

History of Hymns: "Be Still, My Soul"

by C. Michael Hawn

"Be Still, My Soul"

Katherine von Schlegel; trans. Jane Borthwick;
The United Methodist Hymnal, No. 534

*"Be still, my soul: the Lord is on your side.
Bear patiently the cross of grief and pain;
leave to your God to order and provide;
in every change God faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul: your best, your heavenly friend
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*

The formation of "Be Still, My Soul" as it appears in our hymnal covers three countries – Germany, Scotland, and Finland – and well over 100 years.

Little is known about the author of this hymn. Katharina Amalia Dorothea von Schlegel was born in 1697. The date of her death is unknown. As her name suggests, she may have come from an aristocratic family. Other than that she was connected with a small court at Köthen, north of Halle, in Germany, little is known of her life. Some hymnologists suggest that she may have become a Lutheran nun. We know her as the author of "Stille, mein Wille; dein Jesus hilft siegen" published in a collection entitled *Neue Sammlung geistlicher Lieder* (A new collection of spiritual songs) in 1752, one of several of her texts included there.

This text appears at the time of German pietism, similar in spirit in many regards to the Wesleyan revival in England of the same era. Philipp Jacob Spener (1635-1705) led the German pietistic movement. Though not a hymn writer himself, he inspired a revival in German hymnody characterized by faithfulness to Scripture, personal experience, and deep emotional expression. Katharina von Schlegel is thought to be the leading female hymn writer of this period.

The hymn comes to us via a translation by Jane L. Borthwick (1813-1897), a member of the Free Church of Scotland. Borthwick was second only to Catherine Winkworth (1827-1878) in bringing the riches of German hymn heritage to the English language. Her translation included five of the original six stanzas, appearing in *Hymns from the Land of Luther*, second series (1855).

*Be still, my soul: when dearest friends depart,
and all is darkened in the vale of tears,
then shalt thou better know his love, his heart,
who come to soothe thy sorrow and thy fears.
Be still, my soul: thy Jesus can repay
from his own fondness all he takes away.*

*Be still, my soul: begin the song of praise
on earth, be leaving, to thy Lord on high;
acknowledge him in all thy words and ways,
so shall he view thee with a well-pleased eye.
Be still, my soul: the Sun of life divine
through passing clouds shall but more brightly shine.*

The tune FINLANDIA complements this stirring poem wonderfully. The melody comes from a symphonic tone poem by Jean Sibelius (1865-1957) by the name of *Finlandia*, Op. 26. Sibelius wrote it as a patriotic offering in 1899 with a revision in 1900. This composition was performed as the final of seven pieces as the music to accompany a series of tableaux, each reflecting portions of Finnish history. Out of agitated and tumultuous opening music, symbolizing the struggles of the Finnish people, emerges the serenity of the hymn-like melody we know as FINLANDIA, symbolizing hope and resolution.

The Peace Celebrations of 1899 provided the political backdrop for the composition as well as a subtle protest by the composer against the rising censorship from Russia felt in the nearby Scandinavian countries. The censorship was so intense that the composition could not be programmed publically under its formal title *Finlandia*, as the Russian Empire would deem that too patriotic. In order to please the Russian censors, other titles were devised such as "Happy Feelings at the Awakening of Finnish Spring."

Finally, David Evans (1874-1948), a Welsh Oxford-trained organist-choirmaster and music professor, matched the translation with the tune for the *Revised Church Hymnary* (London, 1927). This pairing was brought to the United States when it was used in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. for *The Hymnal* (1933).

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