

# Organ music of Finland: A Nordic journey

By James D. Hicks

"Be very careful with these keys. They are the keys to Finland."

Thus said the titular organist of Turku Cathedral, Markku Hietaharju, as he handed me an enormous ring that appeared to be some long-lost artifact from the middle ages. Possession of these keys entitled one to climb several floors that concluded with a winding staircase, all leading to a lofty perch overlooking the cathedral's magnificent edifice.

My goal in this arduous ascent was accessing the console of the cathedral's gargantuan pipe organ, built in 1980 by the Finnish Virtanen firm. The narrow confines of this space were to be my home during the last days of June 2016 as I performed a concert that premiered a number of newly written works by Nordic composers and recorded a double-disc set devoted to the music of Finland: *Nordic Journey* Volume VI.

Pipe organs have existed for millennia as the ancient Greeks and Romans are known to have employed hydraulically powered instruments in their public arenas. The western Christian Church realized over the past 1,000 years that organs placed in resonant stone spaces produced extraordinary music. In the relatively quiet centuries before the onset of the industrial revolution, organs located in European cathedrals and churches could make an awe-inspiring sound.

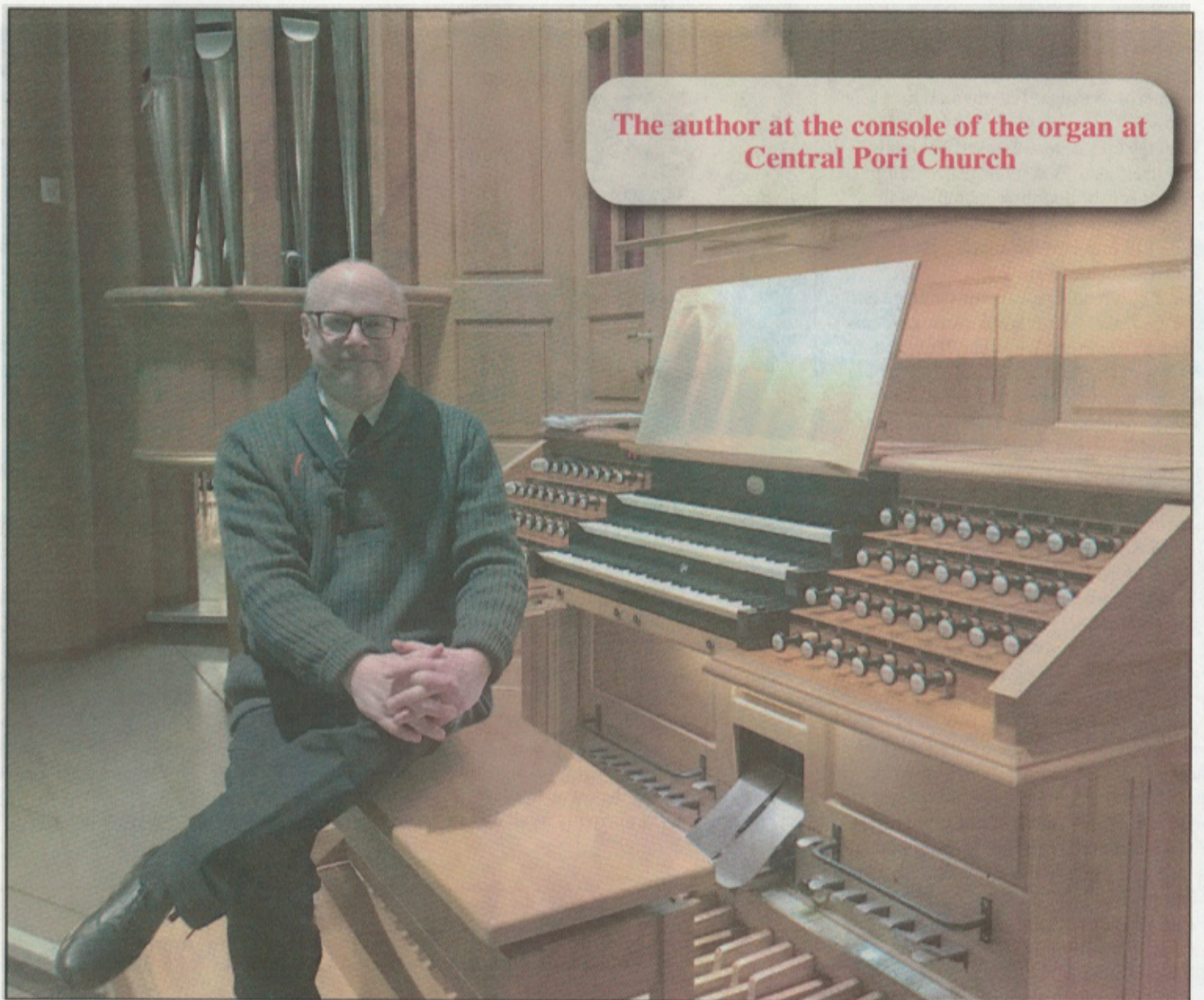
The advanced technology of the organ and the plethora of tonal possibilities they commanded inspired the prominent early seventeenth-century German composer Michael Praetorius to exclaim in his treatise *"Syntagma Musicum,"* "the organ is the most perfect instrument which takes pride of place above all other musical instruments, most of which can be incorporated into this single instrument."

