

Ferdinand
RIES

**Romantic Variations,
Fantasies and a Rondo**

Michael Tsalka, Fortepiano



Ferdinand Ries (1784-1838)

Romantic Variations, Fantasies and a Rondo

Studying the music of Ferdinand Ries, it soon becomes apparent that this man was much more than the esteemed pupil, friend and secretary of Beethoven, who wrote (together with Franz Wegeler) a collection of reminiscences of his relationship with the legendary composer. My purpose in creating this recording was to add another dimension to the figure of Ries both as prolific composer and piano virtuoso. Most of the fantasies, variation sets and the rondo presented in this recording were produced during the composer's years in London (1813-24), a period which is generally considered the most fruitful and successful of his restless, difficult career. The publication of these types of *Einzelstücke* was central to his success with the English public. Square pianos by firms such as Broadwood and Clementi had recently invaded the parlours of the middle classes and pieces – ideally short, pleasant, melodic and technically unchallenging – were much in demand. Newly arrived in London, Ries took advantage of this unique economic opportunity and published, often at his own cost, many of these types of keyboard works.

Among the wealthy patrons of the city, Ries soon became a fashionable piano performer and instructor. A critic described his playing in the following terms:

... [H]is playing is most distinguished from that of all others by its romantic wildness. By means of strong contrasts of loud and soft, and a liberal use of the open pedals, together with much novelty and boldness in his modulations, he produces an effect upon those who enter into his style, which can only be compared that arising from the most unexpected combinations and transitions of the Aeolian harp. It is purely German...

The Harmonicon II (1824), 33-5.

The famous musical impresario Johann Peter Salomon – who had taught violin to Ries' father during his years in Bonn – organized opportunities for the virtuoso to give concerts and present his compositions, introduced him to the aristocracy and supported his candidacy for directorship of the recently founded London Philharmonic Society. These activities were profitable enough to allow him to marry an English lady of some means, Miss Harriet Mangeon.

Ries had created variation sets and rondos prior to 1813, many of which employed well-known vocal themes by Mozart, Méhul, Paër and Beethoven. In preparation for his tour of Russia in 1811-1812, he composed at least two sets based on popular Russian songs. The music of that country must have made a strong impression on him, for he continued for several years employing Russian themes. A virtuosic, festive example can be heard in the *Variations in A minor on a Cossack Song, Op. 40, No. 1* (pub. 1818) [5]. During his years in London, Ries published many sets with themes based on English, Scottish and Irish ballads, for example, the *Variations in C major on a Favourite Scotch Air 'The Old Highland Laddie', Op. 105, No. 2* (pub. 1822) [3]. Ries also did not forget his difficult years in Paris (1807-08) and his narrow, repeated escapes from the French army during the Napoleonic wars. He is alleged to have detested French music, but this did not impede him from using as themes well-known songs and arias from that country. In the *Variations in F major on 'La Sentinelle', Op. 105, No. 1* (pub. 1822) [1], Ries frames a martial song, popular during the French revolution, with a catchy march, which repeats unaltered at the end of each variation (a technique, which he probably picked up from Beethoven). Ries never lost his romantic interest in popular music. The *Introduction and Rondo in E flat major 'à la Zingaresco', Op. 184* (pub. 1837) [6] represents a technically brilliant, late example of his love for the wild and exotic.

Ries' variations open with simple and melodically attractive themes followed by seven to ten sections of

varying difficulty and contrasting expression. As in Mozart's variations, the effect is often one of cumulative drama. Ries displays great melodic, harmonic and figurative imagination, making full use of the extended range and colouristic possibilities of the fortepianos of the 1810s and 1820s. His debt to the Viennese Classical Style is evident in details in the scores relating to touch, pedalling, articulation, accentuation and slurring. These signs give an idea of his expressive and rhetorical abilities as interpreter and improviser.

English critics often complained that his fortepiano compositions were too difficult for the amateur. Ries always found ways of making his publications attractive to the public but was more often than not uncompromising about their demanding technical level. This is particularly true of his fantasies, in which the composer gave free rein to his musical imagination. It is in these works – indebted in part to the *Empfindsamer Stil* – that one can best understand his stylistic mastery and intellectual sophistication. *The Dream, Op. 49* (pub. 1813) [2] is a fantasy in E flat major with an unstated programme. A rambling, brooding introduction is followed by contrasting musical sections, in which ecstatic lyricism intermingles with developmental passages. Cadenza-like phrases act

as musical bridges, though sudden transitions are not uncommon. An extended mid-section begins with a military march and is followed by rhetorical passages filled with pathos, as if the lyrical dreams of the musical protagonist were suddenly menaced by the drama of war.

In the *Fantasy in A flat major on Schiller's Poem 'Resignation', Op. 109* (pub. 1821) [4], each musical section correlates directly to either a full strophe or two to three verses of the poem. Schiller's *Resignation* (first published in 1786, republished as *Eine Phantasie* in 1800) is an extended, mystical work, in which the soul of a departed encounters his eternal maker and asks, as retribution for his piety, the joys he renounced during life, namely the love of women. The godhead denies the reward: He who chooses to take the path of faith and worldly resignation cannot aspire to receive the enjoyments of life in its aftermath. Ries produced an ambitious and original response to the poem, which is compelling not only in its musical narrative but also in its overarching form. The work was published in Leipzig in 1823, a time when the composer was already considering a return to his native Rhineland.

