Sibelius and Kajanus remained aloof from one another. Kajanus used his political power in musical circles both openly and behind the scenes, and not always with the most straightforward of means. It was a grave disappointment for Sibelius when Kajanus was appointed to the post of music teacher at the University in 1897. Surprisingly, the harsh reviews which the *Lemminkäinen Suite* received later in the same year may have been penned by Kajanus! Melartin provides an interesting description:

'A great storm has arisen in our musical circles. Wild stories fly about, but I do not believe them. I believe what I know to be a fact: that the critics are set against Sibelius, as they all support Kajanus, and now that Sibelius has a concert next week, there is an intrigue going on to prevent him from getting an audience.'

Sibelius was probably right in assuming, years later, that Kajanus's inconsistent behaviour was due to his ambitions: 'As for Kajanus, he is fighting for his life. And for his place in the history books. That he is plotting to overshadow me is certain, even if he does not consciously realize it.'

Kajanus and Melartin

One of the results of research on Melartin is that it has yielded information on the relationship between him and Kajanus. Where Sibelius had the good fortune of having a champion who wielded enormous power in Finnish music – even if he lobbied his own interests fiercely at times – such a strong figure could equally well cause harm to those whom he envied, belittled or simply wanted to keep behind him in the race for a 'place in the history books'.

Melartin experienced a frosty attitude from Kajanus from an early date. For some 30 years, Kajanus was in a position to obstruct Melartin's career, and several available sources indicate that that was exactly what he did.

As early as in 1905, Melartin voiced criticism of Kajanus. For instance, he was very displeased with the performance of his first symphony that took place in that year. He felt that the performance conducted by Kajanus was nothing to write home about, having been so limp and colourless that it had been a pain to listen to.

Melartin was scarcely any more positive commending of Kajanus's conducting later. Comments such as 'fairly good', 'a bit grey' or 'quite colourless' were typical. Melartin, who had seen and heard figures such as **Gustav Mahler**, **Felix Mottl**, **Willem Mengelberg**, **Felix Weingartner**, **Alexander Siloti** and many other central European conductors, obviously valued **Georg Schnéevoigt** much higher among Finnish conductors than Kajanus.

As Kajanus was music teacher at the University in Helsinki, he also had a direct link to the academic youth of the day. There was a long tradition of students setting up whistling concerts or other disruptions to protest against a language faction or political party. Kajanus probably had the influence and the demagoguery to persuade students to support his interests. It is indicative that Melartin feared that any discord with Kajanus would lead to trouble, his music being ignored and disrupted in any number of ways.

Specifically, in 1907 Melartin was planning his third composition concert fully conscious of the fact that he might need to adjust his dates according to Sibelius's concert plans. Kajanus was quite intolerably awkward in setting a concert date, bringing up one excuse after another for not booking the orchestra. Melartin had been advised to meet Kajanus in person and, if that did not help, to complain to the orchestra board. Melartin, however, feared that a complaint would lead to open conflict with Kajanus and to cause himself grief, 'a boycott by him and his partisans regarding everything to do with my music, in other words a load of trouble'.

The notion of burning his bridges with Kajanus and thus slamming the doors of Finland's musical scene in his own face made Melartin seriously consider moving abroad as a future option.

Melartin was 19 years younger than Kajanus, and he was such a prolific composer that he may have prompted pure envy in his elder colleague. Not only had Melartin written three symphonies, three string quartets, music for the stage, an academic degree ceremony cantata and *Siikajoki* by 1909 – in that year he brought out his opera *Aino*, which may have seemed like a direct competitor to Kajanus's own tone poem of the same name, both portraying the eponymous female character in the *Kalevala*. Kajanus may also have felt threatened by his younger colleague's experience as conductor of the Viipuri Orchestra, and it is entirely possible that he saw no other option but to undermine Melartin's career.

