Helvi Leiviskä's Piano Concerto in D minor, Op. 7

I am not afraid of many things, but I do fear Helvi's piano concerto.
— **Ernst Linko —**

Helvi Lemmikki Leiviskä (1902–1982) was born in Helsinki into a clerical family. She received a thorough musical education at the Helsinki Conservatory (later the Sibelius Academy) under Erkki Melartin, and in Vienna under Arthur Willner. Nevertheless, Leiviskä never earned her living as a composer; instead, her main occupation was as librarian at the Sibelius Academy from 1933 to 1968. She composed in her spare time and at night, powered by caffeine tablets.

Her output consists mainly of orchestral music, including three symphonies as well as an unnumbered symphony from her student years, and the *Sinfonia brevis*, orchestral suites, and large-scale choral–orchestral cantatas. Her first large-scale work, the *Piano Concerto in D minor, Op. 7*, was composed between 1931 and 1935 and premiered in Helsinki with Professor **Ernst Linko** as the soloist. The Helsinki City Orchestra was conducted by **Toivo Haapanen**. The same concert also featured, among other works, Leiviskä's triple fugue for orchestra and her orchestral songs.

The concerto's reception was generally positive. However, the composers **Sulho Ranta** and **Uuno Klami** criticized the fact that the work reached its climax already before the end. The piece was also considered heavy. The composer's gender could not be ignored. Sulho Ranta (in *Ilta-Sanomat*) stated that the work was "a man's discourse" with no trace of "feminine delicacy." The soloist Linko remarked that if the composer had been identified merely as "H. Leiviskä," one might have assumed the composer to be an ardent young man.

Despite the favorable reception, the work disappeared completely. The full score has been lost, and the Savo Music Society rescued the concerto from the surviving orchestral parts and the piano part. These materials reveal that the 1935 premiere had been incomplete in several respects, something also suggested by correspondence among Leiviskä's friends. For example, **Ensio Kurki-Suonio** wrote to the composer after the concert:"...it seemed to me that Linko cheated more than is permissible... I would like to hear it again, properly played."

On the basis of the surviving material, it can be stated with certainty that the soloist did indeed take liberties and made omissions with Leiviskä's score. In particular, in the third movement the central virtuosic passages of the soloist have been crossed out and replaced with the marking "*piano tacet*" — "the piano is silent" — in handwriting that is not Leiviskä's. Since no cuts were made in the orchestral parts, the sonic result must have been severely lacking in the crucial climactic passages of the final movement, and thus "the climax remained unattained." Only on 6 December 2020 did **Mirka Viitala** and the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, conducted by **Hannu Lintu**, perform the work as close to its original form as could be reconstructed from the surviving materials.

Leiviskä's piano concerto is a large-scale work, approximately 45 minutes in duration, and does not follow the traditional concerto form. The first movement begins with a quiet yet majestic theme in the piano, which becomes the work's principal motif. The tempo

accelerates, and the main theme of the movement is more rhythmic than melodic. As a counterbalance, the orchestra presents a broad, calm subject that later becomes the fugue theme of the final movement. This is followed by a development section in which the tempo and texture steadily intensify, until the piano descends through virtuosic figurations into a grand recapitulation of the opening motif performed by the horns and trumpets. A compressed recapitulation of the main theme leads to a quiet scalar cadence.

The second movement begins with a bell-like motif in the soloist, accompanied by the woodwinds with their own countersubject. The counter-subject takes over, and the soloist and orchestra alternate around a dance-like melody. Leiviskä moves from the weighty D minor of the opening movement to a light F major. The movement alternates the dance-like melody with orchestral interludes. Halfway through, the structure begins to change. The bell motif returns, but the dance melody collapses into B minor, a key as distant as possible from the opening F major. The construction of the second movement is revealed: the piano solo becomes gradually more fragmented, while the orchestra grows ever clearer and stronger. The tension is released in a large *Recitativo* section. The piano part disintegrates into isolated fragments, the music seems to collapse, and the orchestra is left playing quiet chords.

The final movement of the concerto, *Fuga*, rises out of this through structural means. The violas introduce a fugue subject derived from the first movement, which passes through the soloist and various instruments with increasing intensity. It was here, when the first critical cut occurred in 1935, as the soloist crossed out a virtuosic ascent. The fugue thereafter culminates with the full orchestra. It breaks off abruptly, followed by a broad calm section in which fragments of themes resonate in the piano figurations and various instruments, until a solo violin plays the principal motif of the work, now in C major. The fugue subject returns briefly in chromatically altered form and rises to the work's climax. At this point comes a cadenza-like virtuosic passage for the soloist, accompanied by the orchestra, which the 1935 performer crossed out, leaving the orchestra to play accompanying patterns alone. The ascent concludes with a *Maestoso* section in which the principal theme now sounds in D major in the strings and brass, accompanied by the piano, *a tutta forza* — with full force.

Petteri Nieminen





The photo dates from 1932, the period when the piano concerto was being composed.