

June 14, 2020

Hymns We Love: Be Still My Soul

We owe the epic hymn, *Be Still My Soul*, to two remarkable women. We know very little about Katharina von Schlegel (1697- sometime after 1768), other than the fact that she was one of a very few female Lutheran hymn-writers. Her hymns were part of the Pietist movement within Lutheranism that combined an emphasis on biblical doctrine with individual piety and a life of personal devotion. In 1752, she wrote the hymn for which she is remembered: *Stille mein Wille, dein Jesus hilft siegen*, which was translated into English in 1855 as *Be Still, My Soul* by an individual who published it under the pseudonym, “H.L.L.”

It was not until 1867 that “H.L.L.” was revealed to be Jane L. Borthwick (1813-1897), a Scotswoman who apparently was quite unhappy to lose her anonymity. Borthwick became enamored with Lutheran hymns while residing for a time in Switzerland. When she returned to Scotland, she and her sister Sarah translated and published 122 German hymns under the title, *Hymns from the Land of Luther*, the most famous being *Be Still, My Soul*.

The American premiere of Jean Sibelius’ orchestral tone poem *Finlandia* took place right here in Connecticut, when the composer conducted it at the Norfolk Music Festival during his first visit to the U.S. in 1914. The magnificent theme of the central chorale of the work expresses the hope of the Finnish people for the dawning of a new era of freedom for their country, which was then under the subjugation of Russia. Sibelius’ stirring theme was the perfect vehicle to express all the longing and emotion felt in the text of *Be Still, My Soul* when, in 1927, the words and music were combined for the first time in *The Church Hymnary, Revised*.

I can’t think of a more appropriate hymn in which we can find comfort as we continue to pray for our nation:

Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side;

Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;

Leave to thy God to order and provide;

In every change he faithful will remain.

Be still, my soul: thy best, thy heavenly friend

Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Take care, and keep singing!

Listen to *Be Still, My Soul*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdOBuD4gvW0>

Listen to *Finlandia* (Choral Version) by Jean Sibelius: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fE0RbPsC9uE>

