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Carl LOEWE

PIANO MUSIC, VOLUME ONE

- MAZEPPA: TONE POEM AFTER BYRON, Op. 27
- GRAND SONATA IN E MAJOR, Op. 16
- ALPINE FANTASY, Op. 53
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Linda Nicholson, pianoforte

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CARL LOEWE: PIANO MUSIC, VOLUME ONE

by Linda Nicholson

Though little-known today, Carl Loewe (1796–1869) was a renowned and highly respected composer and performer in his own time, a friend of Schumann, Weber and Mendelssohn. (He directed the first public performance of Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and was soloist, together with Mendelssohn, in the latter's Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra). He was proud to be christened 'the north German Schubert' when on a concert tour to Vienna,¹ and today is remembered chiefly as a composer of ballads or narrative songs. (Goethe judged his version of *Erlkönig* to be superior to Schubert's). But there is also a considerable body of solo piano music, much of which is strikingly innovative in content, expression and harmony and yet is rarely, if ever, played. Loewe tends to be categorised retrospectively as a 'transitional' composer: his music has germs of ideas later taken up by 'greater' composers such as Wagner and Liszt, and yet he was unquestionably a brilliantly original composer, a major figure in ushering in the Romantic era.

A close contemporary of Schubert, Loewe was born on 30 November 1796 in Löbejün, a small mining town in Saxony between Halle and Köthen. He was brought up in a musical household, his father Andreas being the local cantor and a music teacher, and his mother, though untrained, played the violin. Loewe's talent was recognised from an early age, and in 1807 he was offered a place in the church choir in Köthen, a small town principally known for its association with J. S. Bach, who was *Kapellmeister* at the local court from 1717 to 1723. Finding the musical education there unchallenging, Loewe was sent to Halle in 1809, where he studied with Daniel Gottlob Türk (1750–1813). Halle was an important university city in which Türk, as director of music of both the city and university, was extremely influential. His fame as composer and pedagogue spread much further in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries due to his seminal *Klavierschule* (published in Halle and Leipzig in 1789) and a number of teaching pieces. Curiously, he did not teach Loewe the piano, leaving him to learn by himself, but rather instructed him in the arts of composition and singing. As a boy Loewe was apparently already an accomplished singer, able to tackle the Queen of the Night's aria from *The Magic Flute*, and his soprano developed into a fine tenor voice. The lack of keyboard instruction may explain why Loewe's piano works, while too demanding for an amateur pianist, never feature the

¹ Letter to his wife, 4 August 1844 quoted in C. H. Bittner (ed.), *Dr Carl Loewes Selbstbiographie*, Wilhelm Müller Verlag, Berlin, 1870, p. 357.



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The instrument used for this recording has a compass of six-and-a-half octaves and two pedals, sustaining and *una corda*. It is more lightly built than a modern concert grand and so has less power and a shorter resonance. The Collard instruments were prized for their fine tone, and this piano is typical in its sweet sound and the differentiation in quality of sound between the different registers.

Linda Nicholson is one of the foremost keyboard players specialising in the performance of Baroque, Classical and early Romantic music on instruments of the period. She won the first two international competitions held for the fortepiano, the Concours International du Pianoforte in Paris and the Festival of Flanders Competition in Bruges, and since then has performed in major festivals and concert series throughout Europe and the Far East. Her broad repertoire encompasses solo works, chamber music and concertos.

She has performed many of the Mozart concertos with outstanding period orchestras, among them Les Arts Florissants, The Academy of Ancient Music, The Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and the Capella Coloniensis, with which group she made three CDs of Mozart concertos in a co-production between Westdeutscher Rundfunk and Capriccio.

Linda is a founder member of the London Fortepiano Trio, and has worked for some twenty years with the distinguished violinist Hiro Kurosaki. Together they have recorded the complete sonatas of both Mozart (for Westdeutscher Rundfunk/Erato) and Beethoven (for Westdeutscher Rundfunk/Accent) for violin and piano.

