Correspondences – Jean Sibelius in a Forest of Image and Myth

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Thanks to his friends in the arts the idea of a young Jean Sibelius who was the composer-genius of his age developed rapidly. The figure that was created was emphatically anguished, reflective and profound. On the other hand, pictures of Sibelius show us a fashionable, reckless and modern international bohemian, whose personality inspired artists to create cartoons and caricatures. Among his many portraitists were the young Akseli Gallen-Kallela¹ and the more experienced Albert Edelfelt. They tended to emphasise Sibelius’s high forehead, assertive hair and piercing eyes, as if calling attention to how this charismatic person created compositions in his head and then wrote them down, in their entirety, as the score.

Such an image of Sibelius largely conforms to the notion of the artists’ spirituality in late-19th-century art theory: artists were seen as special individuals endowed with the ability to achieve greatness and explore inner worlds. The idea was brewing in the international art world that artists were free, heroic individuals detached from everything mundane and trivial.² The importance of Sibelius for Finnish art of the 1890s is also accentuated by the fact that, according to the symbolist theory of art, music, being ‘immaterial’, was the highest form of art. Sibelius’s synaesthetic propensity to perceive colours and sounds together was also seen as a sign of a true artist.³

¹ Axel Gallén (1865–1930), this form of name until 1907.
² Alongside Realism and Naturalism, the literary movement known as Nietzscheism also developed on the international art scene. In his lectures on Nietzsche in 1888, the Danish writer Georg Brandes disseminated the new philosophy among Scandinavians. Another important influence was the Swedish writer, critic and artist August Strindberg, who had entered his ‘Nietzsche period’. The philosophy, with its mythical culture of superman and mysticism, left its imprint also on Finnish art of the 1880s. The first version of Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s On the Road to Tuonela (1888) portrays a heroic man, a free individual, who is liberated from all that is mundane and ordinary. Sarajas-Korte 1989, 239.
³ Synaesthesia refers to the neurological condition in which the senses intermingle. A sensory stimulus results in a perception belonging to some other sense. A person suffering from synaesthesia may see sounds as colours or taste phonemes. The most common form of synaesthesia is so-called colour hearing, which became activated in Sibelius when he saw colours. For further information on colours and synaesthesia, see Arnkil 2007.
This essay examines Jean Sibelius through the visual art of his day, with a view to discovering how his image was fashioned to correspond to international ideas of art prevalent in the 1890s. It also highlights the way his music influenced the artists around him and their work. On the other hand, it is also obvious that Sibelius drew on influences from contemporary art for his own work as a composer. He was in constant contact with artists and surrounded himself at his home in Ainola with artworks that he both purchased and received as gifts. This fruitful and complex interaction played a central role at a turning point in Finnish art and culture at the beginning of the 20th century, when the art world was undergoing an innovative period of new contacts and internationality.

I am so happy to be able to view paintings in Munich and in particular those of [Franz von] Stuck that Erik [Eero Järnefelt] has pictures of. I will now surely save [money] so that before returning home I will get to Italy – to Venezia. (…) I will take a ‘gallery’ at the opera. I will sit there in my shirtsleeves and enjoy. I am now fully restored to my old self. I will have to try to get out a little every year. Then I will be as I used to be.5

4 On the art works in Ainola, see Hälikkä 2014b, 168–171.
5 Franz von Stuck was a leading Symbolist artist in Germany and later a teacher of Wassily Kandinsky. Jean Sibelius to Aino Sibelius, Bayreuth 23 July 1894. Talas 2003, 52.
International modern art provided links to literature, poetry, music, nationalism and science. The age favoured artists such as Sibelius who might be described as a patriotic cosmopolitan. There was a duality in his work; he was both national and international. Sibelius travelled outside Finland 41 times in all, and throughout his active career he went abroad on average once a year. These travels were also a necessity for the composer, who publicised his music by conducting it with different orchestras. At the same time, he also spent a great deal of time engaging with contemporary art. Travelling nourished inspiration and Sibelius worked on his second symphony in Italy, in Rapallo, on his third in Paris, and on Tapiola in Rome. It is characteristic that, by his own admission, he worked best either in the peace and quiet of the countryside or in a hotel room in the city. This productive dualism is common to many visual artists, too. Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Sibelius’s brother-in-law Eero Järnefelt, as well as Pekka Halonen, all found directions for their art in both urban Paris and the silence of the forest.

The clear references in Sibelius’s music to the mythic world of the Kalevala, to the forces of nature, to the animal kingdom and turn-of-the-century fantasy all contributed to the image of a contemporary composer who was as much at home as a flâneur in Vienna, Berlin and Paris as he was trekking in vast forests or seeking inspiration among the Koli hills.

Composer of the Modern World

Jean Sibelius’s formative years, the end of the 19th century, were a time of great upheaval, with escalating urbanisation and industrialisation and giant leaps in science and technology. The population of Europe grew rapidly and the ideas of socialism began spreading. The ascendancy of the conscious mind was also called into question: the Frenchman Jean-Martin Charcot experimented with hypnosis and his pupil, Sigmund Freud, developed new directions in psychoanalysis. At the turn of the century it became increasingly difficult to see the world as something controlled by humanity; instead it had to be understood as part of a universe in flux.7

The time of change also nourished spiritual movements and many artists developed an interest in new visions such as theosophy, Tolstoyism and esoteric sects. Revivalist movements and reinterpretations of the Bible were also popular among the public and artists alike.8 The circle of Young Finns that grew up around the Päivälehti newspaper, established in 1889 and of which Sibelius was also a member, was inspired by the fashionable study of the spiritual world, spiritism, hypnotism and the increasingly popular theosophy.9 Whereas in the 1880s naturalist art had sought to depict the raw side and finiteness of human life, highlighting social inequality and double standards, artists of the next decade wanted to open the gates of the unconscious and depict a world beyond the visible. As the elevating effect of music was seen as being part of spiritual aspiration, visual artists sought to express musicality and lyricism in their own work.

