



FELIX
DRAESEKE

Piano Works

Sonata quasi Fantasia • Two Piano Pieces
Zwei Fantasiestücke in Walzerform • Petite histoire

Vladimir Aćimović

Musikakademie
in Liechtenstein



Romantic Piano • 9

Felix Draeseke (1835–1913)

Felix August Bernhard Draeseke was born in Coburg, Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, on 7 October 1835 and died in Dresden on 26 February 1913. His parents were Theodor and Maria (née Hanstein) Draeseke and his grandfather was the Lutheran theologian Bernhard Draeseke. Tragically, Maria died a week after his birth and Theodor subsequently married Emilie Behring in March 1836. In 1848 Draeseke entered the prestigious Gymnasium Casimirianum to undertake his secondary education and began to study music seriously. During 1849 Draeseke and his grandfather toured Germany, and he met musical luminaries such as Ferdinand Hiller and Aloys Schmitt. Two years later, aged 16, Draeseke declared his intention to become a professional musician. Despite his family's clerical background they remained supportive, and he entered the Leipzig Conservatory in 1852. During his three years there he studied theory and harmony with Benjamin Robert Papperitz and Friedrich Richter, piano with Louis Plaidy and Ignaz Moscheles, composition with Julius Rietz, and music history with Franz Brendel.

By the end of his first year, Draeseke had decided that Wagner would be his guiding light and had begun exploring suitable operatic material. Worryingly, during his second year he sought medical advice on an ear infection that was to lead to deafness later in life. Dissatisfied with its apparent conservatism, Draeseke left the Conservatory in 1855 and commenced writing articles for the Leipzig *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. The year after a Coburg performance of a *Symphony in C major* (subsequently discarded) under August Langert in 1856, Draeseke met Liszt in Leipzig, who was impressed with Draeseke's nearly complete opera *King Sigurd*. Further contact with Liszt's New German School circle during 1858 increased Draeseke's enthusiasm for its cause. Indeed, meeting and spending time with Richard Wagner in 1859 solidified Draeseke's convictions, and among much else his *Germania Cantata after Strachwitz*, *WoO 3a* for male chorus and orchestra and three volumes of songs were written. However, in 1861 Draeseke made his debut as conductor in the premiere of his *Germania Cantata*, the same concert closing with Hans von Bülow conducting Draeseke's *Germania March*, *WoO 3c*. The concert caused an uproar and earned Draeseke the title of '*besonders gefährliche Bestie*' ('the especially dangerous beast') from critics of the New German School. During a visit to Leipzig in February 1862, Draeseke wrote an *Overture (WoO 8)* for the birthday of Prince Constantine of Hohenzollern-Hechingen, which also was not well received, either by the audience or the dedicatee.

Similar audience antipathy had been suffered by many in the New German School, including Liszt, but in Draeseke's case it cut deep. Following discussions with his friend August Langert, Draeseke relocated to Switzerland in October 1862 with a number of piano works including the *Sonata quasi Fantasia*, *WoO 6* just completed. He intended to reflect on and rethink his compositional techniques, settling in the French-speaking *la Suisse romande*. For the following twelve years he taught piano and composed steadily. Further visits to Wagner in Tribschen near Lucerne, an extensive journey through several Mediterranean countries where he became acquainted with the formal mastery of southern architecture, and intensive study of the works of Johann Sebastian Bach, mark his search to rework his musical style. Disappointingly, a planned engagement to Louisa de Trey from Lausanne in 1870 was cancelled owing to anti-German sentiment in her family over the Franco-Prussian war. In 1871 Draeseke began sketching his *Symphony No. 2 in F major*, *Op. 25*, and his main achievement for the following year was the completion of the *Symphony No. 1 in G major*, *Op. 12*.

In February 1876, Draeseke completed his *Symphonic Andante in E minor for Cello and Orchestra*, *WoO 11* and soon afterwards decided to return to Germany. Having received a generous family bequest Draeseke could live comfortably in Dresden without seeking a teaching post. However, he was eventually appointed to teach composition at the Conservatory in 1884, his excellent work leading to a professorship in 1892 and the position of *Hofrat* in 1898. His second and third operas, *Herrat*, *WoO 13* (1879) and *Gudrun*, *WoO 14* (1882–83), the *Symphony No. 3*, *Op. 40* '*Symphonia Tragica*' (1885–86), and the *Serenade in D*, *Op. 49* and *Symphonic Prelude to Penthesilea*, *Op. 50* (both 1888), three string quartets and two quintets all date from this period.

