

ONDINE



MELCHER MELCHERS

PIANO CONCERTOS

PETER JABLONSKI, piano
GAVLE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
CHRISTIAN REIF



MELCHER MELCHERS (1882–1961)

Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 18 (1923)* 31:11

- | | | | |
|---|-----|---------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | I | Molto sostenuto – Molto Allegro | 16:23 |
| 2 | II | Lento, molto espressivo | 6:05 |
| 3 | III | Allegro vivace | 8:43 |

Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 23 (1931) 31:39

- | | | | |
|---|-----|---------------------------|-------|
| 4 | I | Allegro | 15:14 |
| 5 | II | Andante, molto espressivo | 8:59 |
| 6 | III | Allegro | 7:26 |

** World première recording*

PETER JABLONSKI, piano

GAVLE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

CHRISTIAN REIF, conductor

Swedish composer **Melcher Melchers** (1882–1961) has been largely forgotten by music history, and his name is not known outside a small circle of music professionals and enthusiasts. There is no full biography of him in any language, just a sprinkling of short biographical entries and articles, and even in Sweden his works are only now beginning to be discovered. This is partly due to his own quiet and retiring nature to whom self-promotion was an alien concept, and partly to the fact that his compositions were considered to be old-fashioned and were largely neglected, especially after the First World War, which ushered in a completely new soundscape, with harsher, louder sounds of modernity. This makes it difficult to find readily available materials relating to his life and work, and the locations of some of the sources and manuscripts remain shrouded in mystery.

Born Henrik Melcher Svensson in Stockholm on 30 May 1882, the composer changed his name to Melcher Melchers when he settled in Paris in early 1900s. He was only 14 years old when he was admitted to the Stockholm Conservatoire in 1896, graduating in 1903 as a music teacher. Being a talented violin and viola player, he was in demand in several Stockholm orchestras, including the Royal Court Orchestra and the Stockholm Concert Society, predecessor of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. During this time he also began to study composition and developed an interest in conducting.

During the second half of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century France was a major source of inspiration for Scandinavian artists and musicians, and especially those from Sweden. One of the most talented Swedish composers of her time, Valborg Aulin (always in the shadow of her more famous brother, violinist Tor Aulin), immortalised her time in Paris during 1886–7 in her impressive orchestral suite *Tableux Parisien*; her contemporary Helena Munktell lived in Paris for more than 30 years and became an integral part of the musical circles there; many young artists went to study in France, which became possible when in 1862 Jenny Lind established a scholarship allowing Swedish students to continue their education abroad.

Many famous Swedes at one time or another lived in France. Painters Carl Larsson and Bruno Liljefors, captivated by the styles of French Impressionism and Realism, worked at the artistic colony of Grez-sur-Loing. Swedish sculptors Carl Eldh, Carl Milles and his sister Ruth Milles, and Alice Nordin were all greatly inspired by Rodin's work, with Carl Milles even periodically working in Rodin's atelier. August Strindberg lived and worked in Paris during



Melcher Melchers, with a beard, black coat, and a hat, together with Pablo Picasso, Erik Satie, and others.
Painting *Lyre et Palette* (1917) by Arvid Fougstedt (1888–1949) / Moderna Museet, Stockholm

several periods of his life, and in 2017 a square next to the north-west facade of Église Saint-Sulpice in the 6th arrondissement was named after him.

Like many of his creative countrymen and women, Melchers too set his course for Paris, aiming to study sculpture, and to visit as many museums and galleries as possible. Becoming a regular at the famous Café de Versailles and Café du Dôme, he met and became friendly with such luminaries as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Amedeo Modigliani and Leon Trotsky, also making friends with Swedish creatives who resided there. Chausson, d'Indy, and César Franck were his musical idols and greatest influences.

He earned his living by giving music lessons, composed as much as time allowed, and at the same time worked on establishing himself in the musical circles of the city. He performed with Swedish violinists Hans Ekegårdh, Charles Hägerstrand, and Sven Kjellström at the Swedish Church in Paris, and in 1908 was admitted to Georges Caussade's composition class at the Conservatoire National de Musique, where he spent four years and even won a second prize in counterpoint studies. Enrollment of foreign students was strictly controlled and there was tough competition to get in, so it is a testament to his talent that he was one of the few chosen to join a foreign cohort. It was the decision of the conservatoire's director, Gabriel Fauré, that Melchers was to be given a place.

After finishing his studies in 1912, Melchers was commissioned a cantata for the consecration of the new Swedish Church building, and was appointed conductor of the church choir – perhaps a natural result of taking an organist degree in the same year in Visby, Sweden. In 1914, a concert of Melchers's works was organised at Salle Suédoise, with Melchers accompanying Hans Ekegårdh (violinist turned painter) and singer Emma Holmstrand.

