



Finnish Music Quarterly

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Finnish Music Quarterly

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How Finnish classical music and musicians made it in America

By Brian Wise

In the summer of 1998, Americans watched the U.S. House of Representatives debate a proposal to eliminate all national arts funding - contentious issue that was wrapped up in the "controversial" art such funding supported as well as questions over the very idea of federal funding of the arts. Meanwhile, news reports began to tell how the government of Finland had an advanced system of supporting music through its school curriculum.

As if to reinforce that point, Finnish composers, vocalists, instrumentalists and conductors seemed to be everywhere that year. New York alone was the setting of a "Northern Lights" festival at Lincoln Center, a "Scandinavia Today" festival at the Juilliard School and a conductors' workshop at Carnegie Hall presented by the Sibelius Academy of Helsinki.

Finnish music rode a wave of popularity that swelled in the next three or four years as the news media continued to pick up on the story. One New York Times article in 1998 proclaimed that conductors were the country's "hottest export," more than Nokia phones or Finlandia vodka.

In 2005 the Music Critics Association of North America and Columbia University's National Arts Journalism Program conducted a survey of 150 classical music critics that further bolstered the notion that the media interest in Finnish music continues to grow. When critics were asked to name the epicenter of classical music today 11% mentioned Great Britain, 9% said "Germany or Berlin" and 5% cited Scandinavia (and Finland in particular). When a list was created for contemporary composers whose appeal appears to be rising, both **Einojuhani Rautavaara** and **Kajja Saariaho** were among those cited. According to the study's authors, this suggests that given exposure over time, Rautavaara and Saariaho "may very well take their place among the best-liked composers of the current era."

Americanized Finnish musicians

Since the initial excitement, Finnish musicians have not lost their foothold in the U.S., of course, but they are becoming more ingrained in American musical life.

Conductor and composer **Esa-Pekka Salonen** has acknowledged that his recent works like *Wing on Wing* and *LA Variations* owe less to European modernism and more to the sunny sensibility of his adopted Los Angeles. In 2006, the annual *Musical America* directory named Salonen its artist of the year. A year earlier, that same honor went to **Karita Mattila**, a soprano whose reputation largely rests on her performances of Strauss and Wagner.

Osmo Vänskä, who was *Musical America's* 2005 conductor of the year, has been especially embraced by the American critics and audiences, not just for his work on behalf of Kalevi Aho and Sibelius but also his Beethoven symphony cycle on the BIS label. When he became the music director of the Minnesota Orchestra in 2004, he refrained from conducting any Sibelius during his first season. "The whole question is about the music and not about the nationality," he says.

The machinery working

If Finnish musicians are highly adaptable and global in their outlook, their success here is partly the result of a highly developed promotional machinery. "To get a presence in the U.S. there has to be a vital music information center, publishers and

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record companies all working in tandem," says **Frank Oteri**, editor of NewMusicBox.org, the Web magazine of the American Music Center. "The German Music Information Centre doesn't have the structure that the Finns have. The Swedes and Norwegians have music information centers that are as hard working as the Finns, and all of those countries have interesting composers. But they don't have as many artists who are spreading the repertoire."

Reijo Kiilunen, managing director of Ondine Records, believes that American success is the result of the combined efforts by major international talent agencies, management companies and labels. "We are in the machinery of the United States," he said. Kiilunen noted that Ondine, which releases between 20 and 25 albums per year in the U.S., has benefited from generous American press coverage. The label's 1996 recording of Rautavaara's *Angel of Light* was a particular breakout, the result of an active marketing campaign.

But despite these successes, American audiences tend to prefer only the more accessible strains in Finnish music. "It's not easy to get performances of living composers from Europe," says **Steven Swartz**, a spokesman for Boosey & Hawkes, which represents Rautavaara and **Magnus Lindberg** in the U.S. "Some Finnish composers are very difficult. In Europe, orchestras have more flexibility in terms of looser union requirements that allow for more rehearsal time."

Aside from a few high-profile premieres scheduled this season - including a Piano Concerto by Salonen for the New York Philharmonic and a new work by Saariaho for the Boston Symphony's 125th anniversary - the U.S. lags behind many European countries and Japan in the number of Finnish premieres.

A kindred spirit and a role model

Yet considered another way, top-level orchestras here often present the second, third or fourth performances of works that get their premieres in Europe. In addition, Finnish composers have moved from being the "pet projects" of Finnish conductors and are frequently embraced by many non-Finnish musicians.

There also may be a deeper reason behind the continuing popularity of Finnish music in the United States. Finland, like the U.S., is a latecomer to the classical-music scene. Both countries were once colonized and have since used our music to express matters of national identity. To Americans, Finland is a kindred spirit but also a role model. We ask ourselves: "If we Americans are so rich and so smart, why can't we value music and the arts as well as the Finns do?"

One is reminded of comments by Howard Hanson, an American composer, conductor and educator who was active in the mid-20th century and who was astounded by the status of Sibelius in Finland: Hanson found it noteworthy that "for at least once in history a composer became one of the most important figures of a nation, as important as journalists and generals. To Americans who regard music as peripheral and extracurricular, this must seem incredible."

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