In a presentation of French symbolist literature in 1882, the Finnish art critic Kasimir Leino made an observation on visual art: ‘What future art will be like is difficult to say. But that it will indeed take into account the symbolist demand for spirituality and content, of that

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6 The young Jean Sibelius had his first contact with urban life when, with his sister Linda and his aunt Evelina, he moved from Hämeenlinna to Helsinki in summer 1885. Sibelius’s financial worries made him enter, in his father’s footsteps, the medical faculty of the Imperial Alexander University, but he soon switched to law. He was already irregularly attending the new Music Institute at this time. From the outset he had his mind set on a career as a celebrated violinist. Goss 2009, 64, 67.

7 Many scientific disciplines saw significant progress: even earlier in the 19th century, the work of Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley had led to disputes about the origin and development of man; biologists such as Louis Pasteur and Ernst Haeckel had spoken about the new and threatening world of micro-organisms and physicians, such as Lord Kelvin, had awakened uncertainty regarding the immutability of the universe. von Bonsdorff et al. 2012, 12–15.

8 On spiritualism in Finland, see Kokkinen 2011, 46–59; internationally, see Owen 2004.

Albert Edelfelt, Composer Jean Sibelius, undated
Indian ink on paper, 36.5 x 20.5cm
Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Yehia Eweis
we may, I think, be certain.'10 Awareness of new directions in art became more pronounced when contacts with Europe were opened up and information circulated, mostly through French periodicals.11 Leino formulated the symbolist idea of art: '[O]bjectivity will disappear and be replaced by subjectivity, and the value of a work of art will depend on how we are able to enjoy it with our eyes, our nerves and our imagination.' According to him, the aspiration to move away from materiality towards spirituality was a unifying trend. Although Leino was discussing French Symbolism, he traced its roots to Germany, to the music of Wagner and the philosophy of Nietzsche.12

I have just heard Parsifal. Nothing in the world has made such an impression on me, it surely moves the innermost strings of the heart. I already thought I was dead wood, but that is not so. (...) In time the child in me will yet begin to live again. That is how it felt today. (...) – I cannot describe how Parsifal enchanted me.13

As photography and the cinema became increasingly prominent vehicles for the visual representation of ‘reality’ in the late-19th century, many poets, artists and composers began gravitating towards the great questions of existence. As science made new conquests, from the microscope to X-rays, art too turned to new dimensions with growing ambition. The Symbolists believed that the artist was endowed with the ability to perceive, in an ecstasy of the soul, the ‘world of ideas’, and also saw deeper than other mortals. Like few others, artists had a sensibility to grasp, in a moment’s intuition, the true nature of the universe and beauty and convey some idea of it to others. In this sense, the personal experience of the artist held an important place in art.

The time was propitious to the thoughts of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, whose conceptual idea was based on the will to live. Blind, unquenchable will, the instinct that creates the phenomenal world, was also known in Finnish art circles. The popularity Schopenhauer gained in the course of the 1890s was based on his pessimism, his contempt for the mundane and his high regard for the artist’s work. The genius was in contact with the true essence of reality through his work.14

Sounding the depths of the artist’s psyche was a modern phenomenon and the idea of ‘self’ began to change in the wake of modern science and psychology. Sigmund Freud’s The Interpretation of Dreams was published in 1899 but its themes had for a considerable time attracted attention in science and culture. Freud’s notions of dreams and of the primal power of sexuality (Eros) and death (Thanatos) were important elements in the imagery of the art of the 1890s. All art sought to depict contrary forces and the sacred and the profane, Christ and the Devil, Eros and Thanatos were recurring motifs. Another important starting point for the new theory of art was the so-called theory of correspondence advocated in the poems of the poet and critic Charles Baudelaire which influenced a great many artists in many different fields.15

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13 Wagner’s other operas did not make a similar impression on Sibelius. Jean Sibelius to Aino Sibelius, Bayreuth 19 July 1894. Talas 2003, 47.
14 Sarajas-Korte 1966, 32, 141.
15 Plato’s theory of ideas and Plotinus’s ecstasy were accompanied by the ideas of the 18th-century Swedish philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), whose works had a powerful influence on late-19th-century mysticism, and also through Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) on the development of the Symbolist theory. The late-19th-century Swedenborg renaissance was made possible by reprints of translations of his texts originally written in Latin. Most of the literary theory of Symbolism was created by Baudelaire. He transposed Plato’s theory of ideas and Swedenborg’s correspondences into aesthetics and opened up to the next generation the possibilities for poetic expression that they created. Sarajas-Korte 1966, 31–34, 60.
When the Door Opens –
Musicality and Lyricism in Visual Art

The artist’s creation of harmonious as well as expressive effects by line and colour is comparable to what the composer creates with rhythm and notes and the poet with prosody. (Baudelaire in 1846)¹⁶

Many artists, irrespective of nationality, made use of dream worlds, utopias and dream landscapes as imageries in their work. Through science or the search for spiritual truth one might be able to come into contact with higher spheres. These disparate influences were not mutually exclusive. Artists used nature, its forms, sounds and colours to express enduring values and the deepest emotions of human experience. It is obvious that Sibelius and his artist friends drew on these influences.

I feel that soon the wonderful world of art will once again open up to me, the world whose beauty I can enjoy to my heart’s content. Nothing else exists in the world, in life or in nature, other than beautiful fairy tales and, when the door opens, you must enter and fill your soul. Art is a great eternal forest where trees grow as thin or as dense as you wish.¹⁷

In 1894, Akseli Gallen-Kallela wrote an evocative text in his sketchbook that is like a poetic credo of the singular connection between art and nature. The text was written in the same year that he painted the triptych En Saga (Jean Sibelius and Fantasy Landscape), inspired by Sibelius’s tone poem of the same name.¹⁸ In late winter of that year, Väinö Blomstedt and Pekka Halonen had travelled to Paris to study under Paul Gauguin, who was back from Tahiti, and in their excited letters home they described how ‘[H]e opens up your eyes so that each of us learns to know his own self, he helps us find that which is most worth presenting in us. (…) All he keeps talking about is [cor]respondence, harmonies we are not used to hearing talked about.’¹⁹

It is therefore not surprising that Gallen-Kallela refers in his text to Baudelaire’s famous poem Correspondences (1857), which was regarded as a cornerstone of the new movement in art. Included in Baudelaire’s Fleur du mal, Correspondences raised thinking to a new level. The ambiguities of the text opened eyes to a layered, complex art. Baudelaire’s poem emphasises the blending of the senses and the intense experience of sensory correspondences in which smells, sounds and colours all enhance each other. The poem also refers to synaesthesia, a property that was valued and regarded as a sign of the right kind of artist.