Solo recordings in recent years include Scarlatti sonatas (WDR/Capriccio), Beethoven *Bagatelles* and other pieces (Accent), and Mozart piano sonatas (Accent), which won a Diapason d'Or. In 2013 she began recording the complete works of Carl Loewe for Westdeutscher Rundfunk.

In addition to her performing activities Linda teaches privately and gives masterclasses, in, for example, Warsaw as part of the Early Music Festival in Wilanow and at the Konservatorium in Vienna. She has frequently been a juror for the fortepiano competition Musica Antiqua in Bruges.



photo: Jonathan Hughes

extreme virtuosity of certain compositions by Liszt and Chopin, and emphasise instead the expressive and acoustic properties of the piano.

Loewe remained in Halle after Türk's death in 1813, continuing with his singing and compositional studies, and, in addition, completing a degree in theology. He participated in the stimulating intellectual life of the city, and sang in many larger-scale choral works and operas as tenor soloist. His musical development flourished with the production of his first ballads, *Erlkönig* and *Edward*, and with meeting Carl Maria von Weber, whose style of pianism was to influence him considerably.

From the cosmopolitan and lively city of Halle Loewe moved to Stettin in 1821, a rather dull provincial town then in Prussia (it is now Szczecin in Poland) to which he was appointed music director. He had some regrets at not being posted to an important musical centre such as Paris or Vienna but nevertheless remained there until shortly before his death in Kiel on 20 April 1869. In between his many duties as director of music at several institutions and the church of St Jacobi, he continued to compose and toured widely throughout Europe as singer and pianist between 1826 and 1847. He was best known for the solo performances of his ballads, in which he frequently both sang and played the piano accompaniment.

Loewe did not care for the highly virtuosic school of romantic pianism represented by Liszt, and indeed contemporary accounts of his playing describe it as being instead poetic, expressive and sensitive. One of his fans, a Frau Tilbein, wrote after a concert: 'It's a shame that the magician Loewe has completely spoiled one's taste for the senseless clanging of charlatans.'² He himself was aware that his technique was less sound than that of, say, Chopin or Mendelssohn and Frau Tilbein was an astute enough judge to comment:

There are far better pianists – he agrees that [compared to them] he cannot play. But such organisation of the whole to form a complete picture, such excitement by such a childlike, erudite, harmless and simultaneously highly poetic man – that is a unique phenomenon.³

Zigeuner-Sonate, Op. 107 (1847)

Loewe considered the sonata to be the supreme form of composition for the piano, an opinion based on his admiration for Beethoven, whose achievements he tried to emulate. He wrote five sonatas, but his *Gypsy Sonata* is the only one with specific programmatic content. Its 'gypsy' nature lies in its supposed depiction of scenes from gypsy life, but in fact there seems to be some confusion between 'gypsy' and 'Indian', as reflected in the titles of the second and fourth movements. It should perhaps rather be regarded

² Quoted in John Salmon, *The Piano Sonatas of Carl Loewe*, Peter Lang, Bern, 1996, p. 20.

³ Quoted in Otto Altenburg, 'Carl Loewe: Beiträge zur Kenntnis seines Lebens und Schaffens', *Baltische Studien*, Vol. XXVI (Neue Folge), Gesellschaft für Pommersche Geschichte und Altertumskunde, Leon Gauniens Buchhandlung, Stettin, 1924, p. 262.

as an expression of non-specific Romantic exoticism, a parallel to the often gaudy Romantic paintings that idealised gypsy scenes, with attractively tousled children and scantily dressed young women grouped around a campfire. A more direct musical comparison is Bizet's *Carmen*, although it was not produced until 1875, nearly thirty years after Loewe's work. The *Zigeuner-Sonate* is extraordinarily advanced in some of its idioms, harmonies and rhythms, which evoke gypsy music filtered through the ears and mind of a classically trained composer.