Music and politics

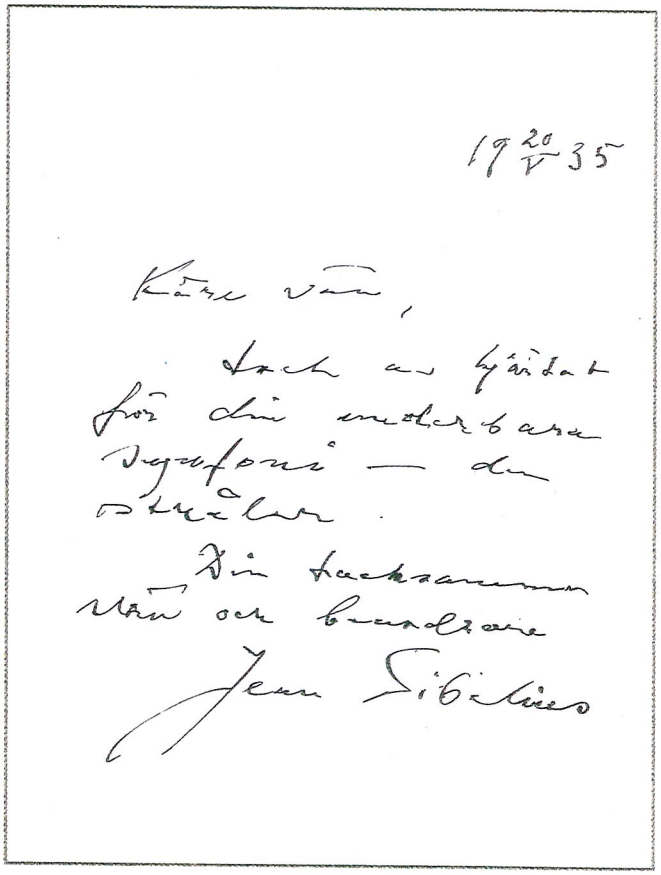
In the late 19th century, musical life in Helsinki was divided into two rival factions. On one side there was **Martin Wegelius**, founder and director of the Music Institute and Melartin's teacher; on the other side there was Kajanus, the leading orchestral musician in the city. Wegelius was a Swedish speaker and represented academic ideals in music study, whereas Kajanus was a Finnish speaker and favoured practical musicianship.

Melartin became director of the Music Institute in 1911. He continued the legacy of his mentor Wegelius and perhaps also assimilated a loyalty to Swedish-speaking musical circles, which provided important support for the institution. These factors, together with the somewhat troubled relations between Kajanus and Melartin, caused the latter to be virtually the only composer to take the Swedish-speaking side against Kajanus in the fight between two orchestras, the 'orchestra war' in Helsinki in 1912–1914. Kajanus could scarcely forgive or forget this, as the orchestra question was for him a 'struggle for life'. His reluctance to programme and conduct Melartin's works must have been partly due to this episode in music politics.

As late as in 1928, Melartin saw Kajanus, 72 years old at the time, as his nemesis. Aino Ackté appealed to Melartin on behalf of one of her pupils regarding a grant, and Melartin replied: 'Dear Aino, thank you for your kind letter. I can promise that I will do all I can for **Greta Carlson**, for I consider her a talent of the first order. But it will be an uphill struggle, since Kajanus is chairman of both committees and will spare no effort in silencing me and my wishes. But I relish the idea of a clash!'

Did Kajanus harbour a grudge against Melartin, or did their differences actually stem from language or music politics? Did Melartin's competence as a composer, his command of large forms, his prolific output and his experience as a conductor prompt jealousy in Kajanus, or did his music simply not inspire Kajanus alongside the classics and Sibelius? Did Kajanus regard the decent and idealistic Melartin as an oddball among the rather Bohemian artists of the day, or were the values of the two men simply too far removed from one another?

Kajanus was a controversial personality in his time, and while it is likely that the truth is a combination of all of the above factors, a satisfactory answer is impossible to find. What is undeniably true is that personal relationships seem to have had a great impact on the status of Erkki Melartin's orchestral music on the Finnish concert scene.



In a letter written in 1935 Sibelius thanked Melartin for the score of his sixth symphony.

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Translation: Jaakko Mäntyjärvi