

The Blue Plaque

Jean Sibelius

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The greatest of all Scandinavian composers, Sibelius was born in Finland in 1865, the son of a surgeon, and was originally destined to become a lawyer. He entered Helsinki University as a law student but abandoned the subject after a year and chose instead to study composition at the city's conservatory.

His symphonic poems based on incidents in Finnish mythology, as recorded in the epic verses of the Kalevala, launched his career and he went on to write seven symphonies, a violin concerto and further symphonic poems. In 1897 the Finnish government voted to award Sibelius an annual pension so that he could concentrate on composing without financial worries. Two years later he rewarded their faith in him by writing the tone-poem Finlandia which rapidly became a kind of national anthem for the Finns who, at this time, were still not fully independent from Russian rule.

Outside his homeland, his music proved particularly popular in Britain and he first visited the country in 1905, returning again in 1909 to conduct concerts of his own works, at which time he stayed in the house in Gloucester Walk, Kensington now marked by a blue plaque. He visited London twice more in the 1920s.

Sibelius wrote little in the last thirty years of his life, although he worked intermittently on an eighth symphony, the sketches for which he eventually destroyed in the 1940s. After the completion of 'Tapiola' in 1926, he published nothing except for a few works for piano. He died of a stroke in September 1957 and was laid to rest at his family home Ainola in the countryside north of Helsinki.



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