Michael Tsalka and Angélica Minero Escobar

About the Instruments

The three reproductions of early romantic pianos employed in the present recording were kindly lent by the Schubert Club in St. Paul, MN (schubert.org). Ries was professionally active during a period in which the fortepiano was in constant evolution and varied not only from country to country, but also from firm to firm. I decided to employ for the recording reproductions of Viennese instruments, not only because of their availability at the Schubert Club, but also because the articulative precision and fluency of Ries' musical style seem to correspond more closely to the clarity of their tone and their fast, responsive action and damping.

Fortepiano after Johann Schantz, c. 1800 [1](#)

Built by Thomas and Barbara Wolf, Washington, DC 1997
Five-octave range: FF-g''

Johann Schantz (1762-1826) was one of the most respected Viennese fortepiano makers of his day. Joseph Haydn praised Schantz pianos, "on which everything is better expressed", and Beethoven recommended them – The Schubert Club owns a letter in which he does just that. Schantz pianos were known for having a particularly beautiful treble and a lightness of touch.

On this piano, the performer operates a knee lever to sustain notes. A moderator, which slips a piece of felt between the hammer and the strings for a softer tone, is operated by a small gilt knob over the nameplate. The original piano, which is in Boston, has a mahogany case.



Fortepiano after Nanette Streicher, née Stein, c. 1815 [3](#) [5](#)

Built by Thomas and Barbara Wolf, Washington, DC 1994
Six-octave range: FF-f''''

Nannette Streicher (1769-1833) established her own highly productive piano-making firm in Vienna in 1794, carrying on the family gift for keyboard building for which her father, Johann Andreas Stein of Augsburg, was esteemed. In 1817, Beethoven asked her to make a piano for him with an especially loud tone.

Veneered in mahogany, this instrument has a light, quick, Viennese "bouncing" action that produces a distinctively clear, ringing sound. It retains the beautiful tone and responsive touch of the earlier Stein models, and anticipates, in its extended keyboard and larger hammers, the later developments of the piano. It also includes a bassoon stop, which inserts a piece of parchment between hammers and strings, for a characteristic buzzing effect.



Fortepiano after Conrad Graf, "Royal Court Piano and Keyboard and Instrument Maker", c. 1824 [2](#) [4](#) [6](#)

Built by R. J. Regier, Freeport, ME 1993
Six-and-a-half-octave range: CC-f''''

In addition to the common sustain and "una corda" pedals, this fortepiano has a moderator pedal (that inserts cloth between the strings and hammers), and a bassoon pedal. The veneer on this modern version of a Viennese fortepiano is American black walnut. The keys are covered with bone and ebony.



Michael Tsalka



Photo: David Beecroft

Early keyboardist and pianist Michael Tsalka (Netherlands/Israel) has won numerous prizes and awards in Europe, the United States, the Middle East, Asia and Latin America. A versatile musician, he performs with equal virtuosity a wide span of repertoire from the early Baroque to the present day. After obtaining a bachelor's degree from Tel-Aviv University, he continued his studies in Germany and Italy. From 2002-2008 he studied at Temple University under the guidance of Joyce Lindorff, Lambert Orkis and Harvey Wedeen. Tsalka holds three degrees from that institution: a Master's in Chamber Music, a Master's in Harpsichord Performance and a Doctorate in Piano Performance. Other teachers included Sandra Mangsen, Klaus Schilde, Malcolm Bilson, Charles Rosen and Dario di Rosa. Michael Tsalka maintains a busy concert schedule, making appearances in Europe, North America, Asia, Russia, Australia, New Zealand and Latin America. Recent performances include appearances at the Boston Early Music Festival, the Forbidden City Hall in Beijing, Bellas Artes Theater in Mexico City, the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the St Denis Festival in Paris, Tokyo's City Opera, the Beethoven House in Bonn, the Jerusalem Music Center, the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, and at radio stations around the world. He has held teaching posts at the Esther Boyer College of Music (Philadelphia), the National Center for the Arts (Mexico City), and Musikskolan Lilla Akademien (Stockholm), and has presented over eighty master-classes in academic institutions on all continents. He has also been the artistic director of festivals in China, Sweden and Finland. Currently he is the artistic director of the Geelvinck Fortepiano Festival, Amsterdam (geelvinckfestival.nl). Together with Angélica Minero Escobar, he is preparing a critical edition of Daniel Gottlob Türk's thirty keyboard sonatas for Artaria Editions, New Zealand. www.michaeltalka.com

A celebrated student of Beethoven, virtuoso pianist Ferdinand Ries established an innovative technical approach to the interpretation of the fortepiano. The decade he spent in London (1813-24) was his most successful. The majority of the variation sets, fantasies and rondos on this recording were composed then. The emergence of the new square pianos created a hunger for domestic music-making and Ries responded with catchy variations on popular themes and technically challenging fantasias that gave full rein to his musical imagination. They add another dimension to the appreciation of the man Robert Schumann praised for his ‘remarkable originality’.

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| 1 | Variations in F major on a Beloved French Song
‘La Sentinelle’, Op. 105, No. 1* | 10:33 |
| 2 | Fantasy in E flat major ‘The Dream’, Op. 49 | 18:04 |
| 3 | Variations in C major on a Favourite Scotch Air
‘The Old Highland Laddie’, Op. 105, No. 2* | 6:50 |
| 4 | Fantasy in A flat major on Schiller’s Poem
‘Resignation’, Op. 109 | 18:33 |
| 5 | Variations in A minor on a Cossack Song, Op. 40, No. 1* | 9:36 |
| 6 | Introduction and Rondo in E flat major
‘à la Zingaresco’, Op. 184* | 8:50 |

***WORLD PREMIÈRE RECORDINGS**

Michael Tsalka, Fortepiano

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Producer: Michael Tsalka • Engineer: John Scherf • Editors: John Scherf and Michael Tsalka

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