The Nation of Sibelius – Sibelius and the Construction of the Finnish National Identity Abroad in the Early Decades of Finnish Independence

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Promoting Finland Abroad

After gaining its independence in 1917, Finland began establishing contacts with other countries and to make itself known internationally. Finland wanted to portray itself as a solid, independent Western state and an internally unified nation. Culture played an important role in the construction of the country’s image. As the evening newspaper Iltalehti observed in 1927, Finland had to make itself known abroad for more reasons than that we ‘run fast and make good butter and excellent pulp.’ According to the paper, Finland also had great theatre, first-class music and vibrant literature and art.¹

From the start, the task of promoting Finland internationally fell to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, established in 1918, and Finnish diplomatic missions played an important role in this. The visibility of the country, the dissemination of information about and events associated with Finland were constant topics in the press summaries, reports and reviews supplied by Finnish embassies to the ministry, as well as in news wires sent to Finnish papers.²

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¹ Järjestelmä tarpeen. Iltalehti 26 February 1927.
² Information on the promotion of Finland can be found in the archives of the Foreign Ministry as well as Finnish diplomatic missions. The former contain a section dedicated to this matter. Historians Pekka Lähteenkorva and Jussi Pekkarinen discuss the matter in Ikuisen poudan maa. Virallinen Suomi-kuva 1918–1945 (2004) specifically based on archive material and from the perspective of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. However, the section on Sibelius is rather short in the book. The sequel, Idän etuvartio? Suomi-kuva 1945–1981, was published in 2008 (Helsinki: WSOY).
Jean Sibelius in his tree root chair in the border area of the Ainola grounds, 1940–1945, Järvenpää.

Photo: Santeri Leivas, The Finnish Museum of Photography
Aside from the authorities, many institutions, societies and private individuals contributed to the cultural exports of Finland. In this essay, I discuss the ways in which Jean Sibelius and his music were used in official promotion during the first decades after Finnish independence. I will focus on the activities of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Finnish diplomatic missions, particularly in relation to two topics: Sibelius’s 70th birthday celebrations in 1935, and Sibelius and the construction of the image of Finland in Italy.

The Image of Finland

According to Tomi Mäkelä, a scholar on the public image of Sibelius, the composer already became a kind of emblem of Finnish identity in the early 20th century, and his use as an icon of ‘Finnishness’ has continued ever since. When Finland gained its independence in 1917, Sibelius already enjoyed a special status domestically, and himself had already realised this in the early 1920s. Sibelius was turned into an institutionalised national icon, as Glenda Dawn Goss describes it, or into an idol who was the product of the collective national spirit.

Sibelius’s position in the drive to enhance Finland’s visibility is also noted by Elina Melgin, who has researched the use of art and culture in promoting Finland’s national image. Discussion of the official image of Finland, Jussi Pekkarinen writes that, after the propaganda of the 1920s and 1930s, on the eve of the Second World War, the image of Finland abroad can be described roughly as resting on three pillars: the settlement of national debt to the United States, the achievements of the long-distance runner Paavo Nurmi in the 1920s, and the music of Sibelius. Later, the Winter War became the fourth factor.

The fact that awareness of Finland was based on just a handful of elements was noted as early as the 1930s. Eero Järnefelt, the head of the press division at the Foreign Ministry, noted in 1930 that the achievements of Finnish culture were not sufficiently visible in the United States, with the exception of sports and the music of Sibelius. The same state of affairs was noted in a broader context by J. K. Paasikivi in 1939, when he was the Finnish ambassador in Stockholm.

A report drawn up by the Foreign Ministry in 1934 on Finnish cultural propaganda – at the time, the word ‘propaganda’ was also used to denote work to promote the national image – lists the ways in which Finland and Finnish culture were promoted abroad. The first item on the list is music; others include art exhibitions, films, literature, lectureships on Finnish language, Finnish cultural offices abroad, talks on Finland, radio and press articles. The same

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3 In this essay, I do not discuss Sibelius’s own relations abroad, his own views of his role in the promotion of Finland, or the issue of the possible ‘Finnishness’ of Sibelius’s music.
4 Mäkelä 2007, 135–36.
7 Donner & Similä 1982, 34.
9 Pekkarinen 2004, 397.
10 Lähteenkorva 2004, 365. The same factors remained important in the promotion of the image of Finland as a land of culture in America in the 1930s and during the Second World War. See Lähteenkorva 2004, 374, 387. Ministry for Foreign Affairs civil servant Eero Järnefelt was the nephew of artist Eero Järnefelt and later served as Finnish ambassador to Washington in the 1930s.
12 On art exhibitions in the promotion of Finland, see Paloposki 2012.
methods were used from the very beginning. For instance, Finland was publicised in a film entitled *Suomi kutsuu* (Finland Calling), directed by Heikki Aho and Björn Soldan in 1932 on commission from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Over the years, several versions of the movie were made, and it was screened in countless countries. Naturally, the musical accompaniment to the silent feature consisted of compositions by Sibelius.

