

SELIM PALMGREN

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When I was having piano lessons in the late 1950s my teacher introduced me to a piece by Selim Palmgren but said, "It is modern, you know!".

Modern it is not. The composer died in 1951 a few years before my lessons but his music is not modern. It is tonal and conventional.

Why do people say such inaccurate things? There are many writers on musical subjects who write falsities and display both their prejudices and ignorance. The trouble is that some people believe these writers.

Palmgren wrote five piano concertos of which the second, entitled *The River*, is probably the best known and brought him some international fame.

The concertos are all fine pieces. The first is Opus 13 and a work of durable attractiveness. The Piano Concerto no 4 Op 85 is nicknamed *April* and is the most original of the set and somewhat introspective.

Some people call new music *avant garde* when it is not and, in one sense, it is wrong to call Bartok and Schoenberg modern. They have both been dead for over fifty years, which does not constitute recent times. However, music which is advanced and of a greater skill and technique can be called modern. Palmgren's music is certainly not advanced. Nor is it of a greater or original skill. In fact, it is anachronistic; some of it is very attractive. He is not modern as his music clearly testifies.

He was born in Pori, Finland on 16 February 1878 into a wealthy merchant family. He wrote about 350 miniature piano pieces and became an accomplished concert pianist. There is a Piano Sonata in D minor Op 11 of 1900. It is his most extensive work for solo piano. It contains big chords and three note chords of tenths which some pianists will fudge. It has lyricism and memorable themes, excellent modulations, something that Schubert could not manage. For me, the middle movement has an irritating and repetitious four note theme that outstays its welcome. But, overall, it is a very good work and it is grammatically correct showing his excellent understanding of correct notation.

His music ranges from the Romantic to the Impressionistic in style. It has been said that he introduced impressionistic music to Finland. He had an interest in Finnish folk music and also had a baroque period showing a real interest in baroque music as may be seen in his *Sonatina in F* Op 93 of 1935.

His first teacher was his sister, Anni, who had studied with a pupil of Liszt. He went on to the Helenski Music Institute from 1895 to 1899 to study with Conrad Ansoerge in Berlin who was himself a pupil of Liszt. Then Palmgren went to Weimar and had a few lessons with Busoni.

Palmgren travelled extensively in Germany, Italy and the USA. He lived in Italy from 1907 to 1909, where he wrote his opera *Daniel Hjort*. His first visit to the USA was in 1919 on a concert tour and from 1921 to 1926 he was Chairman of Composition at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester.

He composed much music associated with Finnish folk music such as the *Finnish Folk Songs and Dances*. *Northern Folk Songs* consists of five pieces transcribed for the piano namely *Elegy*, *Inquietude*,



Slumber Song and Humoresk. Nordischer sommer Op 59 are five piano pieces published by Reid Brothers in London. Finnish Lyrics Op 22 appeared in 1908 and Finnish Rhythms Op 31 in 1911.

His work Sun and Clouds Op 102 of 1942 is a depiction of the twelve months of the year as with the set by Tchaikovsky.

He composed many works with such titles as Snowdrops, Dragonfly, Raindrops, Exotic March, The stars are Twinkling etc.

His music is not virtuosic in the manner of Liszt and Rachmaninov but it is not childish or banal. A set of 24 Preludes Op 17 of 1907 is said to be homage to Chopin (he was sometimes called the Finnish Chopin) have been declared as an uneven collection but would make a good introduction to his work. Three of them are marked In Folk Style. His music is attractive if not strikingly original but a pleasure to play and presents no aural problems to listeners.

While his music must not be consigned as educational and suitable for amateurs many of his pieces would delight young pianists. Other pieces demand fine exponents.

He died on 16 December 1951.

Someone has written that his music needs to be more memorable to be worthy. The waltzes of Johann Strauss are memorable but not worthy as, for example, the music of Bach or Beethoven.

I believe that Palmgren's music is far better than many other composers whose piano music is revered. However, I still consider Liszt and Rachmaninov to be the finest.

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