

Väinö Raitio

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Väinö Raitio (b. Sortavala April 15, 1891 – d. Helsinki September 10, 1945) took piano lessons from Karl Ekman in Helsinki while still a schoolboy, and with his classmate and future pianist and composer Ilmari Hannikainen in his home town of Jyväskylä explored the main works of symphonic literature in four-hand piano transcriptions. From 1911 to 1915 he studied at the Helsinki Music Institute, where his teachers were Erkki Melartin and Erik Furuholm. His studies in Finland culminated in a concert of his works conducted by Robert Kajanus in 1916 that included among others the violin sonata, the piano concerto, and his *Runoelma (Poem)* for cello and orchestra. In 1922 Raitio also enrolled at the Helsinki Church Music College, graduating the subsequent year.

Following in the footsteps of Aarre Merikanto, Raitio spent the winter of 1916–1917 studying in Moscow, mostly counterpoint with A. Ilyinsky. Of greater significance was, however, the free ticket he managed to obtain for the orchestral concerts of Serge Koussevitzky favouring modern repertoire. The influence of Moscow can be discerned in the second and third concerts of his works held in Helsinki in 1920 and 1921 and featuring the string quartet, the piano quintet, the G minor symphony and the orchestral poems *Joutsenet (The Swans)*, *Nocturne* and *Fantasia estatica*. The symphony, the only one Raitio ever wrote, is still traditional in style, but the flowing quintet already reveals a new approach to tonality and timbre. *The Swans* and *Nocturne* display impressionistic trends, but the *Fantasia estatica* (1921) is clearly oriented more towards expressionism and marks the beginning of Raitio's dynamic 1920s period.

Raitio's new style was also inspired by his visit to Berlin in 1920, but nevertheless his main modernistic works date from the period before his third trip abroad, to Paris in 1925–1926. This trip was preceded by his luckless marriage to Enne Palmén in 1925. He then took a job as a music teacher in Viipuri. In 1931 he met his second wife, Hildur Pouru, a dentist, and returned next year to Helsinki, where he got married in 1933 and spent the rest of his life as a free composer. As a minor side-line he wrote music reviews for two magazines, *Aika* (1932–1933) and *Naamio* (1934–1939).

Like those of Aarre Merikanto, the orchestral works by Raitio written in the 1930s are more conventional in style. In his case, too, this was partly explained by the need to write something for the small Radio Orchestra then in its infancy, and by the jubilee celebrating the centenary of the Finnish national epic, the Kalevala, in 1935, to which he contributed a piece called *Lemminkäisen*

äiti (Lemminkäinen's Mother) based on a folk tune, and the tone poem *Neiet niemien nenissä (The Maids on the Headlands)* founded on a folk melody evocative of the bells of Konevitsa Monastery. But during this season Raitio in fact concentrated on works for the stage, where he unswervingly followed a path of his own. This period began in 1929 already with the lyrical two-act opera *Jeftan tytär (The Daughter of Jephtha)* and the colourful ballet *Vesipatsas (The Waterspout)*, and was rounded off with the full-length operas *Prinsessa Cecilia (Princess Cecilia, 1933)* and *Kaksi kuningatarta (The Two Queens, 1937–1940)*. Friedrich Ege wrote an expansive review full of praise for *Princess Cecilia* in the prestigious *Zeitschrift für Musik*:

"Dramatically, the text is constructed with the greatest skill and is theatrically impressive. The libretto of the opera is a real composer's dream. The characters truly come alive, they are made of our own flesh and blood. Life flows through the work, inspiring the composer to create music that enriches the modern opera repertoire. He has succeeded in travelling new roads, creating by new means, new sounds, harmonies and melodies that express the times. The composer's complete technical mastery is demonstrated again and again. The shimmering, colourful, versatile music leaps towards us. It has dramatic force, cogency and a harmonious style. Here, far away in the north, in a completely different Europe cut off from the rest of the world, it is possible, in a medium-sized town in a little country, to hear a European opera that is quite magnificent and highly modern in the best meaning of the word!"

Ege hoped that Raitio's opera would get a hearing abroad, and the papers had already announced that *Princess Cecilia* would be taking the stage in Lübeck when war intervened and the venture had to be cancelled. Because of the war, there were no foreign critics present when *The Two Queens* was performed in 1944.

In 1937, following on from *Princess Cecilia*, Raitio wrote a one-act chamber opera called *Lyydian kuningas (The King of Lydia)* that has only three roles. The work is based on a play by Eino Leino and suffers from its outmoded flowery language. In dramatic structure it also poses something of a problem, being too restricted for its theme. It was not performed until after Raitio's death. Ulf Söderblom conducted a concert performance of it at his last appearance as Chief Conductor of the Finnish National Opera in 1993.