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¹⁷ Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s entry in his sketchbook XI 12 November, 1894. Published in Okkonen 1961, 325.
¹⁸ The painting is generally called a diptych, because the lower panel, where the notes would have been added, remained empty. Gallen-Kallela, nevertheless, made a hole for them in the passepartout that is there to this day. Although empty, it nevertheless, in my view, expresses the music that Gallen-Kallela wanted to have there, and that is why the third part belongs to the overall piece. See, e.g., Coleman 2014, 137–44. My thanks to William L. Coleman, who let me use his still unpublished manuscript for my research.
Correspondences

Nature is a temple in which living pillars
Sometimes give voice to confused words;
Man passes there through forests of symbols
Which look at him with understanding eyes.
Like prolonged echoes mingling in the distance
In a deep and tenebrous unity,
Vast as the dark of night and as the light of day,
Perfumes, sounds, and colours correspond.20

The world of art and the occult were brought together in the 1890s by the notion of the existence of a higher wisdom and masters who were initiated into its secrets. Some artists were elevated to a special status, and they began to earn such appellations as magician, prophet, preacher, alchemist or priest, all of whom were believed to have the ability to attain spiritual knowledge.21 Sibelius was apparently the only one in his circle who had synaesthesia, which was perhaps why he was placed on a pedestal, albeit strictly in keeping with the then current model, as a seer-master.

For him there existed a strange, mysterious connection between sound and colour, between the most secret perceptions of the eye and ear. Everything he saw produced a corresponding impression on his ear... And this he thought natural, with as good reason as those who did not possess this faculty called him crazy or affectedly original. For this reason he only spoke of this in the strictest confidence and under a pledge of silence. ‘For otherwise they will make fun of me!’22

The writer Adolf Paul23 and Sibelius were close friends and kept up a correspondence throughout their lives, and, as the above quote suggests, Paul apparently understood Sibelius as an artist. Sibelius had a strong tendency to perceive things synaesthetically. Tones, colours, smells and tastes evoked a combined reaction. It is also interesting to note Paul’s recommendation that Sibelius read Schopenhauer’s On Seeing and Colours (1816), in which the philosopher discusses colours and their experience from an entirely new perspective.24 However, Sibelius’s synaesthesia was also present in the most mundane things. In wine, for instance, he was already inspired by its colour: in Rome, the golden yellow of Frascati seemed to him like ‘an ode by Horace’, and the red wine sauce on roast fowl was not perfect until the ‘happy red of C major’ had simmered long enough to become sufficiently ‘melancholy’ or dark.25 Colour reactions were also present in Sibelius’s home. One of the reasons Oscar Parviainen’s painting Funeral Procession was important for Sibelius was its yellow colour. Sibelius heard yellow in D major, whereas the bright green of the Ainola fireplace resounded in F major.26

20 Charles Baudelaire was a French poet, essayist, translator and prominent art critic. His most famous work is the collection of poems Les Fleurs du mal (1857; the English translation used here is from The Flowers of Evil by William Aggeler from 1954). The book was epoch-making and scandalous. Six of the poems were banned immediately on publication. This excerpt consists of the first two stanzas of the poem Correspondences.


22 Ekman 1938, 38–39.

23 For further information on Adolf Paul, see Turtiainen 2011, 71–92; Turtiainen 2014, 72–92.


25 Sibelius website, online publication

26 Lindqvist 1998, 44; on colours, see also Tarasti 1979, 264, 266.
Some of the works depicting Sibelius refer to this peculiar ability. Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa’s *Kullervo* (1892) shows the tense face of Sibelius in profile against a forest scene with Kullervo in the background, but the interesting thing is the horizontal ray of light emanating from Sibelius’s eye. Wettenhovi-Aspa himself was a peculiar artist, a champion of theosophy and a great admirer of Sibelius, who considered himself an expert on the world of the *Kalevala*. This strange addition, a ray of light shining from the eye, is a clear reference both to Sibelius’s peculiar ability and to his role as seer-master. Artist friends had a high regard for Sibelius’s music and found inspiration in it, but nowhere is his uniqueness as an artist and individual in touch with a higher wisdom and truth more keenly expressed than in the way he is depicted in art. This was how seer-masters were depicted in art at the time. Gallen-Kallela’s paintings *En Saga*, *Symposion* and *Problem* (known as *Symposion* from 1904) all show Sibelius staring into the far distance, whereas other figures in the pictures are more present in the action. In Edelfelt’s portrait from 1904, too, part of Sibelius’s high forehead is white, as if to emphasise his ability to compose in his mind. Here, the white colour symbolises a higher spirituality.

In the 1890s referencing music in visual art was no longer new. The American artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler began giving musical titles to many of his paintings in the 1860s after a critic had condemned one of his paintings by calling it *Symphony in White*. Whistler milked the scandal for all it was worth and characteristically developed the matter further. In the following years he gave his paintings such titles as *Symphony*, *Arrangement* and *Nocturne*. The titles of Whistler’s works also call attention to another interesting thing, namely the blending of colour and musical harmony. Whistler’s *Nocturnes* contained allusions to both music and landscape and their titles allude to dusk or darkness and to the evocative compositions of Frédéric Chopin.
This kind of artistic interdisciplinarity was advocated by the French composer Claude Debussy, a member of the younger generation who had also composed nocturnes and in whose music chords and harmonies played an important part. Sibelius and Debussy both wrote music to the texts of Symbolist poets and for Symbolist plays and both were deeply inspired by contemporary painting. It is revealing to read a comment made by Sibelius when he met Claude Debussy in London in 1909: ‘Personal acquaintance with Debussy and many new works, including (…) Debussy’s new songs and the orchestral suite Nocturnes, etc., have all strengthened my vision of the path that I have taken, am taking and which I must henceforth take.’

