



# **Jean Sibelius: Patriotic Son of Finland and Masonic Recluse**

by Sir Knight Peter H. Johnson, Jr., P.G.C. of Arizona

The blare of the brass defiantly symbolizes Finland's wish to be free from the oppression of the Czar. The quiet hymn tune evokes thoughts of the pine forests and clear waters of the Nordic landscape. The final heroic statement anticipates the victory of liberty over despotism. Originally titled "Finland Forever," Jean Sibelius' 1899 tone poem, "Finlandia," became the definitive statement of the Finnish national spirit. The immense popularity of this work made its composer, Jean Sibelius, a patriotic icon of his beloved native land and a world-class composer considered by many to be a modern-day Beethoven. "Finlandia," like most of Sibelius' compositions, has a brooding quality revealing the composer to be a man of noble thoughts tinged with a pronounced dark side that would follow him throughout the nine decades of his long life.

Johan Julius Christian Sibelius was born on December 8, 1865, in Hameenlinna in the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland. Sibelius' father was a physician of Swedish and German descent, who died of cholera when "Jahn" was a young man. The family spoke the Swedish language as was very typical for the times. Jahn did not learn his native tongue until he began attending a Finnish school at age eight. By this time the boy was also showing promise in music and could play the piano and the violin. Young Sibelius also learned about the ancient Nordic legends at school. These old tales would later be the inspiration of his earliest masterpieces.

As a young adult, Sibelius briefly studied law before returning to musical studies at the Helsinki Conservatory. His inclination towards composition prompted further

study in Berlin and Vienna. Although Sibelius studied with the most prominent teachers of the day, heavy drinking and lavish spending marred his personal life.

Now going by the name of Jean Sibelius, the composer married Aino Jarnefelt in 1892. Their union produced five daughters and was a stabilizing influence on Sibelius' sometimes-erratic behavior. Sibelius' tone poem "Kullervo," based on a Finnish legend, had already premiered the previous year with great acclaim. Jean Sibelius, only in his mid-twenties, was now Finland's greatest composer.



Sibelius at his desk

Greater success followed in 1899 with the premier of the highly nationalistic "Finlandia" as the Russian yoke grew tighter over Finland. The composition was banned but continued to be performed under the false title, "Impromptu."

Although Sibelius was awarded a government pension for his patriotic efforts, the new century found him often binge drinking in the barrooms of Helsinki. Through the urging of his wife, the Sibelius family moved to the country in 1904. Their new home was called "Villa Ainola." The home was charming but quite rustic. There was no electricity, and the house was heated by wood burning stoves. Sibelius loved the woods, the snow-laden winters, and especially the birds. He also drank less and was more inspired to compose away from the distractions of the city.

This tranquil period was short lived as a tumor was discovered in Sibelius' throat in 1908. This was not Sibelius' first health concern. He had experienced a hearing loss around 1902, but this had improved. The tumor proved benign but required twelve surgeries. This brush with mortality prompted Sibelius to give up cigars and alcohol for about seven years. His compositions seemed to grow more melancholy and introverted as a result of his suffering. In 1914 Sibelius traveled in the United States conducting his new work, "The Oceanides." He was also presented with an Honorary Doctorate at Yale University. Sibelius' symphonic compositions now seemed detached from his earlier nationalistic-romantic period and were thought to be "pure music." Sibelius' music was now held in high regard throughout the English speaking world despite his poor acceptance in the Germanic countries.

After centuries of domination by outside powers, Finland finally became an independent nation as a result of the Communist Revolution in Russia in 1917. Violence followed as the "Reds," the Russian supporters, battled the "Whites," the supporters of a German style state. After 108 days of fighting, 30,000 Finnish citizens were killed as the "Whites" persevered. After nearly a one-hundred-year

hiatus, Freemasonry returned to Finland in 1918 as Finnish Masons petitioned the Grand Lodge of New York for a new lodge in Helsinki. The petition was granted, and Grand Master Arthur S. Tompkins visited Finland and conferred all three degrees of Blue Lodge Masonry on a class of 27 distinguished Finnish citizens including Jean Sibelius on August 18, 1922, in the old Parliament house. This led to the formation of Suomi Lodge No. 1, Sibelius' home lodge. The great musician was also made Grand Organist and held the position for many years. Sibelius is known to have improvised music for the various degrees and ritual work. This led Sibelius to compose a series of nine vocal and instrumental pieces for Masonic ritual work in 1927. The music was virtually unnoticed until an autographed manuscript of the work was presented to the Grand Lodge of New York from the Grand Lodge of Finland in 1935 in token of "friendship and brotherly love." The work was premiered on September 30, 1935, in the American Lodge of Research. The Grand Lodge of New York presented Sibelius with its Distinguished Service Award that same year. Sibelius expanded the Masonic music in 1950 with three additional pieces and a setting of the beloved "Finlandia Hymn" with Masonic words. It was Sibelius' wish that the Masonic music be used exclusively for Masonic purposes only.

Sibelius ranks with Mozart as one of the few world-class composers of Masonic ritual music. It is ironic that Sibelius' deep interest in Freemasonry also corresponds to his withdrawal from public life and a virtual lack of interest in composing for the remaining thirty years of his life. He produced a few piano pieces and some arrangements. After composing seven great symphonies, he is believed to have destroyed the manuscript of his eighth symphony some time in the mid-1940s. It is speculated that modern musical trends alarmed the old master and also that his drinking had again become a problem.

Sibelius' music continued to gain in acceptance throughout the world as he and his wife withdrew to his home in the Northern forest. His 70th, 80th, and 90th birthdays were marked with great celebrations including concerts, presidential proclamations, and even the issuance of a Sibelius postage stamp.

Despite his immoderate life style, Sibelius remained active in his seclusion. He read current events and listened to news and music on the radio. Great musicians frequently paid calls, but he was not particularly interested in discussing his music. He also continued to enjoy the natural delights of the beautiful, sylvan landscape.



On October 18, 1957, the now frail master took his usual walk and noticed a flock of cranes flying over his home. Then he uttered, "There they An elderly Sibelius come, the birds of my youth." Two days later Jean Sibelius died of a cerebral hemorrhage at nearly 92 years of age. He was buried at his home as thousands of his countrymen mourned and lit candles in their windows. It is odd that a musician, not a politician or a military leader, would become the most famous patriot of his native land. Jean Sibelius was a complex man and an artist of the first rank. He is now remembered as the "aristocrat of the symphonists," and although he came from a small country, the universal quality of his music makes Jean Sibelius a true citizen of the world.

There are numerous Internet sources concerning Sibelius including "Virtual Finland-Finlandia" and "Jean Sibelius and other Finnish Composers" by Brother Simo E. W. Laine. Sibelius' Masonic life is well chronicled in Denslow's 10,000 Famous Freemasons.

Peter H. Johnson, Jr., KYGCH, P.G.C. of Arizona, is currently serving as Grand Organist of the Grand Commandery of Arizona. He teaches all music classes at Indian Wells Elementary School on the Navajo reservation in northern Arizona. He is also music director of the United Methodist Church in Holbrook, Arizona, and plays tenor sax in the Whitemountain Big Band. Sir Knight Johnson resides at 1524 Smith Drive, Holbrook, Arizona 86025

---

Published 080514 Updated: August 12, 2014

[Top](#)