Financially Raitio was able to devote his time to composition thanks to a government composer's stipend, various grants and his wife's income as a dentist. His financial straits have probably been somewhat exaggerated in the literature. The lack of understanding that was his lot is, however, one of the saddest chapters in the history of Finnish musical life. Many of his works were performed only once or were never heard at all during his lifetime. Even today, his major works still have not been published, with the exception of *The Swans*. An attempt to rectify this sorry state of affairs is, however, now being made by the Väinö Raitio Society founded in 1991. His works were

hardly available on record until the CD with Jukka-Pekka Saraste conducting radically improved the situation in 1992. This record contains the *Fantasia poetica*, *Fantasia estatica*, *The Swans*, *The Waterspout* and *Antigone* and prompted the critic Veijo Murtomäki to write, “it rewrites Finland’s musical history”.

In style *The Swans* is still bound to the Romantic tradition, and it got a good reception. Toivo Haapanen wrote of it, “*The Swans* deserves to be placed immediately among the most splendid works in Finnish music. It is a harmonious symphonic poem rich in feeling and of beautiful proportions in which the orchestra is handled with complete modern mastery.” By contrast, a concert in 1922 featuring the three-movement tone poem *Antigone* for large orchestra was felt to be too modern and marked something of a turning point in Raitio’s career. According to Ilmari Krohn, its style was “for many people not accustomed to it sheer torture to listen to”, and he called it “cacophonous”.

The dynamic works written by Raitio in the 1920s further include *Kuutamo Jupiterissa* (*Moonlight on Jupiter*) dedicated to his dead cat, the *Fantasia poetica*, a sister work to the *Fantasia estatica*, and *Puistokuja* (*The Avenue*) for soprano and orchestra (Elina Vaara) not performed at the time. *Pyramidi* (*The Pyramid*, 1924–1925) for choir and orchestra suffered from the amateur text by Väinö Siikaniemi.

Providing a precise definition of Raitio’s style of the twenties has proved something of a problem. The composer himself was in the habit of saying that “music is colour”, which is possibly why his name is associated with impressionism. Sulho Ranta, however, already pointed out that Raitio did not admit to being “greatly influenced by contemporary French music”, and stressed the “masculine, northern” nature of his music. Einojuhani Rautavaara once wrote of *Antigone* that it created “a strange impression of music that is ‘colourful’ only in quotation marks, as if no musically adequate guise can be found for the information the composer seeks to impart, presuming such a guise exists even. There seems to be a sort of ethical-dramatic streak, rugged, direct, masculine, fighting against the colourism.” Be that as it may, there is no denying that timbre was for Raitio, unlike for Finnish composers in general, a focal element of music, which is why the orchestra was a natural means of expression for him. The importance of timbre is also apparent in his piano works: *Neljä värirunoelmaa* (*Four Colour Poems*, c. 1921) is a major impressionistic landmark in Finnish piano literature. But generally speaking, Raitio can be said to have created an independent, expressionist style all of his own in the works of the 1920s, for which it is difficult to point to any German or Russian models any more than to French.

Raitio’s stylistic attitude also reflected the introversion and withdrawal typical of him. As a person he remains an enigmatic figure. The only document of any length throwing light on his life and works is the survey he wrote a few months before his death for a book en-titled Finnish Com-

posers edited by Ranta. We can, furthermore, only guess at why he concentrated on opera in his later period. In view of Merikanto's *Juha* alone, which was considered too modern to be performed, he must have been aware that modern operas would be even more difficult to get performed than orchestral works. Nor was Raitio a born dramatist, and nor did melody feature very large in his music; this is reflected in the vocally unrewarding recitative-like writing in his operas. In this respect Raitio's operas can be regarded as more in the nature of extended poems for voice and orchestra, with the orchestra occupying the dominant role.

New features are added to the portrait of Raitio the composer by his ballet *The Waterspout* and *Le ballet grotesque*, the rhythmic drive and pungent orchestrations of which contain neoclassical elements that point to Uuno Klami or Stravinsky. The pronounced rhythmic energy of *The Waterspout* is in complete contrast to the lyrical calm of its sister work, *The Daughter of Jephtah*. Väinö Rautavaara once said of Aarre Merikanto, "He was not really opposed, he was silenced." A similar fate to a great extent befell two other leading Finnish modernists, Ernest Pingoud and Väinö Raitio. Merikanto, Pingoud and Raitio had plans for a joint concert of their works in 1924, but nothing came of them. The infrequent performances of their works in the 1920s were not sufficient to create a living tradition, and their music was denied the fruitful influence it could have exerted in its day, not only on Finnish musical life but on their own works as well. By the time their works were taken up at a later date, they had already lost their historical context. The radical twenties in Finnish music were thus denied a proper reception, being an isolated phenomenon to which the radicalism of the late fifties and early sixties did not constitute an organic continuum. Interest in the "Finnish" modernism of the 1920s was not in fact aroused until the "international" modernism of the 1960s was past its peak. And not until the 1990s can we speak of a "Raitio renaissance".