Melchers's musical circles included Erik Satie, Germaine Tailleferre (herself a student of Caussade), and other members of Les Six. Swedish painter Gunnar Cederschiöld, who also studied in Paris in the early 1900s, describes Melchers in his memoirs as a real Parisian, who spoke fluent French and who was a frequent guest at many well-known musical establishments and informal artistic gatherings, where he would play piano late into the night.

With the encouragement and help of Erik Satie, Melchers was one of the founders of *Lyre et Palette*, a creative circle that organised concerts and art exhibitions in Montparnasse from 1916. Members of the circle included Debussy, Milhaud, Honegger, Satie, Ravel,



Melcher Melchers playing the piano at a song recital.
Painting (1915) by Arvid Fougstedt (1888–1949) / Moderna Museet, Stockholm

Archipenko, Apollinaire, and others. There were also poetry readings by Blaise Cendrars and Cocteau, and exhibitions of paintings by Matisse, Modigliani, Braque, and Picasso. Saturday concerts at 6, Rue Huyghens in Montparnasse featured works by composers such as Mozart and Beethoven and later Satie, Ravel, Sibelius, Grieg, with many prominent musicians taking part in performances. Matisse immortalised Melchers in a portrait for one of the *Lyre et Palette* programme books. Melchers was chosen for the post of music director, holding it for about a year, after which other members of Les Six took over, making the concert series hugely popular. It seems that Melchers's name was quickly forgotten and is not mentioned in any literature relating to the society, but his important connection to *Lyre et Palette* is acknowledged by Tailleferre in her memoirs.

Unlike many foreign artists residing in France, Melchers did not leave the country during the First World War, continuing to live and work in Paris, playing and attending concerts even as sirens were screeching in the air. When he returned to Sweden in 1919, he initially worked as a music critic, travelled to Brussels to study conducting, and taught music at a Workers Education Association, and also at a foundation that promoted French music and culture. In 1925, he was appointed as harmony teacher at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Stockholm, eventually becoming its respected professor of composition, remaining there until 1947.

Despite his active and entrepreneurial years in France, Melchers was remembered in Sweden as a quiet man who did not speak much, and who was just as happy to spend time in his garden or fishing as he was playing the violin or composing. A first-hand account of his years in Paris would have made for fascinating reading, given the cast of characters that made up his social circle, but we are left to glean details of his life here and there from reminiscences of his contemporaries such as Tailleferre's memoirs.

Melchers's creative output is not extensive, largely because his teaching duties at the Conservatoire took up much of his time. His orchestral works include three symphonic poems, smaller orchestral pieces, two piano concertos and one violin concerto, and his only symphony, written for the competition announced for the opening of the Stockholm Concert Hall in 1926. It came second, and was premiered during the second concert day of the grand opening of the new concert hall, on 8 April 1926, conducted by the chief conductor of the

Stockholm Concert Society Wilhelm Sieben. Melchers's other works include a string quartet, violin sonata, the cello sonata, a small number of small-scale solo piano pieces, around 20 songs, and one cantata.

Melchers was appointed a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Music in 1932 and was presented with the Litteris et Artibus medal in 1935, which is given by the King of Sweden for services to culture.

The two piano concertos appear together on one recording for the first time and the first piano concerto receives its world première recording. Written twelve years apart, they are well crafted and articulate works, which show Melchers's affinity with traditional form and Romantic spirit, in which the composer found his own distinct musical language.

Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 18 (1923)

Melcher composed his first piano concerto in 1923. It was premiered on 2 March 1925 in Stockholm, by the Konsertföreningen Orkester (the Stockholm Concert Society, which became The Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra in 1957). The conductor was René-Emmanuel Baton (1879–1940, known as Rhené-Baton, at the time chief conductor of Orchestre Pasdeloup. The soloist was pianist Sven Brandel (1898–1964), a piano professor at the Stockholm Music Academy and, like Melchers, also an organist.

The concerto is dedicated to the composer's wife Henriette Hartog (1891–1971), a Dutch pianist he met in Paris and married in 1921 in Amsterdam. She was born in the United Kingdom, near Hull, where her father Hendrik ("Henri") Hartog (1839–1900) was the first conductor appointed to lead the Hull Philharmonic Society. When the couple moved to Sweden, Henriette was known and appeared in performances as Henriette Melchers.