Sibelius and Debussy both wrote music for Maurice Maeterlinck’s play Pelléas and Mélisande. Other Symbolist works for which Sibelius wrote theatre music include Arvid Järnefelt’s play Death, August Strindberg’s Swanwhite (1908), as well as the poems of Ernst Josephson. Composer Oskar Merikanto wrote in the Päiviälehti newspaper in 1895 about the melodrama The Wood Nymph (Op. 15), based on a poem by Victor Rydberg and set to music by Sibelius: ‘The most beautiful of all Sibelius’s small tone paintings’. Later, in 1909, Sibelius was inspired to write music also for Mikael Lybeck’s Symbolist play Lizard (1908) and Edgar
Allan Poe’s anguished poem *Raven* (1845). Composers’ interest in interdisciplinary art and correspondences produced reverberations as well as cross-overs of all kinds between music, theatre, literature, applied art and, of course, visual art.

To attain musical harmonies, many artists began harmonising their palette in imitation of Whistler. Their desire to depict ‘musicality’ in painting also led to a new conception of the symbolic and emotional meaning of individual colours. Two new palette practices emerged in early Finnish modernism: colour asceticism, which sought to visually express silence, harmony, spirituality and immateriality, and the synthetist palette that was based on unusual colour combinations and the use of maximum colour intensity. An example of colour asceticism is the palette based on black, brown and white in Ellen Thesleff’s *Violin Player* (1896) which is coloristically reduced to the extreme. Hearing one’s inner voice, deep contemplation and the attainment of spirituality, these were the goals. Artists shared the view that music and its exalting power could enable one to enter another world. Players of the *kantele* were often

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Albert Edelfelt, *Larin Paraske’s Lamentations I*, 1893
oil on canvas, 47 x 63cm
deposition, Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Yehia Eweis

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Pekka Halonen, *Kantele Player, 1892*

oil on canvas, 54 x 52 cm

Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum

Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Kirsi Halkola
depicted in a state of trance. Albert Edelfelt’s _Larin Paraske’s Lamentations I_ (1893) and _Kantele Player_ (1892), painted by Pekka Halonen in Ruskeala on a trip to Karelia, are both fine depictions of the mystical state one could attain through music.30 Halonen, who himself played the _kantele_ and held the instrument in high regard, felt there was something deeply evocative in the shamanistic immersion of an unknown rune singer in the sounds of the instrument.31

_When he bangs the beat-up kantele with his rough fingers, stiffened by work, everything in the room falls into harmony. (…) And when he finds an agreeable tune, the strangest expression flashes across his face and the frozen sparkle in his eyes seems to penetrate through the decades all the way to the days and dreams of his youth, reflecting all sorts of life’s adventures. It is such a strange sight that one has to turn one’s face away when one’s eyes become too teary._32

30 Larin Paraske (née Paraskovia Mikiittina) was born in 1833 in a village in North Ingria near the Finnish border. Her ancestors were serfs. In Ingrian communities, folk traditions, such as rune singing, were the women’s responsibility. In 1853 Paraske married a Finn from the village of Vaskela and was freed from serfdom. A hard-working person all her life, she showed charity by caring for orphans. Throughout her life, Paraske memorised folk poems, proverbs and dirges from the area around the Karelian Isthmus. In her poems, her personal experiences were mixed with tradition. Paraske was discovered as a rune singer in 1887 by the clergyman Adolf Neovius, who began writing down the poems and dirges that she sang. When Neovius moved to Porvoo, Paraske, who had been widowed, lived for three years as a member of his family. During this time, she was heard by numerous folklorists and sat for many artists. Hirn 1939, 234–43.

31 Halonen was taught to play by his mother, Wilhelmina Halonen, who was a skilled _kantele_ player. Halonen even built an instrument for himself while in Paris.

Albert Edelfelt, Kaukola Ridge at Sunset, 1889–1890
oil on canvas, 116.5 x 83cm
Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Matti Janas
In his painting, Pekka Halonen has brilliantly captured the singer’s transfixed gaze, as if he were seeing a different world, and the mystical quality of the music. The work differs from other, more ethnographic depictions of rune singers that many artists, Edelfelt and Järnefelt among them, were painting at this time. Sibelius too was an admirer of rune singers and, on a trip to Karelia in 1891, wanted to write down folk melodies. In December the same year he met Larin Paraske in person. Sibelius had, of course, a special interest in the matter but he shared with the painters their enthusiasm for melodies that were perceived to descend from the *Kalevala*.

Following international example, the poetic and musical nocturne became a popular motif in Finnish painting too. Two works by Edelfelt, *Kaukola Ridge at Sunset* (1889–90) and *View over Haikko* (1899), the latter painted for the Finnish Pavilion at the 1900 Paris World Fair, are both images of a summer night in which the hues of the sky, water and forest envelop nature in a harmonious whole, inviting the viewer to contemplation. Many visual artists cultivated references to music. They depicted landscapes using musical devices – systematic horizon lines, harmonic tones and form composition – intuitively, as if writing a score or giving a performance. Painters of musical landscapes were interested not only in the landscape itself but also in its construction. The best example is the Lithuanian artist and composer Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, who wrote music in response to his own paintings and developed a unique style of abstraction ahead of Wassily Kandinsky, who is perhaps more famous for his musical paintings than any other artist.