In 1894, aged 58, Draeseke married one of his former pupils, Frida Neuhaus. During the last years of his life his interest turned to large scale vocal works, including the *Grosse Messe in F sharp minor*, *Op. 60* (1890), and the *Mysterium Christus*, *Opp. 70–73* (1895–99), often cited as his greatest accomplishment, as well as the operas *Bertran de Born*, *WoO, 22* (1892–94), *Fischer und Kalif*, *WoO 24* (1894–95) and *Merlin*, *WoO 30* (1903–05). Draeseke's late a cappella sacred works, the *Grosse Messe in A minor*, *Op. 85* (1908–09) and the *Requiem in E minor* (1909–10) adopt a simpler and highly idiomatic polyphonic style. Draeseke's fourth symphony, the '*Symphonia Comica*' (1912) is infused with gentle humour, especially in its slow movement *Fliegenkrieg* ('The Battle of the Flies'). Following Draeseke's essay *Die Konfusion in der Musik* (1906), the symphony can be heard as mocking Richard Strauss and his associates, reacting against the solemn fervour with which German music was currently seeing itself, or simply smiling at the irony of Draeseke's own situation, that of being overtaken by exactly the extreme developments he had fought so hard to avoid during his Swiss years.

Latterly, Draeseke's works had been widely performed, but during the years following the First World War they suffered neglect, and the efforts of his first biographer, Erich Roeder, to place him alongside Nazi approved composers such as Bruckner, Reger and Spohr did him no favours. However, the founding of the Internationale Draeseke Gesellschaft in 1986 and the International Draeseke Society (North America) in 1989 has resulted in more sustained efforts to promote his reputation.

Sonata quasi Fantasia in C sharp minor, Op. 6

In 1884, Liszt wrote to Draeseke: 'You know my opinion of your first piano sonata. Since Schumann's F sharp minor sonata, I know of no such significant work of this genre.' Written as one movement in 1862 and emerging as a re-worked three-movement composition in 1867, it stands at the apex of Draeseke's piano *oeuvre*, conceived between the end of his initial revolutionary phase and the commencement of a more conservative style. According to Erich Roeder, the original single movement may have contained a quotation from Luther's Easter hymn: 'It was a strange war, when death and life wrestled, life retained the victory, it devoured death.' If so, we are provided with a simple programme, moving from the first movement *Funeral March* to the triumphant *Finale*. But the quotation was removed, leaving a question mark over so simple a perspective. A motto motif re-appears regularly in the first and third movements and a longer theme from the first movement returns in the third movement, thereby giving elements of cohesion throughout the sonata.

I. Introduzione e Marcia funebre

In the introduction in E major, the motto motif, a questioning unresolved cadential figure, punctuates arpeggiated figuration and the main theme, a sumptuous Wagnerian *Andante molto espressivo* is hinted at. The *Marcia funebre* in C sharp minor follows. E major is reasserted with the return of the main *Andante* theme, fully presented and developed. Finally, the *Marcia funebre* returns in C sharp minor.

II. Intermezzo (Valse-Scherzo)

The mood is lightened with this balletic D flat major waltz. The main *grazioso* theme is constantly interpolated with episodes that maintain high spirits but frequently change key without modulation, lending a certain unease to the frivolities.

III. Finale: Allegro con brio

The motto motif precedes the first subject E major theme, which sparkles with semiquaver decoration and is marked *risoluto*. The smoother *espressivo* B major second subject then arrives, full of suppressed energy, anticipation and featuring a dominant pedal section that figures prominently. The first subject and the motto motif make a brief appearance before the substantial development section commences, centring around the suppressed energy of the second subject. *Tempo d'Introduzione* arpeggios and the sumptuous *andante* theme from the first movement herald the recapitulation where the *risoluto* first subject appears emphatically in E major. The second subject follows in E major and in the last bars the motto motif is finally resolved with a triumphant perfect cadence.

Grande Fantaisie sur *La Dame blanche*, Opéra de Boieldieu, Op. 8

By 1866, French composer François-Adrien Boieldieu's *La Dame blanche* had become a staple in Europe's opera houses. Following a long line of successes during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras, this Boieldieu *pièce de résistance*, written in 1825, guaranteed popularity for any good *fantasia* on its themes. Sarasate's *Fantaisie, Op. 3* for violin and orchestra on the same opera remains in the repertoire today. Draeseke's *Grand Fantaisie* of 1866, like Sarasate's *Fantaisie*, was written as a brilliant virtuoso concert piece and ingeniously groups the themes into a satisfying whole. The libretto of the opera itself weaves a Scottish Gothic romantic fantasy from Walter Scott's popular novels involving a castle, intrigue, a long-lost child, and eventual happiness. Draeseke uses five main themes plus other motifs from the opera spread across four sections, the first and third sections (with minor key colourations) in quadruple time and the second and fourth sections in triple time. A quadruple time coda repeats some material from the opening before a spirited close.