According to the ministry report from 1934, it was thanks to Sibelius that Finnish music was so extensively known and appreciated throughout Europe. Music could therefore be considered the best vehicle for Finnish cultural propaganda. Every year, the government subsidised concerts by famous Finnish composers, choirs and orchestras that were held abroad, and diplomatic missions disseminated sheet music of Finnish compositions, occasionally even entire concert programmes. Gramophone records, too, were sometimes provided for film screenings and public lectures. The contribution of music and art had been emphasised before, and in 1921 a bill was presented in Parliament proposing an appropriation in the State budget for the marketing of Finnish art and music abroad.

The World Bows Before the Master?

Despite these efforts, the promotion of Finland in the early decades after independence was not particularly systematic nor, necessarily, very well thought out. When Finland celebrated the 20th anniversary of its independence in December 1937, planning of the festivities began very late, and the Foreign Ministry had no extra funding for its missions. Although Sibelius’s music featured on the programme of many 20th-anniversary festivities, the composer had no clearly assigned role in official publicity. The fact that Sibelius's birthday was close to the Finnish independence day was sometimes exploited in various contexts.

The problems of official promotion were apparent to the missions that were involved in the practical side of things. T. H. Heikkilä, secretary of the Finnish Embassy in Berlin, complained in December 1940 about the poor situation regarding Finnish publicity efforts in Germany. Texts intended for the German press sent to the embassy were not written with sufficient care, and the praises of Finland tended to be sung with exaggeration and pathos. Heikkilä gave an example which actually involved Sibelius. A text received by the embassy for dissemination claimed that ‘the entire world bows respectfully before this master composer.’ The line between a factual yet positively slanted text, and exaggerated and unconvincing praise was a fine one indeed, and there are other examples of writing teetering on that line.

Sibelius himself was generally not involved in such propaganda efforts, except for arranged visits by foreign journalists and other international guests, and a few letters of acknowledgement he was asked to write. In the 1930s and 1940s, guests of importance for Finnish foreign policy were always taken to Ainola, and such visits obviously tended to highlight Sibelius’s role as a representative of Finland.

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14 See, e.g., C–a., Vi och utlandet. *Dagens Press* 3 September 1921; Suomen tunnetuksitekeminen. *Uusi Suomi* 4 September 1921.
15 For more about the film, see, e.g., Kippola & Sedergren 2003; Lähteenkorva 407–11; Melgin 2014, 72.
17 Kulttuuripropagandamme ulkomailla. *Helsingin Sanomat*, 20 September 1927.
18 Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) to Finnish diplomatic missions, circular no. 47, Helsinki 2 November 1937. Fb 66 C: 17. AMFA.
19 See Fb 66 C: 17–18. AMFA.
20 Finnish embassy in Berlin to MFA, Berlin, 3 December 1940. Fb 19 G: 69. MFA. Another failure was a text that had described areas ceded to the Soviet Union after the Winter War as a ‘promised land of witches and sorcerers’.
Jean Sibelius’s 70th birthday on 8 December 1935 was a great opportunity to enlist the composer’s help in promoting the nation. The anniversary festivities are visible in many ways in the activities of the Foreign Ministry as well as its missions. The national epic, Kalevala, was celebrated in the same year, which gave Finland another major instrument for cultural exports. The year was in fact styled as a ‘jubilee of Finnish folk poetry and music.’ Some observers have noted a change in Sibelius’s national status in a more institutional direction, particularly in the 1930s.

In an effort to create visibility for Sibelius’s birthday, Finnish missions passed on Sibelius-related information, articles and photographs to local national press representatives. The embassy in Budapest reported that most Hungarian papers had published the stories that were sent to them, and nearly all illustrated periodicals had carried pictures of the composer.

According to Hungarian papers, features were found in Sibelius’s music that pointed to ‘racial affinity between Finland and Hungary.’ At the time, Finno-Ugrian ideology was still quite vigorous in both Hungary and Finland.

To celebrate the jubilee, an article by Sulho Ranta was translated into French – ‘Le 70e anniversaire du compositeur finlandais Jean Sibelius’ – and sent to the missions for general distribution, including the media. The article praised the composer, and it was translated...
The programme of Jean Sibelius’s 70th birthday gala concert.