Although many views emerged regarding musicality in art, we can say that the treatment of the subject began moving towards a simplified idiom in the 1890s; the goal now was Synthetism, the depiction of bare essentials. The reductive Synthetism of artists as different from one another as Paul Gauguin, Ferdinand Hodler and Piet Mondrian highlights the potential of painting to be musical. Landscape as both a visual motif and a source of emotional response allowed artists to adapt the technique of representation: to simplify and organise, alter and harmonise. By 1910, painting had made the shift to complete abstraction. Even earlier abstraction had been regarded as a purer level of representation, one on which musicality could be founded and to which painters too should aspire. The subject was more than just the imitation of reality, as in Paul Gauguin’s famous *Vision After the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (1888). According to the 19th-century idea of art, colour and sound had a direct impact on the senses and emotions, which made them uncontrollable, even dangerous. In the art of the period, the line was associated with reason, colour with emotion, and the thrust was towards simplification and spirituality, a merging of colour and content.

Akseli Gallen-Kallela’s *En Saga* (1894) is in fact a Gauguinesque attempt to capture vision and reality in a single work. Gallen-Kallela, however, separates them into three panels, whereas Gauguin, erstwhile teacher of Väinö Blomstedt and also Halonen, included them all in one picture. The right-hand panel of *En Saga* is a half-length portrait of Jean Sibelius rendered in delicate watercolour tones and loose brushwork, the composer’s ice-blue eyes gazing from under his eyebrows solemnly into the distance. The left-hand panel, a fantasy landscape, is intended as a kind of mental projection inspired by Sibelius’s tone poem *En Saga*. Although the fantasy landscape has been interpreted in many ways, it remains an enigma, a product of the spirit. It can also be seen as an earnest attempt to visually portray musical inspiration. Čiurlionis and Kandinsky both had the same goal. One possibility is that the work

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34 Tawaststjerna 2003, 88.
36 It must be borne in mind, however, that the idea of abstract art was complex and did not focus exclusively on abstraction of form; colours and simplification in general were seen as abstract elements in themselves. von Bonsdorff 2012, 310–12.
37 The painting has also been called *Jean Sibelius as Composer of En Saga*.
38 On Gauguin and Finnish artists, see von Bonsdorff 2012, 233–43.
was simply an attempt to create a collaborative work between a painter and a composer. Although Sibelius did not want to add a score to the picture, the work hung in a central place on the wall throughout his life.\footnote{On Ainola, see Hälikkä 2014a, 164–67.}

The première performance of En Saga was on 16 February 1893. We do not know when Gallen-Kallela heard it for the first time. Nevertheless, its special nature comes across also in a remark by Sibelius himself: ‘En Saga is psychologically one of my most profound works. I could almost say that the whole of my youth is contained in it. It is an expression of a state of mind. At the time I was writing En Saga, I experienced many upsetting things. In no other work have I revealed myself as completely as in En Saga.’\footnote{A subsequent statement by Sibelius to his secretary Santeri Levas. Talas 2003, 27–28.} Sibelius’s work was unique and timely and it led to something quite exceptional in visual art as well. Gallen-Kallela’s En Saga triptych is apparently the only work in Finland, perhaps in the world, in which the artist has sought to
combine music, its composer, as well as the sensory impact of the music on a concrete as well as an abstract level, in a single, multi-part work.

Gallen-Kallela depicted Sibelius in his works either as part of a fantasy landscape which Gallén saw as an image of the visual, mystic flash of *En Saga* – that is what he wanted to capture for his friend – or as part of an intense moment in the *Symposion* paintings, in which the excitement of a late-night get-together and philosophising led to the unfolding of grand questions and worlds. The *Symposion* works gave Sibelius a certain notoriety that even affected the siting of his house in Tuusula, but for Gallen-Kallela the harsh criticism was traumatising. Perhaps the works should be seen as reflections of the then current ideas about art, in which case the Platonic drinking party, already alluded to in the title, would symbolise discussions with composers that inspired the painter to capture the intense moment of collective reflection on the mysteries of life and art.

Many artists sought to attain a greater contact with and sensitivity to the sensory world. This could also involve things like the ‘inner eye’ or ‘sixth sense’. According to Symbolist philosophy, conceptual knowledge is the memory of something our soul has seen previously; knowledge is intuitive remembering. Plato also has a notion, favourite among Symbolists, of universal harmony that governs the cosmos. Even the topical condition of melancholia had an affinity with this type of remembering; it was nostalgia caused by the loss of original beauty and paradise. Melancholia was seen as a creative and exalting emotional state, and it served as a kind of fuel to many artists: ‘Joy, but of the sort that feels more like melancholia’. It is interesting to note how people close to Sibelius sought to influence him and chastised him for ‘dark whims’ during which ‘his spirit is fettered by dark midnight fantasies’ and wanted to force his ‘soul away from the clutches of a symbolical nightmare and into the bright fields of

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Eero Järnefelt, *Aino Sibelius*, 1896, watercolour on paper, 27 x 34cm
*Ainola Foundation*
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen

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41 Sibelius tried to buy a plot near his brother-in-law, Eero Järnefelt, and near the lake. The seller remembered the scandal relating to his appearance in the *Symposion* painting, and refused to sell it to the composer. Tawaststjerna 2003, 170–73.
42 Sarajas-Korte 1966, 30.
43 Tawaststjerna 2003, 119.
Classicism’. They would have him abandon his melancholic symphonic poems and become a bright symphonist.\textsuperscript{44}

Little wonder, then, that Sibelius’s taste in art favours the dark tones of Symbolism. A painter frequently mentioned in conjunction with him is, in fact, Arnold Böcklin, whose \textit{Isle of the Dead} had attained legendary fame as a core work of Symbolist art that circulated in countless printed copies. Sibelius saw the evocative painting on a museum visit to Munich with Armas Järnefelt in 1894. In fact, one of the few visual pieces by Sibelius himself is \textit{Fantasy Landscape} sketched on the back cover of an 1887 quartet, a drawing that resembles \textit{Isle of the Dead} in both composition and subject matter. A dark landscape is bathed in moonlight and a lone ship glides towards the horizon or a white castle. According to his childhood friend,
Walter von Konow, Sibelius was fascinated by ‘the dark recesses of the forest’ and he played at ‘stalking fantasy creatures’. ‘It sometimes felt quite horrible walking beside him through a dark forest.’