While Germany and France have long occupied center stage in the world of organ culture, Finland's delayed prominence into this niche reflects its many centuries of incorporation into both the Swedish and the Russian Empires and subsequent impressment into numerous wars.

While the first mention of an organ's existence dates back to a 16th-century installation in Turku Cathedral, it was not until the latter part of the 19th century that Finland hit its stride and began producing both excellent instruments and music composed for them by its composers. As the 19th century gave way to the 20th, the music of Finland quickly entered a golden age. This was a time of national renewal and rediscovery of native artistic expression.

The early works of Jean Sibelius, including compositions such as his setting of the national epic *"Kalevala,"* spoke to this urge to break free from foreign domination. In this cultural milieu, a native school of Finnish composers emerged, artists who could write idiomatically conceived music for the organ in their version of the late Romantic style. The works for organ by such musicians as Oskar Merikanto (1868-1924), Fredrik Isacsson (1883-1962), John Granlund (1888-1962), and Väinö Raitio (1891-1945) quickly established the foundation of a unique, Finnish repertoire for "the king of instruments."

It is the music of this school of composers that was my gateway into the rich and immensely rewarding study of Finnish music for the organ. Performing for the first time at Turku Cathedral and at Helsinki's Kallio Church in 2013, I was welcomed by organist Ville Urpöne, lecturer of organ music at Taideyliopiston Sibelius-Academia in Helsinki. Urponen proved to not only be a gracious host, but was also willing to share his exten-



sive familiarity with this branch of musical knowledge. Urponen's groundbreaking book *"Intomielisen nuoruuden vääjäämätöntä voimaa"* illuminates the organs of a century ago and the music these composers wrote in a compelling way.

Gaining access to many unpublished manuscripts at the Sibelius museum, Turku afforded me the opportunity to discover many excellent works from previous eras. These initial pursuits inspired me to further my conversance with this school as I made a concerted effort to learn as much as possible concerning 20th century and contemporary Finnish organ repertoire, visit additional libraries, sheet music stores, and meet other Finnish musicians, all this being a lasting legacy from my sojourn in southern Finland.

It was this experience that proved to be a turning point in my own Nordic journey.