Archive of the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Ainur Nasretdin

into ‘tens of languages’ and published in many European quality papers and also outside of Europe,28 including, among others, the first issue of Cathay Cosmopolitan in Shanghai.29

The radio was also harnessed for these efforts. The Finnish Broadcasting Company offered, partly through the diplomatic missions, to broadcast the Sibelius birthday celebrations that were to be held in Helsinki on 8 December to all public service radio broadcasters abroad. The programme of the jubilee concert was printed in three languages,30 and the composer and his wife attended the event held in what was then the Exhibition Hall in Helsinki. In early November 1935, the jubilee broadcast had been

28 See Sibelius website, online publication.
29 Consulate General of Finland in Shanghai to MFA, Shanghai, 16 January 1936. Fb 46 Q: 57. AMFA.
30 Invitation and programme of Jean Sibelius’s 70th birthday gala concert. Fb 46 Q: 57. AMFA.

The commissioned tribute verses, one in Finnish by L. Onerva, the other in Swedish by Bertel Gripenberg, were printed on the invitation.
included in radio programming by Norway, Czechoslovakia and, preliminarily, the National Broadcasting Company in the United States.\(^{31}\) It was also hoped that the BBC would broadcast the programme or part of it.\(^{32}\)

The Times in London called Sibelius the most famous citizen of Finland. According to the paper, music had succeeded in building a bridge across the linguistic and material gap that separated the isolated, faraway Finland from the powerful nations of Europe.\(^{33}\) Sibelius had visited Great Britain on five occasions, and was a popular and appreciated composer there.\(^{34}\) The first ever Sibelius record was recorded in London in 1930. It, too, formed part of the official propaganda for Finland and Sibelius: the Finnish Government gave a grant of 50,000 marks for the production of the record.\(^{35}\)

In addition to celebrations broadcast by Finnish national radio, Sibelius’s music was also heard on the radio in other countries. In Hungary, Helge Virkkunen performed Sibelius’s songs on the radio on 5 December 1935, and on the day of the jubilee, The Swan of Tuonela and Valse triste were broadcast, as well as a short talk on the composer.\(^{36}\) With help from the local radio station at no cost, the mission in Buenos Aires organised a one-hour-long programme that included a speech in Spanish by the Finnish ambassador, and appraisals of Sibelius’s music by the radio station’s representative; the musical part included Finlandia, The Swan of Tuonela, Voces Intimae and the last movement of the Sixth Symphony. Music by Sibelius was also played by the radio orchestra in the afternoon broadcast on the same day.\(^{37}\) Talks were part of the Sibelius and Finland propaganda over the years.\(^{38}\) On the composer’s birthday, Istanbul radio broadcast Sibelius’s music, and the local Journal d’Orient ran a story about him.\(^{39}\)

The Finnish missions also reported on tribute concerts. A concert at the Royal Opera in Budapest featured the Second Symphony and Finlandia, with the Finnish ambassador and his wife in attendance as guests.\(^{40}\) In Vienna, En Saga was performed at a concert conducted by Arturo Toscanini.\(^{41}\)

Celebrations from Europe to Asia and Africa

Celebrations of the composer’s 70th birthday in Germany were systematic and officially governed. The Germans themselves were active, wanting to attract special official attention to the jubilee. In National Socialist Germany, Sibelius was popular. His Nordic origin and his music both made him particularly fitting to German cultural policy.\(^{42}\) The festivities were organised by the Nordische Gesellschaft, which appointed the pianist Herman Hoppe as coordinator. Hoppe visited the Finnish ambassador in mid-October 1935 to inform him about

