



Finlandia Foundation® National

Inspiring, celebrating and connecting the Finnish-American community since 1953

A photograph of two musicians standing in a lush green forest. On the left, a woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a light-colored, draped, one-shoulder dress, smiles at the camera. On the right, a man with dark hair, wearing a dark jacket over a black shirt, holds a large, polished wooden cello. The background is filled with tall, thin trees and green foliage, creating a serene natural setting.

Jussi Makkonen, cello
& Nazig Azezian, piano

Jussi Makkonen & Nazig Azezian

Finlandia Foundation National (FFN), the premier network of Finnish-American organizations in the United States, is proud to support the United States tour by Finnish cellist Jussi Makkonen and pianist Nazig Azezian.

They are especially known for their performances of works by Finland's national composer, Jean Sibelius, and have permission from his family to perform arrangements made especially for the duo.

The musicians have been performing together since 2013, on stages not only in Finland and the U.S., but across Europe and in Asia. Their concerts, music videos and recordings have reached hundreds of thousands of listeners. They are also passionate about introducing classical music to young audiences, and have performed in hundreds of schools in Finland, in many European countries and in the U.S.

Makkonen began the narrative school concerts in 2010, which have been attended by over 500,000 students. In the program the artists perform the music of Jean Sibelius and, between the songs, tell stories about the composer's life and the featured compositions. Makkonen and Azezian also give lectures to university students about their work as international musicians. In 2019, the performers were recognized by Concert Center Finland for their

outstanding educational work in introducing classical music to young people.

Jussi Makkonen was seven when he began playing the cello. He was selected for the Sibelius Academy youth program, continued with his university studies, and earned his master's in music. Further studies include masterclasses, and he was a member of the EU Youth Orchestra and Gustav Mahler Orchestra. Makkonen plays a Henry Jay cello from 1757.

Nazig Azezian began her piano studies at the age of eight. In 2007 she entered Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, where she earned her master's in music. Additionally, she has taken part in several piano masterclasses.

Makkonen and Azezian have received numerous music awards. In August 2017 their Sibelius-themed *Soiva Metsä (Melody Forest)* CD was the first Finnish chamber music record to sell platinum. It accompanies an illustrated children's book. In early 2019 they released a second CD-book set, *Lintu Sininen (The Blue Bird)*. To accompany the

storybook, Makkonen and Azezian commissioned a new work by Finnish composer Jonne Valtonen. Both books are illustrated by Katri Kirkkopelto and are available in Finnish and English.

For more information about the duo:
sibeliusinspiration.com

United States Tour 2019-2021

On their current U.S. tour, cellist Jussi Makkonen and pianist Nazig Azezian are presenting three programs:

Sibelius Inspiration

Sibelius Inspiration had its acclaimed premiere at the Orpheum Theatre in New Orleans in 2015 for the 150th anniversary of the composer's birth, and it has been performed around the world more than 300 times. It is presented as a traditional concert combining Jean Sibelius's music and narration, or as

a multimedia program that includes videos filmed for the concert.

Through music, video, sound and light, the all-encompassing multimedia experience transports the audience into the world that inspired Sibelius. His compelling compositions, the narration and the visuals carry the audience to the Sibelius home, to the magical moss forest at dusk and to the top of Finland's impressive Koli mountain in the midst of a thunderstorm.

The videos for the multimedia concert were filmed and directed by Aira Vehaskari. The Sibelius pieces were arranged by Matti Makkonen. Finnish fashion designer Mert Otsamo created the artists' performance costumes.

The Blue Bird

In February 2019 Makkonen and Azezian published the CD and children's book, *The Blue Bird*, a story of love, jealousy and forgiveness. Inspired by the story and characters, Finnish composer Jonne Valtonen composed a piece for cellist Jussi



Makkonen, pianist Nazig Azezian and string orchestra. Valtonen's experience in composing both classical and game music makes *The Blue Bird* unique and fresh, and speaks to classical music lovers as well as children.

It is a 30-minute piece in seven movements written for 17 string players. It may also be performed with cello, piano, violin, viola and double bass, or by Makkonen and Azezian as a duo.

The Blue Bird has been performed by several orchestras in Finland. In recent years, the London Symphony Orchestra and the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra have played Valtonen's compositions and arrangements.

Finnish Landscape: Jewels by Finnish Composers

Jean Sibelius, in his own unique style, created the humming of the trees and the sound of rippling

water in his music in a way that feels Finnish, yet universal.

Inspired by forests, landscapes and myths, Finnish composers have created music that captures nature and the roots of the country's identity, the national epic *Kalevala*. It is the translation of hundreds of years-old poems that had been sung to pass along traditions between generations.

Finnish Landscape introduces the most beautiful melodies written by composers such as Jean Sibelius, Oskar Merikanto and Heino Kaski. Some of the pieces were arranged for the first time in history for cello and piano, specifically for Makkonen and Azezian.

For more information and to schedule an appearance contact FFN trustee Teuvo Pulkkinen at teuvo_pulkkinen@hotmail.com or 760.975.7504.

Cover photo by Marko Haapalehto

Finlandia Foundation National, the most important source of support for Finnish culture in the U.S., was founded in Pasadena, California in 1953. FFN administers scholarships,



grants and programs supporting and celebrating Finnish heritage and Finnish-American culture and traditions, and contemporary Finnish America..

FFN is a 501(c)(3) organization. For more information: FinlandiaFoundation.org

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