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Martti Nisonen: Composer of the Keweenaw

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Abstract:

Correspondence in the collection shows that after Nisonen died Dec. 5, 1946 most of his original manuscripts were in the hands of former students. Only through great efforts in contacting these students did the Finnish American Historical Archive get back many of his music manuscripts. Suomi College presidents and archivists corresponded with former students. They even advertised for the return of this music in Finnish American newspapers. These efforts began in the early 1960s and really took hold with a Nisonen concert in conjunction with the American bicentennial in 1976, and a large memorial concert and scholarly panel in 1982. Some of the more important contributors to the re-gathering of his music were Nisonen's former student, Dr. John Milton Gustafson, a music professor at the University of Oregon, musicology professor Dr. Ruth-Esther Hillila, and Lempi Auvinen, who allowed her large collection of Nisonen choral music to be photocopied and returned to [Hancock]. Many of Nisonen's former students and friends returned music, giving Finlandia the collection it has today.

From obituaries and letters in the collection we learn about the Nisonen family. Martti's father was Henrick Johannes Nisonen (b. 1870) and his mother Emilia Dahlstedt (b. 1874). He had a younger brother, Paavo Antero Nisonen (b. 18 July 1896, d. 31 Jan. 1918). His wife was Martta Olivia Nisonen o.s. [Martta Helenius] (b. 2 Oct. 1890, d. 22 Sep. 1942). They married on 15 Aug. 1914 and had four children: Bert Nisonen (b. 7 July 1915, d. Feb 1983), Eiri (Mrs. Robert J. Benson, Bellevue, WA), Sirkku? (Mrs. Ross McPhail, Ontario, Canada), and Henry J. Nisonen (b. 4 May 1927, d. Nov. 27, 1953?, Bellevue, WA). More than 20 years ago there was correspondence with a granddaughter, Marnis K. Holmes and a great granddaughter Sandra-Ann MacEachem, both of Toronto, Canada.

Nisonen was very patriotic, for both the United States and Finland. For example, he composed a symphonic poem called "The Vision of Francis Scott Key" based on incidents in the composing of the "Star Spangled Banner." He also composed a cantata titled "Debt," based on Finland's faithfulness in paying its war debt, and a work titled "Pro Patria (Suomen Sankareille) To the Heroes of Finland" dedicated to his brother Paavo. His Symphony in F major, which he completed on June 14, 1945, took him more than six years to compose. The final movement is programmatic and based on the story of how Finland endured the Second World War. It describes ". . . a patriotic young man's visions, fears and hopes..." [for the future]. Nisonen was personally involved in recruiting volunteers from Hancock to fight for Finland in the Second World War.

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Full text:

Today, Martti Nisonen is virtually unknown in academic music circles. He does not have a biography in the "New Grove Dictionary of Music," nor even on Wikipedia. He has a short entry in the "Historical Dictionary of the Music and Musicians of Finland." Despite this neglect, Nisonen should be considered among the most important of Finnish-American musicians and composers. He left a significant legacy both as a teacher as well as in the many works he composed.

Nisonen was born on September 12, 1891 in Pori, Finland. His father, Heikki Nisonen, graduated from the Leipzig Conservatory and was his first music teacher. Martti later studied at the Helsinki Conservatory (now Sibelius Academy) at the Viipuri Church Music Institute from 1908-09, and also in Berlin. In Finland "he worked as an organist and movie pianist and as a conductor and composer of cabaret music." He must have taken to

composition readily, since he was already composing music in his early 20s, in the second decade of the 20th century. One of the earliest compositions in the Finnish American Historical Archive at Finlandia University is a 217-page piano vocal score of an operetta in four acts. Unfortunately, we don't know the title since the first 20 pages are missing from the manuscript. But Nisonen's marginalia shows that he began composing it on September 12, 1914, and completed it on October 4, 1914. It was dedicated to his wife, actress Martta Helenius, who he married that same year.