\(^{31}\) Finnish Broadcasting Company to MFA, Helsinki, 15 November 1935. Fb 46 Q: 57. AMFA.
\(^{32}\) The broadcast of the concert in London was the subject of much correspondence, to which the embassy also contributed. The radio broadcast never materialised. See documents on the broadcast of the concert to Great Britain. Fb 46 Q: 57. AMFA.
\(^{33}\) Vahtola 2008, 135. The birthday message was published in The Times on 7 December 1935.
\(^{34}\) On the trips to Britain by the Sibeliuses and their reception there, see Vahtola 2008.
\(^{35}\) Tawaststjerna 1988, 344–45; Vahtola 2008, 121. The record contains the First and the Second Symphony and Finlandia. London musicians are conducted on Sibelius’s recommendation by Robert Kajanus.
\(^{36}\) Finnish embassy in Budapest to MFA, Budapest, 11 December 1935. Fb 46 Q: 57. AMFA.
\(^{37}\) Finnish embassy in Buenos Aires to MFA, Buenos Aires, 12 December 1935. Fb 46 Q: 57. AMFA. The ambassador at the time was Eino Wälikangas.
\(^{38}\) In Budapest, counsellor Nyyssönen gave a talk on Sibelius in December 1935. Finnish embassy in Budapest to MFA, Budapest, 11 December 1935. Fb 46 Q: 57. AMFA.
\(^{39}\) The information was passed on to Finland by the Finnish embassy in Budapest. Finnish embassy in Budapest to MFA, Budapest, 17 December 1935. Fb 46 Q: 57. AMFA.
\(^{40}\) Finnish embassy in Budapest to MFA, Budapest, 11 December 1935. Fb 46 Q: 57. AMFA.
\(^{41}\) Finnish embassy in Vienna to MFA, Vienna, 20 November 1935. Fb 46 Q: 57. AMFA. A Sibelius concert was also held in Copenhagen. Finnish embassy in Copenhagen to MFA, Copenhagen, 3 December 1935. Fb 46 Q: 57. AMFA. A copy of the letter was sent to the Finnish Broadcasting Company and to the Finnish news service STT on 5 December 1935.
\(^{42}\) Vihtinen 2001, 94.
Emil Halonen. Bust of Jean Sibelius, 1933, plaster, ht. 56cm
Ainola Foundation
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen
the preparations. The Nordische Gesellschaft had sent a circular to nearly 60 of the most prominent orchestra leaders and to 600 musical societies, advising them to commemorate the day and to include Sibelius in their programme. Several concerts had already been planned. Instructions and material had also been sent to the press.43

After the birthday, the embassy reported to the Foreign Ministry that numerous events and functions associated with Sibelius had been organised in cooperation with Finnish consulates, the Nordische Gesellschaft and N. S. Kulturgemeinde. They had been a success for Finland and Sibelius alike, and the embassy noted with satisfaction that awareness of Sibelius had been raised efficiently and successfully among the German public.44 Sibelius himself had visited Germany several times, and he even studied in Berlin in his youth. The destination of his last trip abroad, in 1931, was Germany.45

Ville Niskanen, the Finnish consul in Shanghai, saw Sibelius’s birthday as an excellent and rare opportunity to make Finnish civilisation and culture known on a more general level in faraway China. It was exceedingly important for all ‘propaganda work,’ because in remote countries ideas about Finland were scant and even ‘odd.’ There was also a commercial aspect in Shanghai: trade relations would be facilitated if the other party had a positive idea of development and cultural conditions in Finland. The consul therefore noted that the press could, in conjunction with Sibelius’s birthday, be offered not only articles about the ‘maestro’ himself, but of the general situation regarding music as well. The articles should include as much general information and observations of Finnish culture and life as possible. Pictures for the papers would also be welcome. The articles should arrive in Shanghai well in advance, because they had to be edited for local readers and translated into three languages.46 The target audience included both the foreign and Chinese communities in Shanghai.

The consulate general had also wanted to take advantage of the other cultural landmark, the Kalevala centenary at the beginning of the year. There was not sufficient interest in the subject in Shanghai, however, and festivities had been considerably smaller than the consul had hoped.47

The consul actively contributed to plans for the orchestra of the international expatriate community to play a special Sibelius programme. In early October, the director of the orchestra, conductor Mario Paci48 was supplied with the score of the second and fourth symphonies ordered from Finland through the Foreign Ministry. Owing to the conductor’s many engagements and late completion of the score, the concert never took place, but Paci had promised to conduct the symphonies later at other concerts of the orchestra. The consul acted swiftly, however, and instead of the cancelled concert he managed to organise a Sibelius radio show broadcast by the French radio station in Shanghai on the evening of the composer’s birthday. According to the consul, the show had a wide audience, also among the international consular services in Shanghai. The consul mentioned that the French radio station was the largest in the city and had superior music programming. He also noted with satisfaction that the leading daily papers in Shanghai dedicated much attention to the anniversary of the ‘maestro.’ He sent clippings of all the longer articles to the Foreign Ministry in Finland.49 Photographs of Sibelius published by the papers illustrate the image that Finland wanted to project of the composer internationally. The Sibelius festivities were also extended

