Jean Sibelius
Born December 8, 1865, Tavestehus, Finland.
Died September 20, 1957, Järvenpää, Finland.

Finlandia, Op. 26

Sibelius composed Finlandia in 1899 for performance at a political demonstration in Helsinki on December 14 of that year. He revised it the following year. The score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, and strings. Performance time is approximately eight minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Sibelius's Finlandia were given at Orchestra Hall on April 11 and 12, 1913, with Frederick Stock conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on December 4, 5, and 6, 1997, with Leif Segerstam conducting. The Orchestra first performed this work at the Ravinia Festival on July 11, 1936, with Hans Lange conducting, and most recently on July 20, 1997, with Erich Kunzel conducting.

In the 1890s, Sibelius was recognized by Finland as its greatest composer; after 1900 he became world famous. Finlandia marked the turning point. Its popularity surprised no one more than Sibelius, who had agreed to contribute some music for a political demonstration in Helsinki. But 1899 was a time of heightened political tensions, as the Russian hold on Finland was growing tighter, and so a simple and brief, but stirring composition called Finland Awakes, crowned by a big singable tune, struck home like a thunderbolt. The following year, Sibelius revised the score and gave it the title Finlandia, before the Helsinki Philharmonic, then only eighteen months old, took it on its first major tour, carrying Sibelius's name and music throughout Europe (the tour ended at the Paris World Exposition). Despite the narrow political circumstances of its creation, Finlandia turned out to have universal appeal, and in very little time it made Sibelius the best-known living Finn in the world.

Like other works of great musical patriotism, such as Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture, Finlandia does not necessarily represent the composer's finest hour. As a musical achievement, it is scarcely more advanced than Sibelius's model, the tone poems by Franz Liszt. Yet that is irrelevant in light of the personal fame, sweeping popularity, and national pride that these few minutes of music inspired. Just as Boléro eventually hounded Ravel, the success of Finlandia came to irritate Sibelius, particularly when it overshadowed greater and more substantial works. Still, this is highly effective music, richly scored and imaginatively colored—those dark clouds at the top are particularly unforgettable. Best of all, it boasts one of music's great melodies, although, as in Elgar's most famous Pomp and Circumstance march, it sometimes catches audiences by surprise, coming at the very last minute.

Finland gained its independence from Russia shortly after the Russian Revolution; its autonomy was officially recognized in October 1920.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.
These notes appear in galley files and may contain typographical or other errors. Programs subject to change without notice.