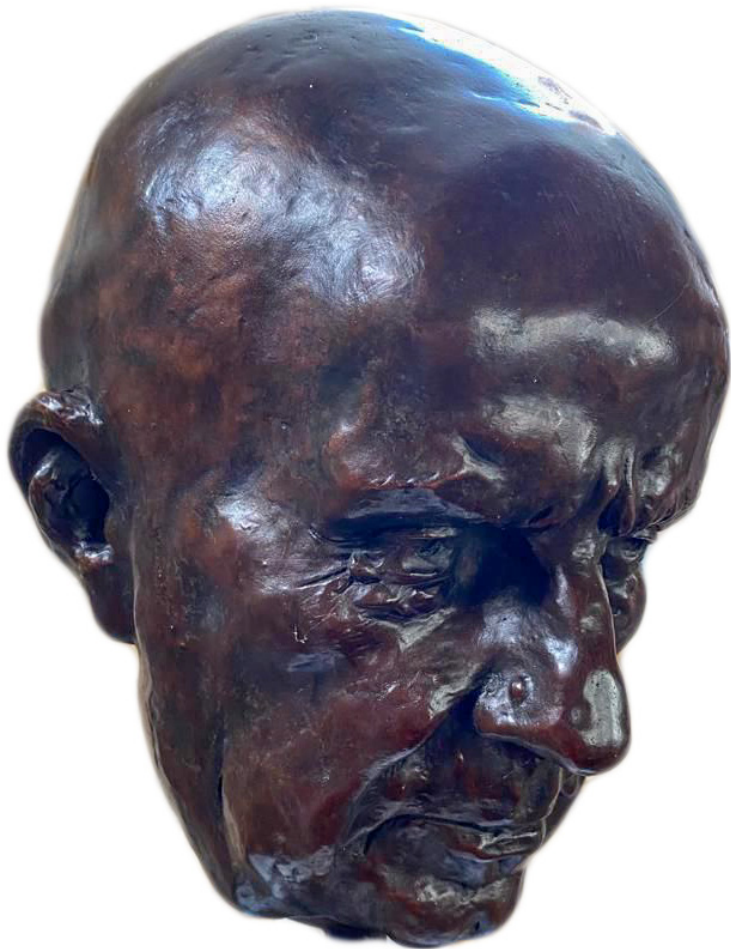


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AINOLA, SIBELIUS, AND ME

By Fred Jones

A well-signposted path leads from Ainola Station past sombre woods to the rocky outcrop on which the house built for the Sibelius family is set. The terrain reminds me of the trees and uneven ground punctuated by rocky chunks in Sibelius Park (where the Sibelius Monument is), and actually this kind of landscape is just waiting to be noticed in other places as well – on the route to the Urho Kekkonen Museum, or beside the railway tracks on excursions to places like Espoo and Tapiola. These blocks of stone seem to me like the chords breaking out of the matrix of silence at the end of the fifth symphony.

This summer, my wife and I spent a couple of weeks in Helsinki. It was our second time there. We visited further afield this time, and amongst other trips we went to see Ainola. I've got to know the music of Sibelius over the course of 50 years and from time to time I remember landmark moments – hearing part of the fifth symphony in the School Chapel some fifty years ago is a vivid and yet very eroded memory - if I really try to *see* it now there is almost nothing there. Another special memory is hearing Maxwell Davies conduct *Tapiola* in Huddersfield, or myself playing the early E flat quartet in the Scandinavian Church in Liverpool just before the Covid lockdowns.... Moments like these are different from seeing Ainola, and back at home I have started to wonder about what it means to me now to have done so. Does it add to my 'understanding' of a Sibelius work when I hear one now, for example?

I am not altogether sure that 'understanding' is really the correct operation to perform on a piece of music being played – yes, it is possible to know that there are this or that many movements, that there is a first and second subject and a development (or not) and so forth, and recognizing such elements in a performance can be construed as a part of understanding it, but I wonder about the extent to which it is a necessary part, and besides there is so much more going on in one's

subjective temporal experience. So, when I listen now to (say) the fifth symphony, I do not actively recall or think about the time that I first heard it as a schoolboy and I don't expect to see with my mind's eye a rocky Finnish landscape as the last chords emerge one after another. I suppose that all the times that I have heard the symphonies, tone poems, violin pieces and so forth may have attuned me to something in the Sibelian musical language; but that can't be said about visiting Ainola; it was something else, a different kind of experience, more like a pilgrimage.

We saw other Sibelian places too, like the Swedish Theatre and the National Theatre, both hardly more than seconds away from our hotel. In both of them, plays with incidental music by Sibelius had been put on and in 1927 the National Theatre had staged Shakespeare's *Tempest* with music by Sibelius and with his daughter Ruth as Ariel. And in between the two theatres was the splendid building which once housed the Hotel Fennia, where Sibelius did some of the work on the Fourth Symphony. The excursion to Ainola was a much more concentrated and intense experience, though. I guess this was partly because we had to go on a train journey and then walk to get there, so that there was something quest-like about it. Already, on the train, we were excited to be on the way. When we got off at Ainola Station we paused for me to assume a Sibelius-posture in front of the poster; then there was the walk to build up anticipation, then the passage through the shop and estate-entrance, and then climbing the rocky path to the house itself.