The first movement is in sonata form. It opens with a short orchestral introduction *Molto sostenuto*, which leads into a piano cadenza – an unusual concept which is rare in the piano concerto repertoire. Perhaps the most well-known example is the cadenza at the start of Saint-Saëns's Second Piano Concerto in g minor, which likely inspired Melchers to try something similar. Melchers's cadenza is expansive and lyrical, with the melody ensconced

in chordal textures in the right hand and undulating accompaniment in the left. The song-like expressive quality of the second theme *tranquillo e molto espressivo* brings contrast to the explosive character of the first *allegro* motif, which reverberates not only through the first movement, but throughout the concerto. Even in the second movement, *Lento molto espressivo*, a sense of calm and tranquility is often disturbed by whirlwinds of passion and drama. But it is also a conversation, a dialogue between piano and orchestra that alternates between quiet contemplation and heightened emotion. The finale, written in rondo form, begins *attacca*, its original and sharp-edged virtuosic main motif is sparkling and playful, betraying the level of difficulty that both pianist and orchestra must overcome. After the powerful and majestic coda, the brilliant downward *staccato* passages in the piano bring the concerto to its triumphal conclusion.

The review of the concerto, written by Swedish music critic, writer, and composer Moses Pergament, was published in *Svenska Dagbladet* on 3 March 1925. The performance was a success, and Melchers was described as a 'creative spirit standing high above triviality and mundaneness', and that the concerto 'was a definite victory.'

Piano Concerto No. 2, Op. 23 (1931)

Melchers wrote his second piano concerto for his wife Henriette, who premiered the work with the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra in Gothenburg, conducted by the composer, on 4 January 1933.

The concerto is imbued with warmth, lyricism, a sense of nobility, elegance, and playful, light-hearted spirit. But it is technically demanding, virtuosic, and requires effective communication between the orchestra and soloist and the individual instruments. Melchers as a composer is clearly someone who likes to tell a story, and who does it honestly, sincerely, without unnecessary effects or elements. Possibly because of this, his writing is often rhapsodic, drawing criticism from some of his contemporaries that could have contributed to his neglect.

The first movement begins with a heroic theme in the horns, in the spirit of Strauss and hints of Wagner, which is soon followed by the sweeping melodic line of the main theme in

the piano. The second theme emerges from the lower registers of the piano and brings with it a sense of darkness and loneliness, which are soon dispelled when the orchestra joins in. This movement is very much a conversation between piano and orchestra, and various instruments, and it seems to be one of Melchers's prominent characteristics – the composer speaks with us, not at us. The cadenza is announced by the grinding double basses who reluctantly give way to the piano, which is struggling and stumbling to climb out of the depths of the instrument into the higher registers, from darkness to the light.

After the dramatically charged first movement with its stirring main theme, a slow, melodically expressive second movement follows with a contrasting, contemplative middle section. But, as always with Melchers, a change is not far behind – and contemplation gives way to drama, passion, or heroic outbursts.

The finale, which was thought to be the most interesting in terms of both the motivic invention and the sound effect by the critic Moses Pergament, who reviewed its Stockholm premiere, has a distinctly virtuosic character. It is in rondo form, very playful, as if a game of hide and seek is unfolding, where sparkling piano histrionics and brilliance are interspersed with lyricism and heartfelt emotion. There are also moments of rustic charm, at times almost of medieval character in the woodwinds, and the overall effect is that of unabashed joy, happiness, but without platitudes or clichés.

The concerto was well received, and acknowledged as a work of importance in a review written on 5 January 1933 in *Göteborgs Handels-och Sjöfartstidning* by Gösta Nyström. Commenting on the loving interpretation of the piano part by the soloist Henriette Melchers, who was praised for rhythmic clarity and a sense of style, Nyström reflected on the honesty of Melchers as a composer, saying that

in his music he does not get lost in philosophically profound considerations. Nor is he a groping and searching spirit, who has found his genius beyond the beaten track of music. His music is impressionistically contemporary and wants nothing more than to be good art. And it becomes good art, because it is healthy and sound, the result of an artist's heart of the purest ore with the purest sound.

The concerto was repeated in Stockholm a few weeks later, with Moses Pergament recounting in *Svenska Dagbladet* on 29 January 1933 that the performance in Gothenburg was a great success for both the composer and the interpreter, and that 'it can be safely said that the reprise in Stockholm was received with particularly warm interest by a fairly large audience.' What is particularly revealing is the critic's last remarks, where he reflects on the fact that the concerto

...contains a good deal of solid music, technically well executed and characterised by wise artistic economy. The style is neither French nor Swedish, nor – as in some of the immediately preceding works – a fusion of French and Swedish. There is a general, international musical language in this piano concerto, which at the same time pays tribute to Late Romanticism and Impressionism.

