

THE PIANO WORKS OF SELIM PALMGREN - DEFINING A TRADITION

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Tradition: *tradere* - to transmit, to hand over

- a belief or behavior passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past (Green 1997)

- traditions are transmitted through time, both in direct interaction or independently by collecting and processing (historical) information

- *Tradition can be presented as a context in which to study the work of a specific composer or as a part of a wide-ranging historical perspective (Gloag, Beard 2005)*

We can identify and speak of several well-known European pianistic traditions; such as the French, Viennese, Spanish, Italian, Polish, Hungarian, English or German pianistic tradition...

...but defining a Finnish pianistic tradition is a work in progress



Recently, the process of understanding our pianistic heritage is speeding up:

- *Martin Wegelius' conducting role in the early decades of Finnish pianistic education* (M. Rahkonen 2000)

- symposia on the history of Finnish pianistic culture, 2014-

Recent research themes, for example :

- early pianistic culture in Finland (18th and 19th century)
- piano composers: Melartin, I. Hannikainen, Klami
- Finnish concert life and performing pianists
- history of pianistic education and international training

Musical (pianistic) tradition is important: at its best, it supports, nourishes and protects developing young musicians, both aesthetically and in practice, allowing the pianistic abilities to be trained and perfected to a high level. Even letting go of certain traditions is only possible when one is fully aware of them.



Palmgren composed a most extensive Finnish repertoire for the piano, written between 1885-1950. His musical language is broad; it reaches from early national romanticism through late romantic, impressionist and mild modernist influences towards an improvisatory expression. Palmgren created an original musical language, and a unique, identifiable pianistic writing.

Palmgren's writing for the piano is physically speaking ideal, it is both virtuosic and lyrical, and his expression is genuine; singing, with a certain human warmth in it. His scale of expression is complete as it reaches from mellow, intimate elegy all the way to orchestral, explosive grand effects.

AIM OF STUDY

Recognizing Palmgren as a major piano composer

Understanding the different elements in Palmgren's piano music, defining them and considering their value and meaning *in performance and for studying*

...as experienced by a pianist and a pedagogue (=me)

Experiencing and understanding the musical and pianistic traditions which Palmgren himself was a part of, and which he further developed through his works

Identifying the compositional phases and the development of Palmgren's musical language and texture

METHODS

- Qualitative inquiry with a striving for conceptualization of the various qualities evident in Palmgren's music and in its performance. I will consider the value and meaning of these elements for artistic and pedagogic practice.
- I will also examine how Palmgren's works and their pianistic tradition may improve or deepen artistic and pedagogic practice of the present day.
 - Phenomenological analysis and the hermeneutic circle will allow me to collect, reflect and re-evaluate my observations. They also provide me with the necessary objectivity and critical reflection.
 - As research tools, I will use performer's analysis, embodied knowledge, historically informed performance and intertextuality.

THE THEMES

THE EVOLUTION
OF FINNISH PIANISTIC
CULTURE (1 concert)

THE GRAND ROMANTIC
PIANO TRADITION (1 concert)

PALMGREN (2 concerts)

TRANSFORMATION
OF TRADITION (1 concert)

THE EVOLUTION OF FINNISH PIANISTIC CULTURE



Martin Wegelius (1846-1906) "Ukko W"

- created the Helsinki Music Institute (later SibA)
- successfully arranged talented pianists to work in Helsinki: several students of Liszt, F. Busoni
- striving for high-quality, systematic pianistic training, piano pedagogy as a subject since 1892 (I. Hymander)
- the piano professors in Helsinki during Wegelius' time and after him were students of Moscheles, Reinecke, Joseffy, Leschetizky, Grünfeld, Scharwenka, Siloti, Teichmüller, Reisenauer, Cortot and Krause, among others
- the concert life in Helsinki was highly vivid and international (Lappalainen 1994)

- Afterwards pianistic tradition carried on in Finnish hands; the first person entitled to the senior professorship in Helsinki was Karl Ekman, one of Palmgren's teachers

PALMGREN 1 & 2

One of Palmgren's missions: to create *Finnish piano music representative of European concert standard* (on his letter to Kajanus)
= striving to create high-quality Finnish piano music and a tradition which did not exist at the time

A portrait of Palmgren -

The 24 Preludes (1907) is the largest solo piano work by Palmgren. It marks the beginning of Palmgren's maturity as a composer. In the Preludes, all the different characters and elements in Palmgren's musical language can be found.

The Recital

Palmgren was an actively performing musician, earning his living both from composing and from giving concerts. I will present his compositions and reflect them with works by other major piano composers of Palmgren's time. This will allow me to position Palmgren in relation to the simultaneous musical development in Europe.

THE GRAND ROMANTIC PIANO TRADITION

Palmgren was an admirer of Schumann since childhood. In addition to Schumann, his study and concert repertoire included works by Chopin and Liszt. Brahms' pianistic style Palmgren considered to be rather difficult to master. (Korhonen 2009)

Chopin, Liszt, Brahms and Schumann created a central repertoire for the piano, which has held its position up to the present. This tradition served also as a base on which the generations after, including Palmgren, built their own musical language and pianistic expression.

I am provided with the indispensable instrumental, expressive and aesthetic backgrounds, on which I can further analyze and process the works by Palmgren.

TRANSFORMATION OF TRADITION

In the 1920's, modernist tendencies can be seen in Finnish art, music and literature. At the same time, there is a new language evolving in Palmgren's works. He was influenced by jazz during his years in Rochester, New York. This can be seen as new harmonic liberty and flexibility of form, even improvisatory writing.

This suggests that Palmgren was actually able to express himself in various musical styles. In addition to Palmgren, there is a big number of Finnish contemporaries in the early modern generation of composers. I will present some of their work in the concert for reflection.

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