43 Finnish embassy in Berlin to the MFA, Berlin, 15 October 1935. Fb 46 Q: 57. AMFA.
44 Finnish embassy in Berlin to the MFA, Berlin, 10 December 1935. Fb 46 Q: 57. AMFA.
46 Consulate General of Finland in Shanghai to MFA, Shanghai, 19 July 1935. Fb 46 Q: 57. AMFA. Shanghai was at the time an independent and international city and an important commercial centre.
48 The official name of the orchestra at the time was the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra. It had been founded as early as 1914, but was reorganised by the Italian pianist Mario Paci (1878–1946) after he was appointed its conductor in 1919. He directed the orchestra until 1942. See Ovidi 2010, online publication.
49 Consulate General of Finland in Shanghai to MFA, Shanghai, 14 December 1935. Fb 46 Q: 57. AMFA.
to other countries, including Egypt, where the honorary consul of Finland successfully organised an event in Alexandria.\(^{50}\)

Jean Sibelius was aware of the celebrations around the world, as the Ministry for Foreign Affairs sent him copies of the missions’ reports and communications, and he also received press clippings.\(^{51}\) Sibelius’s later birthdays were also exploited in Finnish national propaganda, as attested to by archival materials in the Foreign Ministry.

On the occasion of his 70th birthday, Sibelius was awarded the Gold Medal of the British Royal Philharmonic Society, the highest accolade of the society for a representative of music. The Finnish embassy sent word of the medal to the Foreign Ministry, which in turn informed Sibelius. The medal was accepted on the composer’s behalf by G. A. Gripenberg, the Finnish ambassador to London, at a concert held by the Royal Philharmonic Society in early November 1935.\(^{52}\) Sibelius was also awarded the Goethe medal by Adolf Hitler, and the Nordische Gesellschaft sent an amber seal to Jean and Aino Sibelius through the embassy.\(^{53}\)

Sometimes the attention lavished on Sibelius abroad could take on comical overtones. The Finnish embassy in Budapest informed Finland about plans to install a memorial plaque on the wall of the house where Sibelius had stayed in Budapest. The composer replied to the Ministry that he was aware of the plans, but also remarked that he had never been to Budapest.\(^{55}\)

### Sibelius and the Image of Finland in Italy

**Giovanni Sibelius in Rome in 1923**\(^{56}\)

Jean Sibelius had a special relationship with Italy, which he visited on five occasions. Two of the trips took place after Finnish independence, in 1923 and 1926. During the latter trip, Sibelius worked on *Tapiola* in Rome and took a holiday in Capri with his friend Walter von Konow.\(^{57}\) In 1923, Jean and Aino Sibelius took a trip together, which in Italy extended to Rome and Capri. In Rome, Sibelius conducted his own works at the Mausoleum of Augustus, which at the time served as a concert hall under the name Augusteo. According to Erik Tawaststjerna, the idea for a concert conducted by Sibelius was first presented by Herman Gummerus, the first Finnish ambassador to Rome and an old friend of the composer.\(^{58}\) However, as early as August 1921, embassy employee Liisi Karttunen wrote to Jean Sibelius that a member of the board of Regia Accademia Santa Cecilia, the body responsible for organising concerts in Augusteo, had contacted her and expressed a wish to present
The organisers of Sibelius’s conducting visit to Rome in 1923 included the Finnish Embassy in Rome and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Telegram from the mission to the ministry regarding the concert, 27 February 1923.

Archive of the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Ainur Nasretdin

concerts of Finnish music there, and to get Sibelius to conduct his own works. The idea of a conducting visit to Rome may therefore have come about even without the ambassador’s contribution. In 1923, plans for the concert were put forward at the invitation of the same famous Regia Accademia, but it proved to be difficult to find a date that would suit both


60 The academy was founded as early as 1585. Its current name is Accademia Nazionale Santa Cecilia. The Accademia held its concerts in the Augusteo from 1908 to 1936.
parties. At one point, the embassy actually remarked that it would be unsatisfactory for Finland if the concert were to be cancelled altogether.61

Ultimately the concert in Rome was held on 18 March. The programme included the Second Symphony, which Sibelius had composed in part in Italy in 1901, Finlandia, Pelléas and Mélisande Suite Op. 46 and Lemminkäinen’s Return.62 The conducting visit would subsequently always be mentioned in connection with Italy and Sibelius. After the visit, Sibelius was bestowed the title of Commendatore dell’Ordine della Corona d’Italia.63

As honorary member No. 23 of Accademia Santa Cecilia, Sibelius was well-known in cultural circles in Rome. He was also a guest of honour at receptions held by ambassador Gummerus and his wife during the visit.64 Sibelius’s presence therefore also benefited the Finnish mission’s work. Dinners and other occasions at foreign missions were standard practice in conjunction with visits by notables. In Sibelius’s case, this can also be seen in his last visit to Great Britain in 1921.65