Around the house, there are the quite extensive grounds where Aino worked on the gardens; there is the sauna and well, outhouses, woodland ... In one of my wife Abigail's photographs of me I am standing at the extreme corner of the grounds, where Sibelius often sat at the end of his daily walk. I am pointing upwards, as though unexpectedly seeing the sixteen swans. The posture was a homage to a hyperrealist sculpture group by Duane Hanson, called 'Tourists'¹

1 Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art GMA 2132. It is currently in storage, unfortunately, but online images are readily accessible.

- and of course that is exactly what we were, engaging in quite a complex game of cultural intertextualities. For me, this was a moment of heightened experience and the game was part of this heightening, probably both cause and effect, like the chicken and the egg.

Games are fundamental element in the child's cognitive development and the adult's relationship-building tool-kit. This is the kind of thing Abigail and I do (from the same holiday, there is also a photograph of me mimicking the pose of the statue of the Estonian novelist Jaan Kross in Tallinn); but it is also part of my relationship with Sibelius. He died two years before I was born, but there is something connective about seeing where he and his family lived and worked, where they survived the civil war and the Winter War and the Continuation War. A living, inhabited house evolves – furniture is changed, circulates, rooms change function; when the Sibeliuses moved in in 1904, there were as yet only three daughters and no sauna. The sauna came in 1905, and was pulled down and rebuilt in 1925. The Steinway piano arrived as a gift on Sibelius' fiftieth birthday. A house-turned-museum is a snapshot with a different sort of temporal existence, but the sauna was there for almost all of the house's lived-in phase, and as you enter it now the characteristic smell of wood and residual smoke is still strong. The sense of smell is a powerful Proustian memory agent, and here it lets you connect your own present with the past of others. You exist, as Proust would have said, in two time zones at once.

An even more continuously permanent part of the house is the green-tiled stove; a letter of Aino to Sibelius dated 22 July, 1904, refers to it as nearly finished. Sibelius particularly wanted it to be green and thought of this colour as sounding in F major. Perhaps we can feel it as a brooding generator of music just beyond the threshold of hearing, but for me it definitely stirs other associations. It stands out so forcefully against the brown wooden walls of the room that it is in. They speak to me of Scandinavian legend – they radiate the atmosphere embodied in the line drawing of King Hrólfr's hall in E.V. Gordon's *Introduction to Old Norse*, and of Beorn's Hall in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Hobbit*²; they

2 Although it is Greek and not Scandinavian, when I was first

resonate with the stuff of the Icelandic sagas and with Anselm Kiefer's *Nibelungenlied* drawings, prints, and paintings.³ There is something almost mythical about those who live in wooden houses, something of the stories of frontier woodsmen like Juhani Aho's *Pioneers*, but the green ceramic tiles are embedded in such strong sensory contrasts – colour, sheen, temperature, texture – that the stove seems to belong to a different world from the room: whereas the wood still retains a connection with nature, the stove is so definitively *manufactured* that I see it as the mysteriously purposed Sampo whose making is told in the Kalevala which provided Sibelius with so much inspiration. Sibelius was himself certainly taken with the Sampo and its purpose: during an interview by A.O. Väisänen, he talked of composing something about it 'one of these days' and said that 'the beauty of the whole thing is that no-one knows what the Sampo is. The forging of the Sampo should sound *pianissimo* – like something in the far distance.'⁴ I'd say it should also be green, lustrous, and hard, and resonate in F major.

The house is part of a larger socio-cultural context, too. Walking around Lake Tuusula, where Sibelius swam and where he saw those swans, you can cross the road to see Ahola, the house where his friend, the writer Juhani Aho (once in love with the future Mrs Sibelius), lived for a while; further again round the lake there is the house of Pekka Halonen the painter, some of whose work hangs in Ainola. We did not get as far as that, and we also missed Suviranta, Sibelius' brother-in-law Eero Järnefelt's house (though we saw some of his paintings in the not-too-far-off Järvenpää Art Museum), but all these cross-currents and connections (both those made and those missed), are an integral part of my getting to know Sibelius just as one gets to know a living person.

exposed to it, I associated Homeric epic and Icelandic saga strongly, so that the line drawing of the *megaron* in Autenrieth's *Illustrated Homeric Dictionary* belongs with this list of associations.

3 For example, *Notung*, *The Sorrow of the Nibelungen*, and *Germany's Spiritual Heroes* (all from 1973).

4 E. Tawaststjerna, *Sibelius*, vol. 3; trans. R. Layton (1997), 169-70.

They make listening to his music feel like going to listen to the music of a real friend or acquaintance.

Places! I must often have walked past 19 Quai Voltaire in Paris, without being aware of anything special. Sibelius stayed there in March 1909, and indeed there is quite a web of cultural hyperlinks in this address. Baudelaire finished *Les Fleurs du Mal* there a few years before Wagner finished *Die Meistersinger* in the same place. Oscar Wilde, Rainer Maria Rilke, Hemingway and Prokofiev all stayed there too. I have not been back to Paris since discovering this and I don't know how I would feel if I did. And then there are, close to where I live, important early Liverpool-Sibelius connections, but the emotional resonances of Quai Voltaire and Liverpool are in different degrees of intensity from those rippling out from our pilgrimage to the place where Sibelius had a family life, visitors, saw swans and cranes, and remembered his youth, and where he and Aino are buried. Going to Ainola has deepened the personal bond between myself and this composer who died before I was born.



photo of Ainola, Sibelius's home