There are also other indications that Sibelius observed his surroundings with exceptional sensitivity. Visiting Bayreuth in July 1894, he wrote to Aino about how the lime trees were in bloom and the air filled with their scent. ‘It is so wonderful. I noticed it yesterday when I was taking a break – from smoking.’ Olfactory recollections could acquire poetic and psychological overtones: the smell of a cigar was one of Sibelius’s few memories of his father, who died in 1868.

Gallen-Kallela’s Kalevala-themed works also contain many references to the senses: many of the works have smell, touch, hearing or vision as their theme. Kullervo, with his herd of predators and his horn playing, the touch and gaze of Lemminkäinen’s mother, and Eero Järnefelt’s watercolour of Aino Sibelius smelling a delicate flower with her eyes closed.

The Golden Age

Inspired by the spirit of the ancient Kalevala, artists, composers and architects sought to recover something of the mythic past and the ‘Golden Age’, which once reigned and would now be reinterpreted by them. The letters of Akseli Gallen-Kallela and Pekka Halonen contain repeated references to a ‘new Nordic renaissance’. The rise of national self-esteem was backed by the great weight of the Kalevala; as an epic, it was comparable to Homer’s Iliad and its hero, Väinämöinen, to Apollo and Orpheus.

The most famous interpreters of the ancient world of the epic are Akseli Gallen-Kallela and Jean Sibelius but there are many other artists whose sources and inspiration can be traced back to the pages of the Kalevala, a book they regarded as sacred. In line with theosophical thinking, the Kalevala was seen in the late-1880s as an esoteric tradition hidden from outsiders. In theosophy, all religions and, more broadly, all knowledge derive from a single source. Religions are merely variations of the same timeless knowledge or learning, an immemorial chain of links from different ages. For Gallen-Kallela’s generation, Väinämöinen was one of many initiates into the secret knowledge. The Kalevala had become a holy book, Codex Aureus Fennorum, knowledge which could only be gleaned by the select few.

The 19th century was also an age of great world fairs in Europe. Promotion of the distinctive features of national culture became a key goal for artists in many countries. Displays of exotic faraway cultures at the world fairs inspired artists to examine more deeply the cultural roots of their own country. They drew inspiration from folk poetry and vernacular architecture, from everything they thought would highlight the perceived distinctive features of their own culture. Finnish artists were by no means the only ones on a ‘quest for originality’. Particularly in countries that had not yet achieved independence, such as Finland and Norway, as well as Poland and Hungary, the promotion of distinctive art carried special weight: appearing at a world fair was an extraordinary event. For Finland, this took place at the 1900 Paris World Fair, which has attracted a great deal of attention in Finnish history. The Finnish Pavilion was a total work of art which, combined with the
international première of Sibelius’s *Finlandia* and the works in the great art exhibition, presented the story of Finland with exceptional breadth.\(^5\)

The most famous works on *Kalevala* themes from the 1890s to the 1910s circulated in visual form as paintings, reproductions of paintings, as well as *objets d’art* and textiles, even ornaments. With its emphasis on primitivism and timelessness, the decorative Synthetist style was seen to speak a universal language that had translated the cryptic mythological motifs of

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51 Finland asserted its position also with music. The Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra gave a concert during the Paris World Fair with Robert Kajanus as conductor. Sibelius accompanied them as reserve conductor. One of the musicians was Pekka Halonen’s brother, violinist Heikki Halonen. The programme included Sibelius’s *Finlandia* (1899). Smeds 1996, 324.
Finnish national art into an internationally understandable form. The *Kalevala* was a work of folk poetry and sung oral lore gathered and compiled by Elias Lönnrot and it fascinated artists in all sorts of ways. The age-old pagan tradition of rune singing became a source of inspiration to all arts. One trigger came from music, from the Wagnerian-style compositions created in the early 1880s by Sibelius’s friend, Robert Kajanus, that were inspired by the main themes of Finnish mythology. Folklore themes were subsequently also taken up by Sibelius, whose symphonic poems *Kullervo* (1892) and *Lemminkäinen* (1896) introduced a new level to the popular myths. Sibelius’s intensely sensory tonal world spoke of the strength and union between nature and archaic Finnish culture. These notes also reverberated in Gallen-Kallela’s paintings. *Lemminkäinen’s Mother* (1897) was, in fact, originally named *Lemminkäinen in Tuonela* after the second movement of Sibelius’s composition. 

There were also artists, among them Pekka Halonen, who felt the *Kalevala* to be such a sacred book that its motifs should not be depicted directly. All readers of the *Kalevala* have their own images in their soul, and they cannot easily be replaced with others. The *Kalevala* has no need for our pictorial help or literary interpretation. (...) I think its impregnating effect should instead come about through inner understanding and assimilation, particularly as concerns art. Sibelius’s music was thus an important mediator for many: Halonen’s large painting *Maidens on the Headlands* (1895) was inspired by Sibelius’s *Boat-Ride*. 

One background influence was Charles Baudelaire, who, in his 1863 essay *The Painter of Modern Life*, championed archaic expression. Baudelaire recommended that artists abandon the central perspective, advising them to follow the example of Egyptian and early renaissance artists in order to emphasise the musical, that is harmonic, elements of the work. He encouraged them to return to the power and harmony of archaic art. Baudelaire felt that complex and abstract ideas could best be presented though the intentional simplification of form and colour. In discussing Gauguin’s art and his synthesis of Symbolist art, the critic Gustave-Albert Aurier demanded ‘Walls, walls, give him walls!’ Aurier considered murals to be the greatest form of art of his day and the real goal of decorative art. 