Three years earlier in 2010, I had recorded what I thought probably would be a one-off project of Nordic music in Sweden. As a result of my Finnish explorations what had been conceived as a short-term undertaking immediately changed to today's ongoing series: *"Nordic Journey."* My subsequent concert experiences in Finland, and the discovery of so much excellent repertoire educated me considerably to the wide variety of organs existing in the country as well as the rich tradition of music that emanated from these instruments. From the organs of the Kangasalan firm at the cathedrals in Tampere and Oulu dating from the 1930s, whose warm, burnished tones proved to be so ideal for Finnish Romantic repertoire, to neo-classic installations such as at Naantali Church, providing crystal clear voicing for more recent, contrapuntally-oriented music, to finally, outstanding modern organs such as the ones located at St. Michael's Turku and Kupio Cathedral, whose versatility allows for the interpretation of all styles, my respect for the Finnish organ tradition only became stronger.

This variety in organ styles can be detected in the recording mentioned at the beginning of this article: *Nordic*

*Journey* Volume VI, recorded both at Turku Cathedral and St. Michael's Church, located a short distance away. The collection instilled the pattern that has informed all five of the subsequent recordings that I have made in Norway, Iceland, Sweden and Denmark: the creation of new music (the series now includes 50 commissioned works by Nordic composers), the rediscovery of unpublished and/or forgotten works from previous eras, and the inclusion of some of the more celebrated mainstream opuses. These organs were able to faithfully interpret a quite diverse body of works from the Romantic period up to recent creations.

A key development into my understanding of the cultural legacy of Finland was the discovery of the publishing firm Edition Tilli. Powered by Johann Tilli, an acclaimed bass in Finnish vocal circles for many years, Edition Tilli has been instrumental in providing premiere editions of previously unpublished Finnish music of many styles and varying media. Mr. Tilli and I are now collaborating on bringing to life organ music that has dwelled in obscurity for a century. As this edition of *"The Finnish American Reporter"* goes to press, I will emerge from my long pandemic period of enforced seclusion and present the first modern performance of a work from 1920, Sonata no. 2 in G minor by Arvo Karvonen (1888-1969) at Finland's Kerimäki Church. Performing on a late-19th-century instrument located in the world's largest wooden church, this program will include several of our collaborations.

Another example of how *Nordic Journey* has aligned with the work of Edition Tilli will be an upcoming August 2021 concert I am playing at the iconic Helsinki Cathedral as a part of the annual Helsinki Organ Summer. The program will include the results of a three-way collaboration that creates something new out of something old. Turku-based musician John Granlund composed an unfinished Prelude and Fugue at some point during the second decade of the 20th century. Finding a copy of the original manuscript, I commissioned New York

composer and organist Professor Walter Hilse to complete the fugue in the style of the original composition. With Mr. Tilli engraving a new modern edition, I will be excited to share the initial performance of this hybrid work in the cathedral's magnificent space.

My current fascination with Finnish music and culture continues this coming November as I travel to Pori, Finland to record the triple-disc *Nordic Journey* Volume XI.

The 2007 Paschen organ at Pori Central Church is one of the most notable modern installations in Finland. Conceived as a modern interpretation of an organ from the French symphonic school, this instrument will be an ideal vehicle for the recording of the complete works of John Granlund, additional selections by Väino Raitio, and premiere performances of commissioned works by Lars Karlsson, Marcus Malmgren, and Santeri Siimes.

The emphasis on "all things Finnish" continues in 2022's projected *Nordic Journey* Volume XII, a project that returns me to Turku, but this time to the historic 1936 Kangasalan instrument located at St. Martin's.

The Finnish organ heritage provides musical reward for both the seasoned aficionado and the casual listener. An organ tour of the country might include everything from the c. 1791 Schwan organ located in the southwestern village of Nagu to the largest organ currently existing in the country at Lapua Cathedral, an instrument consisting of eighty-eight registers distributed over four keyboards and foot pedals.

New installations are on the horizon, most notably the projected 2022 organ by the Austrian Rieger Orgelbau in the concert hall of the Helsinki Music Centre. This new instrument will be the largest concert hall organ in the world with one hundred twenty-three registers and around ten thousand pipes.

An organ composition competition will be an integral part of the instrument's inauguration and will be a symbol of Finland's ongoing support for the music for "the king of instruments."