And here we may get to the heart of the question as to why Melchers's music suffered from so much neglect. His works, although clearly well received and respected, were often described as traditional (read old-fashioned) with a French (and sometimes German) accent, and it was thought that influences of French composers, particularly Franck, made him stand out in the milieu of Swedish music.

But Melchers's works are simply an amalgamation of his musical experiences, influences, and affinities, which were inevitably coloured by his many years in France during his formative years. The value of Melchers's compositions is in their honesty and adherence to tradition whilst being loyal to his own aesthetic beliefs, and commitment to following his own creative path no matter what the world thinks of it. Melchers's music allows us to see a fuller picture of the Swedish musical heritage, which is rich, multifaceted, and deserves to be better known because it is very much a part of the greater European music tradition.

Anastasia Belina

Described by the *Gramophone* as 'a pianist in full flower of his mature, imaginative artistry', **Peter Jablonski** is an award-winning Swedish pianist. In 2026 he received the prestigious Polish Fryderyk award for his recording of André Tchaikowsky's piano concertos, and in 2025 he was awarded with a Swedish Grammy for his critically acclaimed recording of Ronald Stevenson's piano works, released on Ondine. In December 2022, Jablonski was given the prestigious French Academy Charles Cros Award, Contemporary Music, for his recording of Grażyna Bacewicz's piano music. He is among the leading pianists of his generation, and during the last thirty years on international stages has performed with over 150 orchestras, given over 2000 concerts, and has been on more than 30 tours of Japan.

Discovered by Abbado and Ashkenazy and signed by Decca in his seventeenth year, he went on to perform, tour, collaborate, and record with many of the world's leading orchestras and conductors, which include NHK Tokyo, Orchestre National de France, L'Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, DSO Berlin, Leipzig Gewandhaus, Tonhalle Zurich, Philadelphia, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Cleveland Orchestra, La Scala Philharmonic, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra, Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, Oslo Philharmonic, Warsaw National Philharmonic Orchestra, National Symphony Orchestra of Polish Radio (NOSPR), Daniele Gatti, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Andris Nelsons, Daniel Harding, Kurt Sanderling, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Riccardo Chailly, Myung-Whun Chung, Jukka-Pekka Saraste, and Marie Jacquot.

He has appeared in concert and recitals in famous venues around the world, which include the Royal Festival Hall and the Barbican in London, Philharmonie Berlin, Suntory Hall Tokyo, Hollywood Bowl Los Angeles, Salle Pleyel Paris, Musikverein Vienna, Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, among many others.

He has performed and recorded the complete piano concertos by Beethoven, P. Tchaikovsky, André Tchaikowsky, Rachmaninoff, Bacewicz, Bartók, Melcher Melchers, the complete mazurkas by Chopin and Scriabin, and all piano sonatas by Prokofiev. During his three-decade-long career he developed a diverse repertoire that in addition to major works by Classical and Romantic composers also includes works by Barber, Gershwin, Szymanowski, Lutosławski, Copland, Stenhammar, with most recent additions of such composers as Ronald Stevenson and Grażyna Bacewicz.

He has worked with composers Witold Lutosławski and Arvo Pärt, and had a number of works composed for, and dedicated to him, including Wojciech Kilar's Piano Concerto, for which he won the Orpheus Award for the world premiere performance at the Warsaw Autumn Festival. He remains a supporter of today's composers and regularly gives world premieres of new works.

Jablonski's extensive discography includes recordings he has made for Decca, Deutsche Grammophon, Philips, and Ondine labels. He has received numerous awards for his recordings, which include the Swedish Grammy for his recording of piano music by Ronald Stevenson, the Edison Award for best concerto recording of Shostakovich's First Piano Concerto, Rachmaninov's Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, and Lutosławski's Paganini Rhapsody with Ashkenazy and RPO for Decca. He was presented with the Gramophone Classical Music Award for his Deutsche Grammophon recording of works by Cécile Chaminade with Anne Sofie von Otter and Bengt Forsberg.

Peter Jablonski is the recipient of the Litteris et Artibus medal for his services to culture, granted to him by the King of Sweden, Carl XVI Gustaf. He is also the winner of the prestigious prize Årets Svensk i Världen (International Swedish Personality of the Year), receiving it before ABBA and Astrid Lindgren. In 2022 he was elected into the Royal Swedish Academy of Music.

www.peterjablonski.com

Founded in 1912, the **Gavle Symphony Orchestra** has a long and exciting history, with a strong focus on the future. Since its inception, the Gavle Symphony Orchestra has played a significant role in the Swedish music scene and its 52 musicians are driven by an undeniable and heartfelt passion for music. The orchestra takes on a repertoire ranging from the baroque to the latest contemporary music with equal curiosity and dedication. The orchestra's particularly notable initiative for a composer-in-residence programme has resulted in numerous new works that follow the current trends in contemporary music for orchestra. Through a series of acclaimed recordings, the Gavle Symphony Orchestra has also brought many older Swedish composers into the limelight and given them well-deserved recognition.