The bizarre opening of the *Allegro vivace* 'Waldscene' [1], if heard out of context, already suggests a much later date of composition. It is strangely fragmented, the first eight bars for left hand solo consisting of a demisemiquaver upbeat followed by a dotted crotchet, joined by the right hand with the same motif to make an interval of an eleventh. This dotted figure alternates with two demisemiquaver flourishes, each of them static and creating an effect rather than moving on to any kind of a musical argument. The whole passage has an improvisatory and impressionistic quality, until a proper tub-thumping folk-cum-gypsy theme finally emerges at bar 54. Seemingly illogical and disjointed, these elements turn out to be the first section of a strict sonata-form movement. Loewe's strength lies not in developing or dissecting his material in a Beethovenian manner, despite his admiration for him, but in a profuse melodic invention. Thus the development section begins with the opening motif transposed into different keys, with huge leaps that were definitely not intended for the amateur market, and continues with an entirely new theme that has a certain yearning quality. There is a curious mixture of the old and the new in the combination of an experimental use of harmony and instrumental sound with a strict adherence to Classical form. Türk had trained Loewe very much in the earlier Classical tradition of Haydn and Mozart, and here, as in his other sonatas, Loewe repeats the exposition exactly with appropriate modulations to form the recapitulation. There is a short coda that draws the movement together in featuring the opening dotted figure.

In using the title 'Indisches Märchen' [2] Loewe appeals to the nineteenth-century predilection for fairy tales: the brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen were contemporaries. In the case of the Grimms, these stories often featured grotesquely contrasting figures, characters or events in a peculiarly Germanic way. The movement opens, *Andantino innocentemente*, with a dotted theme that has an open, naïve folk quality derived from its being doubled in octaves, accompanied by simple harmonies. (The dotted rhythm refers back to the first movement.) The second section, marked *Adagio*, is more elegantly written and sweetly tender in character. This Arcadian atmosphere is shattered by the entrance of a monstrous spook or giant, represented by diminished sevenths and extremes of dynamic. The spook passes, and relative calm is restored with the return of the first theme, though it is undermined by a rumbling bass and different, more disquieting harmonies.

Alpenfantasie, Op. 53 (1835)

Unlike *Mazeppa*, Loewe's *Alpenfantasie* [11] does not have a specific narrative, but rather conjures up a general image of scenery. It can be heard as the aural equivalent of the German nineteenth-century paintings of mountain landscapes by, for example, Caspar David Friedrich, a slightly older contemporary of Loewe. These paintings were a deliberate departure from earlier Classical landscapes, depicting a Romantic world of mists, rocky crags, dramatic lighting perhaps twilight or with the sun's rays rising above the alps, and often small human figures dwarfed by the majesty of Nature.

Thus the *Alpenfantasie*, marked *Allegretto*, opens with eight bars of bare fifths, the pedal raised – eight static bars that create a ghostly atmosphere (mountain mists?). Slowly different elements are introduced, veering between the keys of A major (the sun rising?) and A minor. This single-movement piece is a rondo, the main recurring section consisting of these components. The first episode is in F major, a long-breathed melody accompanied by oscillating triplets that sound like a slow trill (running streams?). The main theme returns, slightly ornamented, to be followed by an episode in A major marked *con maestria*. It begins in the bass register of the piano, moving higher and higher up, *crescendo*, with raised pedal (the majesty of the mountains?). The third statement of the theme develops into a lengthy, quasi fugal passage (Loewe was much influenced by Bach), building up to a *fortissimo* climax marked *brillante* (landslide? avalanche?). The work winds down with a final statement of the theme that dissolves into twenty bars of open fifths, inviting the listener to savour pure sound devoid of thematic substance fading into nothingness. Once again Loewe is anticipating later developments in music, as he creates a desolate, bare aural landscape that prefigures Mussorgsky's symphonic poem *Night on a Bare Mountain*, written some fifty years later.