The Italian press gave Sibelius broad coverage during his visit. He was interviewed, and the concert was reviewed extensively, although the reviews were not particularly positive. According to Erik Tawaststjerna, the interest of the press was due to Herman Gummerus’s excellent press contacts.66 However, much of it was probably due to the efforts of Liisi Karttunen, a clerk in the Finnish embassy, but whose work also included many duties as a cultural attaché. Karttunen wrote for Finnish newspapers herself and, having lived in Italy for quite some time, had good contacts with Italian journalists. Liisi Karttunen was a close assistant to the Sibeliuses during their visit. Aino Sibelius wrote to her daughter, Katarina, saying that ‘Miss Liisi Karttunen is our best friend, always there when you need her, and so completely Italian that she has mastered the entire country.’67 Karttunen was in contact with Sibelius later as well, and served as his assistant during a trip to Rome a few years later.68 She may have met the composer later in Finland at the home of her friends, the artist Eero Järnefelt and his wife.

Sibelius and Kalevala

Sibelius’s music was also heard in the Augusteo without the composer’s presence: for instance, The Swan of Tuonela was played there at Easter in 1927 and also in April 1928. The latter concert was conducted by Bernardino Molinari (1880–1952), whom Sibelius had met on his visit five years earlier.69

Sibelius was mentioned in many articles and lectures by foreign journalists who visited Finland as well as others writing about Finland. The same names kept cropping up in the articles also as regards fine art. In summer 1926, Franco Passigli published a long article in La Nazione with the title ‘The Northernmost Capital of the World’ in which he lists the great names of Finnish culture, mentioning Albert Edelfelt and Akseli Gallen-Kallela among the

61 Telegrams of the Finnish embassy in Rome to MFA, Rome, 19, 20, 24 and 25 January, 27 and 28 February and 28 March 1923; MFA to Jean Sibelius, Helsinki, 19 January 1923. Fb 46 Q: 57. AMFA.
62 Tawaststjerna 1988, 132. On the visit to Rome, Sibelius’s preparations for the concert and the concert itself, see also Sirén 2012, 453–58.
64 Tawaststjerna 1988, 133–34.
65 Vahtola 2008, 120.
68 See postcards and letters of Liisi Karttunen to Jean Sibelius. Coll. 206.19. Jean Sibelius Collection. National Library of Finland. Some of the cards from Italy also have other senders besides Karttunen.
69 On Liisi Karttunen and the Sibeliuses, see Palosuo 1991, 40–44. For Liisi Karttunen on Sibelius’s trip to Rome in 1926, see Sirén 2012, 482, 484.
The music representative was of course Sibelius, whose music, Passigli wrote, had always touched audiences in all of the concert halls in the world.71

The embassy in Rome submitted reports on the performance of Finnish music in Italy, but it is not always known whether Sibelius was on the programme or not. Many Finnish singers and musicians performed in the concerts.72 In February 1935, the embassy sent the Foreign Ministry a request for copies of *Kalevala*-related Finnish piano music to celebrate the centenary of the epic, and it subsequently received a shipment which also included Sibelius’s music as a matter of course.73


72 For example, a concert of Finnish music was held in Milan in 1934. Finnish embassy in Rome to MFA, Rome, 3 March and 5 April 1934. Fb 19 G: 65. AMFA.

73 Finnish embassy in Rome to MFA, Rome, 16 February 1935, telegram; MFA to the Finnish embassy in Rome, Helsinki, 19 February 1935. Fb 19 G: 65. AMFA. The ministry sent Rome the scores of the following compositions: *Sortunut ääni*, *Venematka*, *Terve kuu*, *Kyllikki*, *Lemminkäinen palaa kotiänoille* (Lemminkäinen’s Return) and *The Swan of Tuonela*. Other featured works were Selim Palmgren’s *Marjatan laulu*, Oskar Merikanto’s Prelude to the opera *Pohjan neiti* and Toivo Saarenpää’s *Kalevan kansan laulu*. 
Sibelius’s 70th birthday took place at a time that signalled a slight fracture in the otherwise good and unproblematic relations between Finland and Italy. The reason was the attack on Abyssinia and its annexation to Italy. The League of Nations imposed sanctions against Italy, and, being a member of the League, Finland was obliged to join. In November 1935, the Italian Ministry for Press and Propaganda gave instructions on how to deal with cultural products and performing artists from countries participating in the sanctions. For example, opera houses had to remove from their programming works by composers coming from sanctioning countries, with the exception of a few French compositions, and the same rules applied to concerts and music broadcast on the radio. The injunction also applied to conductors and performing artists who were nationals of sanctioning countries. Italy’s counter measures also had an impact on Finland: a radio concert of Sibelius’s music that had been scheduled for the jubilee was cancelled. Nevertheless, the Italian press carried stories about the composer.