Zwei Fantasiestücke in Walzerform, Op. 3

No. 1. Vivace, ma non troppo

No. 2. Molto vivace

On 17 October 1862 Draeseke left Germany for Switzerland. These *Fantasiestücke* were among his compositions completed before the end of the year. Von Bülow once remarked to him that he was a 'harte Nuß' ('a hard nut to crack') and would 'never be popular among the ordinary'. Nevertheless, these waltzes, designed for virtuoso public performance, do represent a step in the direction of more light-hearted, persuasive listening. Both waltzes use a tripartite A–B–A format. The first waltz announces a number of contrasted themes in B major before letting them loose in various keys during the middle section, followed by their re-statement in a final coda section. The second waltz employs a contrasted rather languorous *più lento* theme in the D flat major middle section with the outer sections containing a variety of bustling themes in A flat major.

Petite histoire, Op. 9

No. 1. Rêve de bonheur ('Dream of Happiness')

No. 2. Intermezzo

No. 3. Incertitude ('Uncertainty')

During 1868 Draeseke spent some considerable time in Munich where his compositional output included these three character pieces. The musical language is more restrained than in his New German School years and thematic lines are longer, less explosive and not as astringent. *Rêve de bonheur* simply repeats its contented, warm-hearted theme before a short coda. *Intermezzo* propels an energetic, balletic 3/8-time opening theme in F sharp minor towards its B major middle section. This tranquil respite leads on to a return of the balletic material, revealing classic A–B–A form. *Incertitude* includes more chromaticism, but its purpose is to help characterise the mood rather than appearing simply for its own sake. In G minor, the theme droops, burdened with care, until the final coda gives resolution in G major.

Two Piano Pieces, Op. 5

No. 1. Valse-Nocturne in E major

No. 2. Valse-Scherzo in C sharp minor

Written around 1867, Draeseke stylistically matches the *Valse-Scherzo* with the Chopin influenced *Valse-Nocturne*. Chopin-like gestures and figuration abound, while still bearing Draeseke's trademark rapid key-changes and cadential surprises. The mood is altogether less benevolent and more dramatic than the *Petite histoire* and illustrates the experiments Draeseke was conducting with his musical style. The *Valse-Nocturne* is episodic with the *molto espressivo* main theme constantly returning after other material, while the *Valse-Scherzo* employs two main themes the first vaulting and energetic, the second more lyrical and slower. Following the return of the first theme the second theme also reappears but in a more *scherzo*-like energetic fashion, ending with a spirited coda.

Rodney Smith

Vladimir Aćimović



Named the 'most promising young artist' in Serbia by the ArtLink Foundation, pianist Vladimir Aćimović (b. 2002, Niš) has performed in all the major venues of his home country, and is a frequent guest on national broadcasting channels. He has received fellowships from the Academy of Music in Liechtenstein, the Mozart Gesellschaft Dortmund and the Aspen Music Festival and School. Aćimović has won top prizes at the International Robert Schumann Piano Competition, the International Competition for Young Pianists Arthur Rubinstein in memoriam, the International Competition 'Young Virtuoso' and the European Union of Music Competitions for Youth (EMCY) Award, among others. A finalist of the Ferruccio Busoni and New York International Piano Competitions, he also participated in the 19th International Chopin Piano Competition. He has performed internationally, appearing at the Konzerthaus Dortmund, Wiener Staatsoper, Bulgaria Hall (Sofia), Robert-Schumann-Saal (Düsseldorf) and Harris Concert Hall (Aspen). Aćimović studied with Lidija Stanković in Belgrade and Milana Chernyavska in Graz, where he is currently pursuing a master's degree. He is also undertaking doctoral studies at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade, where he is a junior researcher.

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Felix Draeseke's early affiliation with the music of Liszt and Wagner permeated his own compositions of the period, not least his *Sonata quasi fantasia in C sharp minor*, a work of sumptuous Wagnerian candour as well as balletic lightness. It also marked a significant turning-point from a revolutionary style to something more conservative. As Liszt wrote to him, 'Since Schumann's F sharp minor sonata, I know of no more such significant work of this genre.' The programme also includes a virtuoso *Grande Fantaisie*, two characterful *Fantasiestücke* and Chopin-like gestures in the *Valse-Nocturne*.

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(1835–1913)

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	Sonata quasi Fantasia in C sharp minor, Op. 6 (1862–67)	22:57
❶	I. Introduzione e Marcia funebre	9:58
❷	II. Intermezzo (Valse-Scherzo)	3:23
❸	III. Finale: Allegro con brio	9:36
❹	Grande Fantaisie sur <i>La Dame blanche</i>, Opéra de Boieldieu, Op. 8 (1866)	13:42
	Zwei Fantasiestücke in Walzerform, Op. 3 (1862)	10:19
❺	No. 1. Vivace, ma non troppo	5:31
❻	No. 2. Molto vivace	4:48
	Petite histoire, Op. 9 (1868)	9:27
❼	No. 1. Rêve de bonheur	2:11
❽	No. 2. Intermezzo	2:36
❾	No. 3. Incertitude	4:40
	Two Piano Pieces, Op. 5 (1867?)	9:25
❿	No. 1. Valse-Nocturne in E major	4:53
⓫	No. 2. Valse-Scherzo in C sharp minor	4:32

Vladimir Aćimović, Piano

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