Artists who were inspired by frescoes, such as Gallen-Kallela and Halonen, wanted to imitate their beautiful properties in their paintings. Because fresco painting was virtually an impossible technique to use in Finnish climate conditions, many artists experimented with gouache and tempera, which they thought best reproduced the thin, matte surface typical of frescoes. Just like ancient Egyptian and early renaissance frescoes which Baudelaire encouraged artists to admire, decorative murals on *Kalevala* themes were simultaneously carefully designed and reductively simple. In keeping with the ideals of Modernism advocated at the turn of the century, the works depict simultaneously something from the past in art of the future, but also a future in the past. The modern idea of art had created a conception of...
its own temporality, of ‘historicity’.\textsuperscript{59} Decorative art was particularly suited to the depiction of mythological events and complex stories. The large size of the works, the simplified form and flat, two-dimensional perspective were all facets of the new decorative art that Gallen-Kallela, for one, adopted for his \textit{Kalevala}-themed works.

The powerful emotional experience of \textit{Lemminkäinen’s Mother} (1897) is intensified by its archaic form and intense tempera colours. As Eero Tarasti has pointed out, the black and red colours also symbolise Fenno-Karelian colours.\textsuperscript{60} The medieval references and sense of antiquity in fresco-like art together form an interesting combination of pagan \textit{Kalevala} tradition and Christian heritage. Employing the timeless and immemorial motif of maternal love, Gallen-Kallela encapsulates the universal message of his work as if following the principles of theosophy. In \textit{Kalevala}, Lemminkäinen is a war hero and womaniser who dies when he attempts to shoot the mystical red swan of Tuonela, a bird that is beyond life and death. The narcissistic Don Juanesque hero also illustrates the problem of divided self and super-ego.\textsuperscript{61} Lemminkäinen’s mother succeeds in reviving her son by turning to higher powers. A golden bee brings the force of life back from the realm of the living, expressed by golden rays. In order to attain the greatest possible emotional intensity, Gallen-Kallela used his own mother as the model for \textit{Lemminkäinen’s Mother}. The sensual battle between life and death is captured in the painting precisely because of its intimacy. The work combines the universal with the subjective, the modern with the timeless.

The closest artist to Jean Sibelius, however, was neither Akseli Gallen-Kallela nor Pekka Halonen but the lesser known Oscar Parviainen. A few mentions survive of their special relationship and their correspondence also sheds light on the matter. Sibelius even sent a small composition to Parviainen to comfort him during an illness in 1919 and, as Parviainen’s comment reveals, it played a big part in his recovery: ‘Master – Many a long, long night have I lain here and listened to the owls hooting for help in the forest. (…) I beseech you to send me a few lines of music, someone can always play them to me when all is quiet and still. For nine weeks have I thought of asking you for help and now I can no longer wait and that is the reason for this bold prayer to you Master. (…) You understand I am desperate and yearn for a sound that would lift me up again.’\textsuperscript{62} In reply, Sibelius sent him the concept for \textit{Sonnet} (Op. 94, No. 3), and Parviainen wrote later: ‘Master – It was as though lightning passed through me and I was alive again – A song of rejoicing from the angels of heaven! I was like a small child and you do understand that you have set me on my feet once again.’\textsuperscript{63}

Sibelius’s music had influenced Parviainen intensely earlier and inspired him to paint. In 1906 he wrote from Paris: ‘[Y]our funeral march echoes in my ears and I make sketch after sketch. The book is hidden in my drawer so that no one can get it but when the sketch is finished I will send it to you.’\textsuperscript{64} In 1908, Sibelius wrote to Parviainen, thanking him for \textit{Funeral Procession}: ‘How shall I be able to thank you for your magnificent gift? I recognise your Parisian ideas, although they have developed considerably. For I cannot, as a layman, tell you anything except the impression that your work has had on me and it has been singular and deep.’\textsuperscript{65}

The most powerful work owned by Sibelius is, nevertheless, Parviainen’s \textit{Invocation} or \textit{Child’s Death}, which was a response to a family tragedy: Sibelius’s daughter Kirsti died in 1900. Parviainen was inspired by Sibelius’s improvisation and wanted his own work to have an

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item Tarasti 1979, 229, 237.
\item For more on the subject, see Mäkelä 2007, 206.
\end{thebibliography}
intense dark red and the darkest black. The large canvas still hangs in Ainola in front of the grand piano, the place where Sibelius played, composed and worked. In the dark, sorrowful painting, a skeletal figure – death – is seen shimmering behind the child’s white bed, waiting. The mother has buried her head next to the child. In a fit of emotion, Sibelius thanked Parviainen: ‘Brother, your wonderful picture is next to my piano and I play to it, i.e. you, every day. Please accept my thanks, O imaginative master of sentiment and art!! I feel myself enriched that you have opened your soul to my innermost being.’

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Akseli Gallen-Kallela, The Great Black Woodpecker, 1893, gouache on paper, 145 x 90cm
Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Pirje Mykkänen
Speaking Trees, Personified Animals – Nature as Inspiration

Dear Uncle!

(…) Yesterday I played out on the hill, on top of the large boulder which you saw, and I imagined that the entire hill was an orchestra. The crows were oboes, magpies bassoons, gulls clarinets, thrushes violas, chiffchaffs violins, doves cellos, song thrushes flutes, the farm rooster the conductor and the pig a percussionist. You can only imagine what a dangerous situation it was and how I had to retreat in haste, because the violas began messing me. I moved to another place a little lower, but it was even worse. They tried indeed to shout me down, but I gave them what they deserved,

Your very own,

Janne.

The landscape was a superb subject for the turn of the century, because, under the prevalent perception, experiences in nature were special and also sensitising to artists. For Baudelaire too, nature was an inexhaustible repository of general analogies, signs. For a poet, everything was ‘significant, everything was symbolic, everything was hieroglyphic’. Baudelaire also saw the mutual analogy between the senses: ‘[W]hat would be truly surprising would be to find that sound could not suggest colour, that colour could not evoke the idea of a melody, and that sound and colour were unsuitable for the translation of ideas.’

