

# Erkki Melartin (1875-1937) THE SOLO PIANO WORKS MARIA LETTBERG



2-CD-Set: N 67 048  
Jewelcase mit Banderole  
WG: 10

PIANO RARITIES · ERKKI MELARTIN  
THE SOLO PIANO WORKS

Lastuja I, Op. 7 · The Legend II, Op. 12 · The Melancholy Garden, Op. 52  
The Mysterious Forest, Op. 118 · 24 Preludes Op. 85 · Fantasia apocaliptica  
Maria Lettberg

## The Finnish Composer Erkki Melartin and his Piano Works

Composing meant everything in life to Erkki Melartin (1875–1937) and he regarded his profession as a composer as his only true vocation. 'If only I were allowed to compose, this is my daily prayer,' he wrote as a convalescent of tuberculosis. 'I simply cannot bear the inner pressure without exploding if I'm not at last able to write down music,' he uttered after having an utmost busy period of conducting. This passion he was loyal to until the very end. He didn't obey his doctors, but still a few weeks

before his death he stood up quietly, in secret, and locked the door to his study in order to compose without distraction.

Nevertheless, Melartin succeeded to combine this lifelong mission with many other professional activities. He worked 1908–1911 as the conductor of the Viipuri (Vyborg) Orchestra and devoted himself to teaching music theory for nearly 30 years. In his lifetime he was for twenty-five years known as director and professor of composition at the Helsinki Music Institute, which is today the Sibelius Academy.

Melartin was a captivating and multi-talented person. His hobbies extended from drawing, painting and photography to art history, literature, languages and gardening, not to mention his extensive travelling. He was also an avid collector of stamps, ex libris and post cards. Idealism and strong ethics dominated his world view and in his later years he was involved, not only in theosophy, but further in Indian philosophy and mysticism.

Melartin was born in 1875 in Käksälsalmi (Kexholm), a Karelian town situated by the Lake Ladoga in East-

ern Finland. Later, in the Second World War, the area was ceded to the Soviet Union. He studied composition with the same teachers as his 10-year-old contemporary Jean Sibelius: with Martin Wegelius 1892–1899 in Helsinki and Robert Fuchs 1899–1901 in Vienna. He early made his name known by producing piano works, solo songs, incidental music and chamber music. His actual breakthrough in Finland came with his stage music to *Sleeping Beauty* 1904 and his three first symphonies premiered in 1903, 1905 and 1907. Practically taken, he was the only symphonist in Finland

### CD 1

- 1-6 **Lastuja I, Op. 7, Kuusi pianokappaletta / Späne I, Op. 7, Sechs Klavierstücke Chips I, Op. 7, Six Pieces for Piano**
- 7 **Legend II, Op. 12 / Die Legende II, Op.12 / The Legend II, Op. 12**
- 8-12 **Surullinen puutarha, Op. 52 / Der traurige Garten, Op. 52 The Melancholy Garden, Op. 52**
- 13-17 **Lyyrisiä pianokappaleita, Op. 59 / Lyrisches, Op. 59 / Lyric Pieces for Piano, Op.59**
- 18-23 **Den hemlighetsfulla skogen, Op. 118, Sex pianostycken Der geheimnisvolle Wald, Op. 118, Sechs Klavierstücke The Mysterious Forest, Op. 118, Six Pieces for Piano**

- 24-29 **Sex pianostycken, Op. 123 / Sechs Klavierstücke, Op. 123 Six Pieces for Piano, Op. 123**

### CD 2

- 1-24 **24 Preludier, Op. 85 / 24 Präludien, Op. 85 / 24 Preludes, Op. 85**
- 25-29 **Noli me tangere, Op. 87, Stämmingsbilder / Stimmungsbilder / Impressions**
- 30 **Legend I, Op. 6 / Die Legende I, Op.6 / The Legend I, Op. 6**
- 31 **Sonata I, Op. 111, Fantasia apocaliptica per il pianoforte**

MARIA LETTBERG, Klavier / piano

**Deutschlandradio Kultur**



alongside Sibelius till the middle of the 1910's. As a composer Melartin was versatile and productive like no other: six symphonies, the opera *Aino* and the ballet *Blue Pearl*, a Violin Concerto, symphonic poems, orchestral suites and a variety of instrumental and vocal compositions. It is true that his music is often characterized by National Romanticism and lyrical Finnish folk music features, but in addition, his output reflects the influence of Late Romantic expressiveness, Symbolism and Impressionism. Later, the Modernism of the era left its clear mark on Melartin's composition.

The piano was Melartin's own instrument, but he acted not as a soloist, but rather as a Lied pianist and an expert on free improvisation. Melartin's piano music is very much rooted in lyrical Nordic sentiment in the spirit of Grieg. However, in comparison to Sibelius' darker Northern tone, Melartin's musical idiom often has a lighter and more ethereal tinge. In general, a distinctive feature for Melartin's piano works seems to be a synthesis of Nordic Impressionism, Late Romanticism and Russian Modernism.