The orchestra regularly collaborates with renowned international artists such as Janine Jansen, Denis Kozhukhin, Gabriela Montero, Nemanja Radulovic, Lucas Debargue, Viktoria Mullova, Nicolas Altstaedt, Anne Sofie von Otter, Johan Dalene and many more, while past and current chief conductors include Petri Sakari, Robin Ticciati, Jaime Martin and Christian Reif.

Gavle Symphony Orchestra has released several highly acclaimed albums and successfully toured in South Korea, China, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

www.gavlesymfoniorkester.se

Christian Reif is Music Director Designate of Wuppertal Opera & Symphony Orchestra, where he leads his inaugural season as Music Director in 2027/28. Reif holds the title of Chief Conductor of the Gavle Symphony Orchestra in Sweden, where his term has been extended for 2 years through the 2027/28 season, and has established a reputation for his natural musicality, innovative programming and technical command.

Since 2022, Reif serves as Music Director of the Lakes Area Music Festival, a month-long summer festival in Minnesota featuring the nation's top classical performers in programming that ranges from opera and chamber music to symphonic performances along with commissioned new works. LAMF believes that high quality arts experiences should be accessible to all and operates on a name-your-price ticket model.

Recent highlights include debut performances with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Nashville Symphony, The Florida Orchestra, Danish Chamber Orchestra, Latvian National Symphony Orchestra, and Australian Youth Orchestra. He returned to conduct the Houston Symphony, National Arts Centre Orchestra in Ottawa, Canada, Netherlands Radio Philharmonic, Belgrade Philharmonic, and leads an opera production at Rice University in Houston.

With an equal footing in North America and Europe, Reif has conducted the symphony orchestras of San Francisco, Baltimore, Dallas, Houston, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, Indianapolis, and Kansas City, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and Orchestra of St. Luke's. Previous season highlights include appearances with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Detroit Symphony, SWR Symphony, and Royal Northern Sinfonia. In Europe, he has performed repeatedly with Orchestre National de Lyon, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Münchner Rundfunkorchester, Hallé Orchestra and Stavanger Symphony.

Reif enjoys conducting opera and has led productions at the Music Academy of the West of Don Giovanni, Juilliard Opera of The Merry Wives of Windsor, Opera San Jose of Leoncavallo's Pagliacci and the Lakes Area Music Festival of Ariadne auf Naxos, The Rake's Progress, and Hansel and Gretel.

In 2023, Reif won a Grammy for the Nonesuch Records album *Walking in the Dark*, the debut solo album of classical singer Julia Bullock in which he accompanied her on piano and led London's Philharmonia Orchestra. The album was praised by Gramophone Magazine as

"illuminating" and described Reif as providing "excellent support" for Bullock. In 2020 during the pandemic, Reif and Bullock recorded a series of at-home virtual "Songs of Comfort", ranging from Carole King's classic "Up on the Roof" to Schubert's Wanderers Nachtlied. NPR Music featured the duo in a "Tiny Desk Concert" for their special quarantine edition of the series, and The New York Times highlighted them on their "Best Classical Music of 2020" list.

From 2016 to 2019, Christian was Resident Conductor of the San Francisco Symphony and Music Director of the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra, after being the Conducting Fellow at the New World Symphony from 2014 to 2016 and at Tanglewood Music Center in 2015 and 2016. He studied conducting at the Mozarteum in Salzburg and at The Juilliard School in New York City. He resides in Munich with his wife Julia Bullock and their son.

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Publisher: Svensk Musik (Piano Concerto No. 2); M/s (Piano Concerto No. 1)

Recordings: Gavle Concert Hall, Sweden, 11–13 November, 2024 (Piano Concerto No. 2) &
9–11 June, 2025 (Piano Concerto No. 1)

Executive Producer: Joel Valkila

Recording Producer: Ingo Petry (Take5 Music Production, www.take5.pro)

Recording Engineer: Thore Brinkmann

Editing, Mixing and Mastering: Ingo Petry

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Booklet Editor: Joel Valkila

Cover & artist photos: Gavle Symphony Orchestra

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Christian Reif and Peter Jablonski

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CHRISTIAN REIF, conductor