

Armas Järnefelt

– an all-round Romantic

Next year will mark Armas Järnefelt's 150th anniversary of birth. Järnefelt was definitely one of the most exciting and most original Finnish composers of the Romantic era. Not until the present century has the richness of his music been truly appreciated.

Armas Järnefelt (1869–1958) was born into a patriotic, arts-loving family. His close connection with **Jean Sibelius** was reflected in his own compositions in National-Romantic vein. Järnefelt studied with **Martin Wegelius** at the Helsinki Music Institute in the late 1880s, and composition in Berlin and Paris in the early years of the following decade, combining national elements with his Late-Romantic idiom. The music of **Richard Wagner**, in particular, became a major model for him.

In 1893, Järnefelt married **Maikki Pakarinen**, a soprano, and through her opera career he soon got a chance to conduct opera in Germany. This paved the way for the role of conductor that would later dominate his career. His interest in Wagner was also visible here, and he would in time conduct almost all the Wagner operas.

Not until the present century has the richness of Armas Järnefelt's music been truly appreciated. In this respect, he resembles **Erkki Melartin**, at one time familiar to concert audiences mainly only for his solemn march for the play *The Sleeping Beauty*; for the name Järnefelt is most often associated with his beautiful *Berceuse* for violin and small orchestra, in its various arrangements. Astonishingly little attention has been paid to his other works. There are, perhaps, two reasons for this, as he pointed out in a radio interview he made in old age: one was that, like many of his Finnish composer contemporaries, he was overshadowed by the internationally famous Jean Sibelius, and the other was his focus on conducting.

Stylistic diversity

The orchestral works of Armas Järnefelt are both original and bold. The instrumental parts are often demanding, especially in the quick passages, and he often arrived at some interesting formal solutions. The most distinctive feature of his music is, however, its stylistic diversity, including the influence of Sibelius and Finnish folk music, and of German, French, Russian and other Romanticism. He wrote relatively few works, but they cover genres ranging from solo songs to stage music and from cantatas to utility music, and it

was he who composed the earliest Finnish film score, for *Laulu tulipunaaisesta kukasta* (The Song of the Crimson Flower, dir. Mauritz Stiller) premiered in 1919.

Järnefelt composed his six-movement *Serenade* in 1893 while studying in Paris as a pupil of **Jules Massenet**. It was first performed in Helsinki in the spring of that year. Some claim they can detect French influences, and the second and third movements in particular call **Gabriel Fauré** to mind. The special feature of this *Serenade* is its many eloquent solos. It is a surprisingly mature piece and reckoned to be one of Järnefelt's most interesting multi-movement works.

Influences of Central Europe

The Symphonic Fantasy (1895) is a romantic synthesis, astoundingly expressive and original. Its National-Romantic ethos is especially marked in the lyrical passages, but the full Romantic trends of Central Europe are also very much in evidence. While studying in Berlin, Järnefelt had been introduced to the very latest ideas on orchestration. The influence of Strauss and Wagner can be sensed in the textures, forms and timbres. The aesthetic world of the *Symphonic Fantasy*, modern for its times and avoiding clear formal schemes was too much for con-



temporary Helsinki concert audiences and the critics had not a good word to say for it. This must have been a great blow for Järnefelt, as he let the work be forgotten.

The Suite in E flat (1897) consists of five orchestral character pieces representing a variety of styles in Järnefelt's customary manner. By the time he wrote it, he had been working in Germany for some time, and this can be heard in the Suite. The Finnish national elements have mainly been replaced by, for example, hints of beautiful German folk *Ländler*, and the movements vary in style from Wagnerian to Romantic Russian.

Possibly the best-known orchestral work by Järnefelt is the symphonic poem *Korsholma* (1894), which, like the *Symphonic Fantasy*, has National-Romantic passages and, among other things, allusions to Finnish folk tunes. The influence of Wagner is audible in the second half, and the piece ends with an imposing quotation from the hymn *Ein feste Burg*.

Armas Järnefelt was definitely one of the most exciting and most original Finnish composers of the Romantic era, and his first-class works deserve a more frequent hearing.

Pasi Lyytikäinen



Footnote

In honour of the jubilee year, Fennica Gehrman is publishing previously unpublished works by Järnefelt. One of these is *Miranda*, the incidental music to the fairytale play by Topelius (1901). The Lahti Conservatory and Lahti Youth Theatre will be performing it on 1–2 February.