

Episode 15

History of Hymns

BE STILL, MY SOUL

NARRATOR: The views and opinions expressed here are those of the guests and are not the official position of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

[BEGIN MUSIC]

NARRATOR: Germany, in the late 1600s and early 1700s was largely Lutheran and was experiencing a religious revival known as the Pietistic Revival. Philipp Jacob Spener was the leader of this movement, which encouraged small bible study groups, personal works of righteousness and congregational hymn singing. The Pietists also encouraged laymen in the church to express their devotion by writing hymn texts that were subjective, emotional and more expressive than traditional Orthodox Church music had been to that time.

Her last name, von Schlegel, indicates that she was likely born to an aristocratic family. She was Lutheran and may have been canonist of an evangelical women's seminary, but apart from that, not much is known of Katharina Amalia Dorothea von Schlegel who wrote the text of "Be Still, My Soul."

One fact though is certain: She knew her scriptures well, both the Old and the New Testaments. In her hymn, she wove together in a creative and remarkable way a whole series of scriptural themes and references to biblical events.

Katharina was born in Köthen, Germany, on October 22, 1697, twelve years after Johann Sebastian Bach who was born 80 miles away in Eisenach. Though Bach was not born in her town, he did serve six years in the court of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Köthen as Kapellmeister or director of music from the time Katharina was 20 years old until she was 25. Some believe that Katharina was also attached to the ducal court and therefore may have known the brilliant organist and composer.

Katharina was a poetess and her first known published work was "Stille, mein Wille, dein Jesus hilft siegen" in the 1752 book "Neue Sammlung geistlicher Lieder." Katharina wrote at least 20 hymns and several were published in 1774 in a collection of spiritual songs called "Köthenische Lieder."

100 years after its first publication in the German language, "Stille, mein Wille" was translated into English by Jane L. Borthwick in Scotland and published in "Hymns from the Land of Luther, Series 2," which Jane and her sister Sarah Borthwick Findlater jointly prepared, titled in English, "Be Still, My Soul." This hymn was originally sung to several other tunes, none of which was a lasting combination. Katharina von Schlegel wrote many verses to her hymn but Jane translated only five, three of which are generally sung today.

(END MUSIC)

(BEGIN MUSIC)

NARRATOR:

Johann Julius Christian Sibelius, known as Janne to his family, was born December 8, 1865 in Hämeenlinna in southern Finland, about 60 miles north of Helsinki. As a youth, inspired by the business card of a seafaring uncle, he began using the French form of his first name, Jean, and was forever after known as Jean Sibelius.

Finland was at the time ruled by the Russian Empire but was experiencing a rise in nationalistic feeling, a yearning to be free from foreign rule and to establish its identity as a Finnish-speaking people and as a sovereign nation. In this climate, Jean Sibelius began his study of law at what is now the University of Helsinki, but his love of music led him to quit his law studies and study music at the Helsinki Music School, which is now called the Sibelius Academy. Jean later continued his music studies both in Berlin and in Vienna, finishing in 1891. On the 10th of June, 1892, Jean married Aino Järnefelt and their marriage lasted 64 years—until Jean’s death—and produced six daughters.

In 1899, Jean wrote a symphonic poem for Helsinki’s press celebrations, a covert protest against growing censorship by the Russian empire. Much of the piece is vigorous and turbulent, representing the Finnish people’s national struggle, but toward the end, the serenely melodic “Finlandia Hymn” is introduced. Sibelius later reworked this hymn into a stand-alone piece, and with words by Veikko Koskenniemi, it became a Finnish national favorite.

Jean and his wife Aino built a home on the banks of Lake Tuusula, 38 km north of Helsinki, among a small colony of other artists in 1903. The Finnish landscape surrounded him there in an idyllic setting and served as inspiration for many of his compositions. Jean Sibelius eventually wrote seven symphonies, more than 100 songs for voice and piano, chamber music, piano music, choral music, tone poems, a violin concerto, incidental music for 13 plays, the opera “The Maiden in the Tower” and Masonic ritual music. He composed prolifically until 1927 but for the last 31 years of his life, he composed no major works, confining himself to reediting earlier works and writing some Masonic music. In that same year, 1927, Katharina’s hymn text, translated by Jane Borthwick, was paired with Jean Sibelius’ melody, “Finlandia,” and a favorite setting for the text was found.

[END MUSIC]

Jean Sibelius died in 1957 at his home, leaving us with—among many others—the beautiful melody to a best-loved hymn, “Be Still, My Soul.”

[BEGIN MUSIC]

The Brigham Young University Concert Choir sings its rendition of “Be Still, My Soul.”

(Music: Brigham Young University Concert Choir, “Be Still, My Soul.”)

[END MUSIC]

[BEGIN MUSIC]

NARRATOR: Michael Dowdle plays his classical guitar arrangement of the “Hymn from Finlandia,” the melody for “Be Still, My Soul.”

(Music: Michael Dowdle, “Hymn from Finlandia” [instrumental])

[END MUSIC]

NARRATOR: Voice Male sings an a-cappella arrangement of “Be Still, My Soul.”

[BEGIN MUSIC]

(Music: Voice Male, “Be Still, My Soul.”)

[END MUSIC]

[BEGIN MUSIC]

NARRATOR: Christina England sings a Jay Richards arrangement of “Be Still, My Soul.”

(Music: Christina England, “Be Still, My Soul.”)

[END MUSIC]

[BEGIN MUSIC]

NARRATOR: Let’s listen now to Jenny Oaks Baker as she plays Tyler Castleton’s arrangement of “Be Still, My Soul.”

(Music: Jenny Oaks Baker, “Be Still, My Soul” [instrumental])

[END MUSIC]

[BEGIN MUSIC]

NARRATOR: The Mormon Tabernacle Choir and Orchestra at Temple Square perform a Mack Wilberg arrangement of “Be Still, My Soul.”

(Music: Mormon Tabernacle Choir and Orchestra at Temple Square, “Be Still, My Soul.”)

NARRATOR: Thanks to Karen Lynn Davidson for material from her book “Our Latter-Day Hymns: The Stories and the Messages.”

[END MUSIC]