Melartin was completely bilingual. He named his works, often alternatingly, either in Finnish or in Swedish, if not using German or classical Italian and French titles. In this recording, the titles of Melartin's piano works are given in Finnish or Swedish, German and English.

*Chips I* [*Lastuja I*], Op. 7 (1898–1900) is a collection of six character pieces or "Lieder ohne Worte" for the piano. The name *Lastuja* refers to a set of detached lyrical thoughts or short novels in Finnish National Romantic literature. Every piece of this collection is

based on a poetic text and with its genuine national feeling it soon made Melartin's name widely known in Finland.

*Legend II*, Op. 12 (1900) was composed in Vienna, but most of the material was derived from Melartin's own incidental music for a symbolistic play by G. Hauptmann. There is much virtuosity and youthful romanticism in the piece, which made it valued by performers and piano students in Melartin's own times.

*The Melancholy Garden* [*Surullinen puutarha*], Op. 52 (1908) is one of the finest lyrical compositions by Melartin, who originally planned it for the orchestra. These five impressionistic tone poems were composed in Viipuri (Vyborg) and at those times, Melartin's personal life was coloured by heartfelt disappointment and loneliness. Melartin dedicated, however, this masterpiece to his contemporary Jean Sibelius, sending his sincere regards and utterance of admiration to the 'dear big brother Jean' in a letter. Sibelius answered saying he was very proud of Melartin's fine gesture: 'I thank you for the Suite, the letter and for the kind words. The Suite is an outstandingly poetical work. You have there found a very apt expression for solitude. I understand you very well.' The cycle has inner pathos and virtuosity, and in those times in Finland it represented a fresh new style with its whole-tone scales and unconventional harmonies.

*Lyrical Pieces for Piano*, Op. 59 (1909) is a collection of five classically titled character pieces for the piano, composed in Viipuri (Vyborg). The charm of these 'album leaves' was recognised and appreciated by piano students and amateur players in Finnish homes. Many of the pieces are dedicated to his music loving friends or admiring young ladies of the local high society.

*The Mysterious Forest* [*Den hemlighetsfulla skogen*], Op. 118 (published 1923) is an exquisite cycle of impressionistic pictures. It is flavoured by pianistically effective and quite modern ideas ranging from obstinate repetition to frag-

mentary expression, use of both low and high register in unisono plus semitone and whole-scales, tritones and flageoletti.

*Six Piano Pieces*, Op. 123 (1924–25) is a collection, where Melartin returned to a more traditional pianism without losing any of his individual tone and musical quality. The opus contains a lot of fresh and naturally flowing music, but, in addition, chromaticism and self-dependent modern harmony at times.

*24 Preludes Op. 85* (1913–1920). In the 24 preludes Melartin joins the tradition of many keyboard composers, and perhaps also plans to give a response to the challenge set by his Finnish colleague Selim Palmgren, a contemporary of his and a composer specialized in piano music, who had composed his 24 preludes already in 1907. Melartin started the work in 1913, but it took him seven years to complete the cycle. Stylistically, the preludes are connected both with classical and romantic models, but also with Debussy, Ravel, Scriabin and Sibelius. Each prelude has a descriptive title, which reflects the musical idea, like 'Japanese Cherry Blossom' or 'Autumn Night'. The preludes got very good reviews e.g. by German critics in the 1920's.

*Noli me tangere*, Op. 87 (1914), meaning 'touch me not', is a cycle of five impressions, often held to be among Melartin's most important piano works. The style in these short pieces refers clearly to the more or less ascetic Scandinavian Impressionism. Some of the pieces, in addition, unfold quite modern dissonant harmonies or even atonal features. The atmosphere is filled with introverted melancholy and desolation.

*Legend I*, Op. 6 (1898) has been through the years one of Melartin's most popular piano piece. It has its roots in lyrical Nordic tone as Melartin admired Grieg in his early years. Melartin uses at times delicately modal harmonies, but in the middle part he opens his young heart to romantic pathos, too.

*Sonata I* (*Fantasia apocaliptica*)

per il pianoforte),

Op. 111 (1920) is Melartin's most extensive piano work, and it can be seen as his main achievement in the field of piano composition. In 1921, the composer himself wrote that he had created 'a wild apocalyptic fantasy, the modern flavour of which is too strong even for the three people who have ever studied the work'. The very expressive and expressionistic sonata was, indeed, practically taken forgotten for decades. In Finnish musical circles, the unpublished sonata had become a distant legend in all its apocalyptic and fantasy-like modernity. Fortunately, the manuscript was found in the 70's, and the sonata was recorded for the first time in 1984.

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