The Piano used in this recording

Piano by Collard and Collard, No. 50766, 1849–50, property of West Deutscher Rundfunk; prepared and tuned by Paul Müller.

The piano-building firm of Collard and Collard was one of the most successful of the nineteenth century: their pianos were amongst the most highly regarded concert instruments of the period, and continued to be produced until well into the twentieth century. Frederick William Collard founded the company, joining the firm established by Muzio Clementi around 1800. Thanks to Clementi's fame the business flourished, and Frederick's brother, William Frederick, also became a partner in 1810. The two brothers took over the business on Clementi's death in 1832, and when W. F. Collard retired in 1842, the family tradition was continued by nephews Frederick William Collard Jr and Charles Lukey Collard.

separated by an instrumental interlude in which the pedal is lifted, creating a halo of sound in the upper treble of the piano. The sung text reads as follows:

Tenor: 'Toujours, toujours, je te serai fidèle', disait Adolphe à chaque instant du jour, 'toujours, toujours je t'aimerai, Adèle. Je veux le dire aux échos d'alentour, je graverai sur l'écorce du hêtre ce doux serment, que le dieu de l'amour vient me dicter en me faisant connaître que mon bonheur est de t'aimer toujours.'

Sopran: 'Toujours, toujours,' lui répondit Adèle, 'tu regneras dans le fond de mon cœur, toujours, toujours comme une tourterelle je promets bien t'aimer avec ardeur! Je pense à toi quand le soleil s'élevé, j'y pense encore à la fin de son cours, dans le sommeil si quelquefois je rêve c'est au bonheur de te chérir toujours.'⁶

The third movement, *Presto* [9], is a brilliant scherzo and trio (although not so called), which makes far fiercer technical demands on the performer than the previous movements with its leaps and fast running passages in both hands. The 'trio' features Beethoven's favourite key relationship of the flattened sub-median, i.e., it is in F major, and it recalls the German dances written by both Beethoven and Schubert. It refers back to the 'scherzo' via distinctive crotchets preceded by short *acciaccature*, though here, appearing in the bass, they have a more bucolic character.

Loewe the vocal composer is once more in evidence in the *Finale*, a rondo which is conceived in terms of the human voice [10]. The opening section is marked *Allegro assai – dolce parlando*, and seems to consist of two characters, the first asking a question, the second answering it. After a brief transitional section, a bass voice joins the group, commenting on the conversation in running quavers. After various episodes the initial conversation returns, with one last question that is definitively answered by scales in the home key of E major. Loewe was concerned to present the Sonata as a unified whole, not as a random collection of individual movements. To this purpose the themes of the first and last movements are closely related: based on the interval G sharp–B, this, together with the presence of a recitative or *parlando* in both, gives a sense of fulfilment, of the sonata having come full circle.

⁶ Tenor: 'Always, always will I be faithful to you', said Adolphe every moment of the day, 'I shall always, always love you, Adèle. I want to say it so it echoes around. On the bark of the beech I shall engrave this sweet oath that the god of love has just dictated to me, making me aware that my happiness lies in loving you forever.'

Soprano: 'Always, always', replied Adèle, 'you will reign in the depths of my heart. I promise that, like a turtledove, I shall always, always love you with ardour! I think of you as the sun rises, and I am thinking of you still as it sets, and if I sometimes dream in my sleep it is of the happiness in cherishing you forever.'

The third movement [3], a rondo, is the most explicit in its illustration of the programmatic content of each section: a *Tanz* marked *Presto, ma non troppo* is followed by a 'Corps de ballet', consisting of 'Männertanz mit Feuer-Bränden' ('Men's dance with firebrands'), 'Die Frauen umtanzen den Waldkranz' ('The women dance around the wood clearing'), 'Eiertanz der Kinder' ('Children's antics') and a concluding *Prestissimo*. It is beautifully and idiomatically written for the instrument, much of the intricate passage work, especially that of the 'Children's antics', owing a debt to Weber's pianistic style.