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68 Jean Sibelius to Pehr Sibelius, 10 July 1885. Sibelius. The Hämeenlinna Letters 1997, 72, 156; Goss 2009, 63.

69 Baudelaire, L’Art Romantique 1954, 1085–86.
Artists altered landscapes in order to express certain states of mind – with subtlety, simplifying or changing. Certain elements too, such as allusions to the sounds of nature, were common to both Sibelius and artists. Sibelius drew influences for his compositions from landscapes in an idiosyncratic way, internalising his experiences as emotional evocations and even structures for his symphonies.\(^70\)

Gallen-Kallela’s *The Great Black Woodpecker* (1893), often regarded as a self-portrait, is a prime example of the use of nature as metaphor. ‘The cry of an individual’s life in the silence of the wilderness’, as Gallen-Kallela himself described it, shows how the magical dimensions of nature were an important part of the world of *Kalevala*. The metamorphosis
of a human being into an animal is a common element in many stories of the epic. The new subjective character of the work, with the bird representing the artist himself, and the profound celebration of the pristine and primitive nature of the wilderness in the motif link the painting with the new, mystical art. Pekka Halonen sought the same effect in Winter Day (1895), in which he has skilfully captured the brilliant blue of the sky, the nuances and blue shadows on the snow. From the bottom left corner, a hare lopes diagonally up towards the snow-covered slope. The unusual, intensely diagonal composition creates an impression that the artist is viewing the scene from behind the hare, blending himself into the animal like a shaman or his own alter ego.
I have swans in my mind all the time, and they give brilliance to life. It is odd to see that nothing in the whole wide world, not in art, literature or music, affects me as much as these swans + cranes + bean geese. Their calls and their being.

The swan was an important symbolic animal for Sibelius. It also crops up in many paintings, from Lemminkäinen’s Mother to Magnus Enckell’s Fantasy (1895) and Lennart Segerstråle’s Swans in Fog (1914) that adorns a wall in Ainola. Segerstråle’s work carried a very special significance for Sibelius. The mystical swan of Tuonela has travelled from Sibelius’s composition to many visual interpretations. The nature around Lake Tuusula and the annual migration of swans are captured legendarily in the soundscapes of Sibelius’s years in Ainola. The composer’s brother-in-law, Eero Järnefelt, was in turn fond of depicting great crested grebes and frogs among the reeds on the shores of Lake Tuusula.

Pekka Halonen, who, like Sibelius, remained in the Tuusula artist community for the rest of his life, created his best-known work there — the famous snowy landscapes, inspired by international art. The influences that made him a painter of winter exoticism came from Paul Gauguin and Japanese art. The surroundings of his studio home, Halosenniemi, with their steep cliffs and the shoreline views of the lake changing with the seasons, provided the artist with an inexhaustible source of inspiration that he called his own Louvre.

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winter scenes had become a popular theme among nationalist-minded artists in Finland in the 1890s. Snowy landscapes were felt to be ‘the finest exoticism of the North’.75

Halonen’s Winter Forest (1915) which the artist gave to Sibelius as a present on the composer’s 50th birthday, is also a tribute to the magnificent pine trees at Ainola. The frost-covered branches and needles create sinuous forms, emphasising the red tones of the trunks against the snow. The viewer can almost feel the bite of the cold air. Halonen and Sibelius shared an intense, affective relationship with nature that provided endless inspiration to both artists. ‘16 November. How to attain that “peace of the soul” Pekka Halonen speaks about?’ Sibelius wrote in his diary in 1933–34.76 As late as May 1947, Sibelius wrote poignantly about what swans meant to him: ‘[W]ild swans swim in our lake — they will take to the wing at dawn. Although I cannot see them anymore, I rejoice that I can breathe the same air as they.’77

**Timeless Sibelius**

Many stories of modern art could be written on the basis of Sibelius’s life, particularly as the sparks of his music flew from the 20th century to the present day. Sibelius’s most prolific period was during 1890s–1930s, a time of revolutions in art as well as music.78 Generations changed also in Finnish art. In the course of the 1890s, Albert Edelfelt passed into the group of older artists, whereas Gallen-Kallela and his peers reached the status of revered models. At meetings of the Finnish Art Society in the 1910s, Gallen-Kallela, Halonen and Järnefelt found themselves suddenly members of the opposition advocating the cause of older artists, while Tyko Sallinen and his ilk represented the young. On the other hand, Halonen’s art found a second wind in the early 1900s through the spirit of Neo-Impressionism and Expressionism after he had moved close to his artist friends, the Ahos, Järnefelts and Sibeliuses, and built his studio home on the shore of Lake Tuusula. But in art, new generations were already in power.

Among the works of art owned by Sibelius, Tyko Sallinen’s Landscape (1914), a rural view painted with sinuously rhythmic brushstrokes, represents the newer, expressionist style. On the other hand, Halonen too is represented in Ainola by two colouristic landscapes from the 1900s, which, from the testimony of photographs, used to occupy pride of place in the living room. The art surrounding the Sibeliuses in Ainola was thus from many different decades. Although Gallen-Kallela and Halonen, who were born in the same year, lagged hopelessly behind changes in the art world in the 1920s, Sibelius’s position in Finland never wavered, nor was the creative power of his works ever questioned. Perhaps the painters were right: the abstract character of music is indeed more timeless than art.

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75 In the 1890s winter scenes became more common as the subject for large canvases in Finnish art. Winter themes also hold a prominent place in the book *Suomi 19:nellä vuosisadalla (Finland in the 19th Century)*, edited by Leo Meckelin. By the turn of the century, the subject was considered to be of such national importance that, of the paintings adorning the pavilion at the 1900 Paris World Fair, nearly half had winter as their theme. See, e.g., Konttinen 2001, 234–35.

76 Tawaststjerna 2003, 434.

77 Tawaststjerna 2003, 445.

78 Mäkelä 2007, 194–95.
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