



Jean Sibelius (December 8, 1865 – September 20, 1957), was a Finnish composer and violinist of the late Romantic and early-modern periods. He is widely recognized as his country's greatest composer and is often credited with having helped Finland to develop a national identity during its struggle for independence from Russia through his music. His most famous musical compositions include his seven symphonies (an extended musical composition in Western classical music, most often written by composers for orchestra) and thirteen tone poems (a piece of orchestral music, usually in a single continuous movement, which illustrates or evokes the content of a poem, short story, novel, painting, or landscape).

In January of 1899, Sibelius started creating his First Symphony at a time when his patriotic feelings were being enhanced by the Russian emperor Nicholas II's attempt to restrict the powers of the Grand Duchy of Finland. The symphony premiered in Helsinki on April 26, 1899 and was well received by all. Also premiering on the program was the even more compelling, blatantly patriotic *Song of the Athenians* for boys' and men's choirs. The song immediately brought Sibelius the status of a national hero. Another patriotic work followed on November 4th of the same year in the form of eight tone poems depicting episodes from Finnish history known as the *Press Celebration Music*. It had been written in support of the staff of the *Päivälehti* newspaper, which had been suspended for a period after editorially criticizing Russian rule. The last tone poem, *Finland Awakens*, was particularly popular and after minor revisions, it became Sibelius's most well-known composition, *Finlandia*.

Finlandia, Op. 26, was written in 1899 and revised in 1900 and as previously mentioned, composed for the Press Celebrations of 1899, a covert protest against increasing censorship from the Russian Empire and was the last of seven pieces depicting episodes from Finnish history. After minor revisions, the official premiere was on July 2, 1900 in Helsinki with the Helsinki Philharmonic Society conducted by Robert Kajanus. A typical performance takes between 7.5 and 9 minutes depending on how it is performed.

In order to avoid Russian censorship, *Finlandia* had to be performed under alternative names at several musical concerts — famous examples of alternative names include *Happy Feelings at the awakening of Finnish Spring* and *A Scandinavian Choral March*.

Most of the piece is taken up with rousing and turbulent music, symbolizing the national struggle of the Finnish people. Towards the end, a calm comes over the orchestra, and the serene and melodic *Finlandia Hymn* is heard. Often incorrectly cited as a traditional folk melody, the Hymn section is of Sibelius' own creation. Although he initially composed it for orchestra, in 1900 Sibelius arranged the work for solo piano.

Sibelius later reworked the *Finlandia Hymn* into a stand-alone piece. This hymn, with words written in 1941 by Veikko Antero Koskenniemi, is one of the most important national songs of Finland. Today, during modern performances of the full-length *Finlandia*, a choir is sometimes included, singing the Finnish lyrics with the hymn section.