In 1922, Nisonen, his wife and three children moved to Hancock, Michigan where he started teaching music at Suomi College (now Finlandia University). A fourth child was later born in Hancock. He taught every conceivable topic in music. Nisonen personally organized and conducted most of the concerts at Suomi College, including vocal music in a wide variety of combinations, such as mixed choirs, men and women's choirs and vocal soloists. He also conducted instrumental ensembles, including founding the Copper Country Symphony Orchestra.

In addition to organizing and training the musicians for these concerts, Nisonen composed and arranged a large amount of the music that was used. Much like Johann Sebastian Bach, Nisonen was a practicing Lutheran musician who organized special music for the Church calendar, thus in his collection we find many cantatas and other works created especially for Easter, Christmas and other special occasions. Not all of these works were original compositions. The collection contains at least as many arrangements of music by other composers, as it does original compositions of Nisonen. This shows a very strong practical side to his life and work. The manuscripts are at Finlandia University precisely because they were performed at concerts and recitals there.

I was able to study Nisonen's collection of music manuscripts on three separate occasions. During these visits I was able to inventory the entire collection, which came to 29 single-spaced pages. That work was complicated by the fact that the collection exists in two separate alphabetical series. Several of Nisonen's compositions were found partially in both series. This also made calculating the total number of his compositions difficult. A good estimate might be that the collection contains more than 500 individual works, which include both his original compositions and his many arrangements of other composer's works. In almost all cases, Nisonen signed his music showing whether he had composed or arranged it. Using the inventory, I was able to begin a classified works list of his original compositions, which shows that Nisonen composed at least 12 large orchestral works, 12 operas, 33 cantatas, and numerous other smaller works, mostly vocal, such as choruses and songs.

Nisonen was just as gifted with language as he was with music. The majority of his music was vocal, meaning that it had a sung text. He set the texts of many different authors, most frequently those of Simo Korpela, Hilja Haahti, Samuel V. Autere and Hugo Hillilä, but he also wrote many of the texts himself. The majority of the texts are in Finnish, but there are a substantial number in English. There is no evidence that Nisonen studied English formally in Finland, but within a few years of being in America he was already writing extensive English texts, and he translated many Finnish texts into English. His work in either language was of native quality.

Unfortunately, many of the works are incomplete. One example is the only violin and piano piece I found in the collection. It is titled "Longing," or *Kaipuu* in Finnish (Nisonen used both titles). Only the violin part was found. We know a little about what the piano played, since the violin part has cues showing the piano melody line in certain places. It is a very beautiful work, but can't be reconstructed from the violin part alone. The collection also contains many "sketches," a term used by musicologists for earlier versions of a piece on which a composer was working. These are typically written out in pencil, with numerous corrections. There are also many photocopies, especially of chorus scores used by choir members.

Fortunately, some of Nisonen's most important works, such as the orchestral works, operas and cantatas, are complete and could be reconstructed and performed. Some of these larger works have multiple versions of the music, starting with early sketches, proceeding up to sets of parts, indicating that they may have been performed, and in some cases a clean score written out in pen, presumably the composer's final version. This is the case with his "Symphony in F major," perhaps his most significant work.

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I hope the inventory will pave the way for future research on Martti Nisonen's life and work. He deserves to be recognized as a significant composer.

Sidebar

Professor Martti Nisonen (at piano) leads a group of recruits for Finland's Winter War. They include William Tammela of Alston, Mich.; Eskel Olson of Nisula, Mich.; Lloyd Hauswirth of Hancock, Mich.; Paul Hillstrom of Salo Location (near Hancock); and Charles Karting of Lake Linden, Mich. The men's transportation to Finland was paid through local fundraising, and once they were 8 miles out to sea, they enlisted in the Finnish army.

AuthorAffiliation

Editor's note: Dr. Carl Rahkonen is a music librarian and professor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He will give a presentation on "Martti Nisonen: Composer of the Keweenaw" at the 2013 FinnFest.

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