

Orchestral Works of Väinö Raitio

© Kimmo Korhonen & Fimic, 2000

Translation Susan Sinisalo

Väinö Raitio (April 15, 1891 – September 10, 1945) began his composing career as a Late Romantic, but in the early 1920s he underwent a change of style that was for the next decade to place him in the vanguard of Finnish Modernism. His chief output consists of his colourful orchestral works combining impressionistic nuance with the expressionistic force and abrasiveness associated with Skryabin. Dating from the late 1920s onwards are his operas, lyrical in tone, and the rhythmically striking ballet *Vesipatsas* (*Water Column*). In his orchestral music of the 1930s Raitio returned to a more traditional, conventional style.

Joutsenet (The Swans) op. 15 (1919)

Duration: 7'

Väinö Raitio began his composing career as a Late Romantic, but in the early 1920s proceeded to a brand of Modernism coloured by Impressionism and Expressionism. Possibly his best-known work is the tone poem *The Swans*, a work of his transitional period marked by both rich romanticism and impressionistic colour. The idea for composing a work about swans was partly inspired by a poem by Otto Manninen.

Nocturne op. 17 (1920)

Of all the Finnish Modernists of the 1920s, Raitio had the firmest ties with Impressionism. His statement that “music is colour” is revealing. Whereas the tone poem *The Swans* (1919) was still on the watershed between Romanticism and Impressionism, *Nocturne* was already a clear product of Impressionism. The pentatonic main motif is suggestive of folk music, though not of the Finnish variety, while the second subject is evocative of Debussy. The music has both mysterious, shimmering sheets of timbre and fast-flowing climaxes.

Fantasia estatica op. 21 (1921)

Duration: 10'

Raitio's individual brand of Modernism bursts into full flower in the *Fantasia estatica*. He was to have composed a triptych of three fantasias, but the *Fantasia chaotica* intended as a continuation to the *Fantasia estatica* and the *Fantasia poetica* (1923) was never written. The *Fantasia estatica* is scored for large orchestra and characterised by both the impressionistic colour of delicate webs of

sound and an expressionistic force that erupts in ecstasy as promised by the title. In this respect the music possibly comes closest to Skryabin.

Antigone op. 23 (1922)

Duration: 25'

1. *Antigonen kuolinuhri veljelleen (Antigone's sacrifice for her brother)*

2. *Tyrannin tuomio (The fall of the tyrant)*

3. *Antigonen kuolema (The Death of Antigone)*

Raitio's 1920s Modernism has elements of both Impressionism and Expressionism. The most cogent representative of the expressionistic streak is the orchestral tone poem *Antigone* in three movements. It was inspired by the tragedy of Sophocles, but although each of the three movements has a title, they can in no way be called programme music giving a detailed description of any events. The three rather loosely constructed movements are dominated by slow tempi underlining the tragedy, and the closing movement alone has a short Allegro passage. This is music characterised by the poetry of subdued timbres and climaxes of tremendous impact.

Kuutamo Jupiterissa (Moonlight on Jupiter) op. 24 (1922)

In the Modernist works written in the 1920s Raitio juggled with Impressionism and an Expressionism akin to that of Skryabin. *Moonlight on Jupiter*, subtitled "a fantastic tone poem for orchestra", has a slightly impressionistic orientation. In the quietest passages, particularly, it has all the delicacy and colour of the Impressionists and even Debussy, but the climaxes have more in common with the Expressionists.

Fantasia poetica op. 25 (1923)

Duration: 10'

The *Fantasia poetica* was to be the middle movement of an orchestral triptych beginning with the *Fantasia estatica* (1921), but the third and final movement, *Fantasia chaotica*, never materialised. The *Fantasia poetica* is, however, capable of standing on its own and is as such one of the finest works by Raitio. Like his other best works of the 1920s, it has a rich, and in this case "poetic" colour dimension, here combined with the expressionistic force of the crests of three waves. The motto of the work is the poem *Erlebnis* by Hugo von Hofmannsthal.

Vesipatsas (Water Column) (1929)

Towards the end of the 1920s Raitio turned increasingly away from orchestral tone poems to music for the stage. The first works to be completed in this category were the opera *Jeftan tytär* (*Jephthah's Daughter*, 1929) and the two-act ballet *Water Column*. Despite its stage background, *Water Column* may nevertheless be classified as an orchestral work, and one of Raitio's finest at that. It is packed with the richness of colour characteristic of Raitio, but it also introduces a new feature: effective, pounding rhythms often evocative of Stravinsky. The Expressionism of the earlier works is at the same time supplemented and enriched by a Neoclassical dimension.

Neiet niemien nenissä (Maidens of the Headland) (1935)

In the 1930s Raitio turned away from his Modernistic, idiosyncratic style. *Maidens of the Headland*, composed for the 100th anniversary of the Finnish national epic, the Kalevala, in 1935 adopts a more simplified idiom though it does still bear traces of the Impressionism of the previous decade. A further indication of its more traditional ideals is the use of an old kantele melody, The Konevitsa Church Bells, as one of the motifs for the work.