Loewe was brought up in a strongly religious household, and as a young boy, before he went to Köthen, used to study Protestant chorales. This influence continued as he studied theology in Halle, and he later wrote some seventeen oratorios. Thus Protestant religious fervour dominates the fourth movement of the *Zigeuner-Sonate*, 'Abend-Cultus' [4], even though ironically Loewe is describing a pagan ceremony. It is manifest in the rigidly four-bar phrases, the solid three- to five-part chords, and the frequent plagal cadences, all of which belong to the chorale tradition. The movement, marked *Adagio molto*, bears the heading 'Sie erwarten den Aufgang des Mondes, den sie als Abglanz des indischen Sonnentempels anbeten' ('Evening devotions: They await the moon's rising, which they worship as a reflection of the Indian Temple of the Sun'). The central section of the movement introduces a much more exotic element as the piano dampers are raised and very fast notes flutter back and forth to create a wash of sound that clearly references the cimbalom, a gypsy instrument. Other passages, too, are indicated to be played with the dampers raised, creating a blurring of harmonies that is foreign to the modern ear, and can be successfully realised only on a nineteenth-century instrument, with its shorter sustaining power and softer attack.

The final movement, 'Aufbruch am Morgen' ('Daybreak'), *Allegro vivace* [5], is a generally joyful affair, linked thematically to the earlier movements by a dotted figure appearing in the second section.

Mazeppa – eine Tondichtung nach Byron, Op. 27 (1828)

Loewe had a deep love and knowledge of literature, and so it is not surprising to find him writing a piece based on Byron's *Mazeppa* (published in 1819) twelve years before Liszt did so [6]. It is truly innovative in many ways for its date: to the best of my knowledge, this is the first use of the term 'Tondichtung' ('tone poem'),⁴ and Loewe remained the only composer to apply it to a work for solo piano. Generally, tone or symphonic poems are orchestral works based on a non-musical source such as a poem, novel, or painting, the *genre* beginning with Mendelssohn's *Hebridean Overture* (also known as 'Fingal's Cave' – though Mendelssohn did not use the term 'tone poem') and continuing with works by Liszt, Sibelius, Smetana

⁴ Sabine Coelsch-Foisner also ascribes the first use of the term 'Tondichtung' to Loewe in her article 'The Synergies of Mind and Muse: Reflections on Nineteenth-century Thought', in Marlies Kronegger (ed.), *Analecta Husserliana*, Vol. LXIII: *The Orchestration of the Arts – A Creative Symbiosis of Existential Powers*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 2000, p. 116.

and Richard Strauss. Their form is not determined by Classical models such as sonata form, but by their dramatic content, a Romantic breaking away from tradition and merging of different art-forms. Loewe's *Mazeppa* is an important example of the genre, a creation that seems to be without precedent.

In the first edition of Loewe's work there is a synopsis of the story at the end 'for those who don't know it':

As an act of revenge Mazeppa is tied, naked, to the back of a wild horse from the Ukraine. Together they ride, without goal, through fields, plains and woods. As both unfortunates witness the dying embers of the day the horse falls into a raging torrent. Having swum across, refreshed, it hurries on through desolate woods. Hungry packs of wolves trot alongside their prey, and the horse's fear drives it on ever faster, at this point to Mazeppa's joy. They fly through distant lands, and other wild animals gather around the strange pair, but flee on seeing the human form. The strength of both is gone and, exhausted, the horse falls. Vultures descend from high in the sky to approach their prey, and Mazeppa tries to deter them by shaking his fist at them. Miraculously the young man's ties are released by some local men and he escapes the throes of death.