In May 1939, the Milanese cultural association Circolo Filologico organised a concert in which Finnish singers Musa Silver and Aili Seppälä sang Finnish songs, some of them composed by Sibelius, and the Italian pianist Giovanni Piccini performed pieces by Sibelius and Palmgren. According to local sources, the only Finnish composers known in Italy apart from Sibelius were Selim Palmgren and Armas Järnefelt, so none from the younger generation.

The Spirit of the Winter War

In Italy, the Winter War inspired great enthusiasm for Finland, and there was a marked increase in the number of events associated with the country. Sibelius’s music played a part in these events, which were often initiated by Italians – Finland enthusiasts – although the embassy too contributed in many ways. In March 1940, a concert was held in Rome in which the Italian pianist Agnese Mancinelli played works by Sibelius and Palmgren. The at the same concert, the chairman of Amici della Finlandia, Mr Remo Renato Petitto, spoke about Finnish nature and its impact on art. According to him, Finnish music is closest to the heart of those who ‘have had the good fortune’ of learning to know the landscapes, forests and lakes of Finland in the summer.

The concert was not the only one in 1940 to feature Sibelius’s music. The embassy reported five events that were held that year, after the end of the Winter War. An event organised by Amici della Finlandia in May at Castel Sant’Angelo had Finnish poetry and music as its theme, and the programme included poems composed by Sibelius, Selim Palmgren and Toivo Kuula. The German conductor Helmuth Thierfelder (1897–1966) conducted The Swan of Tuonela in November at a symphony concert in Rome, organised by the Friends of Finland in celebration of Sibelius’s approaching 75th birthday. The concert was well received in the Roman press. The embassy noted with pride that the concert ‘was graced with the presence’ of Crown Princess Maria José.

On 9 December 1940, the Italian radio company E.I.A.R. organised a concert of Sibelius’s music in honour of the composer’s birthday. The conductor was Willy Ferrero (1906–1954), who had presented Sibelius’s music in several previous concerts. The programme

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75 1935 annual report of the Finnish embassy in Rome, Rome, 18 June 1936. Fb 5 G Rome t. AMFA.

76 Finnish concert in Milan on 16/V/1939. Finnish embassy in Rome to MFA, Rome, 19 May 1939. Fb 19 G: 69. AMFA. Musa Silver was a Finnish opera singer who worked for a long time in the Finnish consulate in Milan.

77 The view was expressed by the artistic director of the Venice music festival Mario Corti, who would have wanted works by young Finnish composers on the festival programme in 1939. The plan never realised. See Finnish embassy in Rome to MFA, Rome, 9 December 1938. Fb 19 G: 68. AMFA.


79 Finnish embassy in Rome to MFA, Rome, 21 May 1940. Fb 19 G: 69. AMFA.

80 Finnish embassy in Rome to MFA, Rome, 26 November 1940. Fb 19 G: 69. AMFA.
consisted of the Second Symphony, The Swan of Tuonela, Valse triste and Finlandia. The radio announcer spoke about Sibelius’s life and art. The symphony concert held in tribute to the anniversary consisted of En Saga. Once again the conductor was Bernardino Molinari. The embassy reported on the reception in the press. According to La Tribuna the ‘wonderful, beautiful’ En Saga was played altogether too seldom, and Molinari’s interpretation was praised. The critic of Il Lavoro Fascista wrote about Sibelius that ‘his prized compositions are dictated by the soul of such an honest artist that they arouse the deepest sympathy and the greatest respect in everyone.’

Sibelius was once more featured in 1940 at a concert in Rome on Christmas Day, with the Second Symphony conducted by Vittorio Gui (1885–1975), who had also conducted the first presentation of Sibelius’s Fifth Symphony in 1938. The concert was noted by the Italian press.

War, Sibelius and Sisu

Amici della Finlandia continued organising events in the years that followed, showcasing Finnish culture and Sibelius. In March 1941, the Finnish embassy participated in a Sibelius gala in Rome in which the chairman of the Amici, Mr Petitto, spoke again of Sibelius and his love of Italy. Sibelius’s songs were interpreted by Musa Silver, with piano accompaniment. The event was attended by about 500 people, and in her report Liisi Karttunen wrote that the hall had been decorated with Finnish and Italian flags, and there were flowers and a picture of Sibelius on the tables. When the Continuation War began in summer 1941 and Italy and Finland became brothers in arms, there was also a political demand for events featuring Finland.

In the summer of 1942, Amici della Finlandia organised a concert of Finnish music in Rome. The programme included piano music by Sibelius and Palmgren, with Finnish folk songs. Chairman Petitto spoke about Finnish composers, Sibelius in particular, and the embassy noted that he ‘poetically’ described ‘the Finnish nature, which is the great and profound inspiration of Finnish art.’ The idea of the omnipresence of nature in Sibelius’s music was quite common at the time. Being a Finn, he was thought to be endowed with a particularly profound relationship with nature.

It was quite common to have lectures as well as music on the programme, both on the air and on other occasions. The series of radio shows entitled ‘Journeys abroad’ by the fascist Dopolavoro organisation featured Finland on 15 August 1941. One of the organisation’s leaders, Arnolfo Santelli, spoke about Finnish nature and history and of cultural relations between Finland and Italy. He also spoke about the heroic Finnish people who defended their land and their culture. The show included musical inserts, the beginning of Finlandia and part of The Swan of Tuonela and a part of Armas Järnefelt’s Prelude.

A Finland-themed event in Rome in the spring of 1943 featured lectures on Finnish history and poetry. It also included recitals of Finnish poems and Sibelius’s violin music, as well as songs by Sibelius, P. J. Hannikainen and Oskar Merikanto. The event ended with a screening of the film Suomi taistelee (Finland at War). According to the Finnish ambassador, the event was attended by about 1,000 people, among them high-ranking Italian officials and diplomats.
In an article published in the autumn of 1941 under the title ‘The New Face of Europe. The Finnish People,’ Italian journalist Andrea Fabbricotti linked Sibelius with Finnish sisu. Having visited Finland in 1939, Fabbricotti explained the concept of sisu to Italian readers, saying that it refers to ‘an inner glow, a fire of the soul and super-human power.’ According to him, Sibelius had explained the meaning of sisu as follows: ‘that which in our innermost being is metaphysical and which makes the impossible possible.’ According to the writer, this is a perfect description of the patriotic people of Finland. Sibelius was for Italians a symbol for the entire country. The literary weekly Giornale della Domenica ended its article on ‘In the Finnish war’ with the words: ‘The land of the Kalevala, Sibelius and athletes is moving towards a new, honourable and victorious future.’

Figurehead of Finland

As the Italian case shows, people worked abroad for the promotion of the Finnish cause also during the Second World War, and used music in many ways to do so. The importance of Sibelius for Finland in these efforts was noted elsewhere as well. In July 1942, Sibelius’s First Symphony was performed at the Tivoli in Copenhagen, the concert ending with Finlandia. The local paper Berlingske Tidende published a very positive review of the concert, saying that Sibelius’s music had promoted the Finnish cause much more than ‘many print products and diplomats.’

Sibelius’s role as a spearhead figure in the promotion of Finland continued after the war. Notable dates included the composer’s round anniversaries and his death in 1957, as well as the Sibelius Festivals that took place between 1951 and 1965, which were marketed by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Finnish missions, and to which the Foreign Ministry invited music critics and journalists from abroad.

Sibelius was famous to begin with, making it easy to use him as one of the main pillars in the construction of the image of Finland. He also represented a sufficiently high level of Finnish culture to enable everyone to accept him in this role. An example is the remark by the influential art historian and critic Onni Okkonen in a press interview in 1927 that Jean Sibelius and writers Aleksis Kivi and Johannes Linnankoski were of sufficiently high calibre to be used in the promotion of the national image. The success of their work revealed the crux of the matter: other countries discovered new important values for themselves in their work, and in so doing they honoured Finland, for otherwise they would pity or completely ignore Finland and Finns as ‘a remote provincial country and people.’ A few years prior to Okkonen’s statement, in November 1923, Sibelius received the first honorary prize awarded by the Alfred Kordelin Foundation. In its report, the jury observed that Sibelius had worked ‘not only for the promotion of Finnish music and its development in new directions, but also to make Finnish culture known throughout the civilised world.’

When Jean Sibelius died in September 1957, The Times wrote in its long obituary that the country of Sibelius had made him a figurehead, an emblem of its national life, to be shown to the rest of the world. An apt formulation of the role that independent Finland had wanted to give to the composer.

91 Lähteenkorva 2004, 320.
92 Mitä olisi tehtävä taiteemme tunnetuksi tekemiseksi ulkomailla. Helsingin Sanomat, 16 September 1927.
93 Halila 1990, 112.
94 Vahtola 2008, 148 (obituary in Finnish 146–50). The obituary was published by The Times on 21 September 1957.
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