In using the term 'tone poem' Loewe clearly wanted to depict the dramatic legend as vividly as possible, and so he is adventurous in his use of instrumental colour. Extremes of the piano register are explored, something which is far more striking on a nineteenth-century instrument, where each register has its own character, than on a modern concert grand with its more homogenised and equalised registers. Towards the end of the piece there is a grumbling trill in the bass over which there are descending sixths in the treble (the vultures hovering?), producing strange harmonies that are blurred as the dampers are raised, again an effect that benefits from the softer sound of an earlier piano. The wild galloping of the horse, followed by its stumbling and exhaustion, are clearly referenced in the music: at one point there is the direction 'stampfend' and towards the end of the piece there are *ritenuti* and *accelerandi* as the horse slows down, then tries to revive. Loewe's *précis* of Byron's poem is in fact a radically abridged version, missing out some crucial details of the story. In the last verse not only is Mazeppa saved by some local men (Cossacks), but he is also carried to a cottage where he wakes up to find himself being tended by a beautiful young Cossack maiden. This section elicits the most tender and transcendent of music from Loewe: extraordinary harmonies with sliding chromaticisms that presage those of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*.

Grande Sonate in E major, Op. 16 (1829)

The *Grande Sonate*, Op. 16, successfully unites elements of Classical sonata form with a new kind of

Romantic expression. It was dedicated to Frau Tilbein, one of Loewe's closest friends, and the sensitive, intimate style of much of the writing seems to have been designed to appeal to her taste, or possibly to reflect her personality. It may also be that Beethoven's E minor Sonata, Op. 109, one of his most personal works, influenced Loewe in establishing this particularly touching and sentimental mood.

The first movement [7] conforms to Classical convention in having an *Adagio introduzionale* that presages a rigorous sonata-form movement, marked *Allegro cantabile, con molto sentimento*. What is far from conventional are the harmonies of the *Adagio*: a series of unresolved seventh chords expressing a Romantic longing that, like the closing bars of *Mazeppa*, foreshadows Wagner's writing. Also breaking with convention is the recitative at the end of the development section, a declamatory outbreak that first leads back to the opening of the *Allegro* via a dominant seventh with an added thirteenth, and the second time leads into the development with a flattened dominant ninth. Much of the writing appears to be Schubertian: for example, the theme which is heard as part of the second subject, (even though it is in the tonic key of E major), which consists of repeated semiquavers with an inner melody. This theme melts into a repetition of the opening in G major, using the typical Schubertian device of altering one note of a chord chromatically to modulate to a distant key. Since it is not clear how much of Schubert's music Loewe was familiar with in 1829, it can be assumed that he, the 'north German Schubert', was equally contributing to the development of a new language, a manifestation of the *Zeitgeist* of the 1830s. It has a naturalness and sincerity that is unique to this period, speaking directly to the heart in an almost childlike way.

There is novelty, too, in the second movement [8]: it is a 'Romance pour le Piano, avec accompagnement du chant ad libitum'. There are two voices doubling the upper keyboard line precisely, so the movement can be performed equally well as a 'song without words'. To modern audiences having optional parts may seem strange, but in the 1830s amateur music-making was still flourishing, so the idea that the sonata might be adaptable to the number of participants in a drawing room would have been appealing. This custom follows the instrumental tradition of eighteenth-century chamber music, primarily intended for amateurs, much of which was commonly published in the form of keyboard sonatas with violin or flute *ad libitum*.

Naming the movement a 'Romanze' would have invoked specific associations and characteristics in the early nineteenth century. Loewe had studied Türk's *Romanze* for keyboard as a boy, and indeed his mentor had described the genre in some detail, saying that it 'must have a simple, agreeable and naïve melody'.⁵ Loewe clearly followed these instructions, writing a 'Romance' with a deceptively simple melody that depends on *appoggiature* and a seventh swoop downwards for its expression. The two 'verses' are

⁵ Daniel Gottlob Türk, *Klavierschule, op. cit.*, translated by Raymond H. Haggh, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1982, p. 391.