



NAXOS



ROMANTIC  
PIANO

JÓZEF  
WIENIAWSKI

Piano Works

Piano Sonata • Polonaises • Ballade

Andrew Cannestra



## Romantic Piano • 5

### Józef Wieniawski (1837–1912)

Józef Wieniawski was a prolific Polish composer and virtuoso pianist. Coming from a musical family, musicians and audience members alike are likely to be familiar with his more famous older brother, virtuoso violinist and composer Henryk Wieniawski (1835–1880). The two brothers even collaborated with one another in composing several pieces together, most famously the *Allegro de Sonata in G minor, Op. 2*, which they performed together in concert many times. As a solo concert pianist, Józef toured widely across Europe throughout his lifetime, becoming only the second pianist to perform Chopin's complete études in concert (after Franz Liszt) and frequently programming his own works. While his music fell into relative obscurity during the 20th century, contemporary performers have begun to revitalise his works, and this album presents several works that have never been commercially recorded among others with only a small handful of recent recordings.

Born in Lublin, Poland, Józef received high-quality musical training from an early age, first studying with Franciszek Synek before moving to study at the Paris Conservatory at the age of ten. In Paris, he studied composition with another like-minded virtuoso pianist-composer, Charles-Valentin Alkan, and his piano teachers included Pierre-Joseph-Guillaume Zimmermann and Antoine François Marmontel. A few years after graduating from the Paris Conservatory, he spent two years in Weimar studying with Franz Liszt, largely as a pianist but also absorbing Liszt's compositional style. Through these formative years, Wieniawski was already touring extensively, at first with his brother as a twin billing of child prodigies but before long as a soloist in his own right. At his peak, he gave over a hundred concerts per year, cementing his legacy as one of the great virtuoso pianists of his time.

At the age of 22, Wieniawski first settled in Warsaw, becoming an active performer and organiser in the music scene. Over the coming decades, he would temporarily take up residences in Paris, Moscow and Brussels, but Poland remained his musical centre; he was rewarded with the position of director of the Warsaw Music Society in 1875, and later recognised for his illustrious career as Honorary Member of the Society in 1896. Along the way, he collaborated with many of the prominent Polish musicians of his time, both performing as a soloist and as a chamber musician, as well as other contemporaneous European greats such as Eugène Ysaÿe. He largely ceased composing in his final decade, with his final opus dating from 1898, and died in Brussels in 1912.

Despite his reputation of living in the shadow of brother Henryk, Józef's compositions are certainly worthy of performance and scholarship on their own merit. His *oeuvre* largely consists of works for solo piano, particularly character pieces. Beyond those works recorded here, other significant solo piano works of his include a set of *8 Romances sans paroles, Op. 14*; two *Valses de concert (Op. 3, Op. 30)*; *8 Mazurkas, Op. 23*; a neo-Baroque *Fantaisie et Fugue, Op. 25*; two opus sets of *Pièces romantiques, Opp. 39 and 40*; a set of *24 Études, Op. 44*; and *4 Klavierstücke, Op. 51*. He also wrote in the genres of the nocturne, tarantella and impromptu. Many of his forms were initially popularised by Chopin and still in vogue across the latter half of the 19th century. Beyond his solo piano music, he also composed orchestral works, including a *Piano Concerto, Op. 20* and a *Symphony in D major, Op. 49*; he also contributed chamber music, such as duo sonatas for violin (*Op. 24*) and cello (*Op. 26*), a *String Quartet, Op. 32* and a *Piano Trio, Op. 40*. Lastly, near the end of his career Wieniawski wrote German Lieder, including the *6 Gesänge, Op. 47* and the *6 Lieder, Op. 50*. The intensely lyrical nature of Wieniawski's music made him well suited to write for voice, and his proximity to his brother and many of the great string players of the 19th century certainly influenced and directly led to much of his chamber music, too.

His style and musical language certainly owes a great debt to his predecessors Fryderyk Chopin and Franz Liszt, but the originality of Wieniawski's voice as a composer is on full display in his solo piano music. His writing is both highly virtuosic and quite pianistic, bearing the mark of a true master of the instrument and showcasing a wide variety of textures and colours. Nearly all standard Romantic-era virtuoso techniques appear in these pieces: octaves, scalar passagework, arpeggios, and free, rapid cadenzas, while also requiring a warm, lyrical tone and careful phrasing. Despite this heightened virtuosity, it is never superfluous, adding essential characters and colours that form the fabric of his music. Above all, his music is remarkable for its sincerity and refreshing takes on familiar art forms and genres.

Much like Chopin, Wieniawski absorbs different elements of Polish dances, particularly the polonaise, often in ways beyond what one finds in Chopin's polonaises. He crafts highly danceable textures in stark contrast alongside more intricate virtuosity and rhythmic complexity. Similarly, he channels equally authentic and charming Polish dance elements in the *Polka brillante, Op. 11*. Furthermore, his expressive markings are very precise and illuminative, generally using at least one or two Italian words or phrases corresponding to each new section or change in character, even including some terms used infrequently by other composers of the era. While he composed through the end of the 19th century, witnessing substantial innovations in harmony and musical style, his musical language remained largely unchanged across his career, unaffected by those composers at the forefront such as Debussy or Schoenberg.

Performing the music of Wieniawski requires an intimate awareness of the many specific details in the score alongside a sense of imagination and creativity from the performer to bring these pieces to life. While many of his works have fallen into obscurity in the last century, these recordings strive to not only revive some hidden gems, but to inspire others to take up performing them. Much of his piano music remains virtually unknown today, leaving room for others to uncover even more hidden masterworks as interest in his more well-known music continues to be revived.

### **Barcarolle, Op. 29 (1884)**

Traditionally, a barcarolle was a song of the Venetian gondola; it appeared frequently in Italian bel canto opera, but did not make its way to the piano until the early Romantic era. Nearly every example shares two main characteristics: a 6/8 or 12/8 metre, and a slow-to-moderate tempo featuring a gentle rocking motion, imitating the feeling of a relaxing, peaceful ride along a Venetian canal.

The *Barcarolle* is one of Wieniawski's later works, and these harmonies are among his most adventurous, at times reminiscent of the emerging French impressionist movement. In particular, he uses the flat-sixth chord quite frequently, evoking a feeling of nostalgia. Like the polka, this work is in rondo form, with the main B flat major theme appearing in full three times.

### **Ballade in E flat minor, Op. 31 (1884)**

The ballade as a piano genre was first popularised by Chopin, Wieniawski's compatriot and source of great inspiration. Throughout the 19th century, composers such as Franz Liszt and Johannes Brahms, among many others, offered their contributions; it comes as little surprise that Wieniawski, too, would try his hand. This tragic work was published just a few years after the passing of his brother Henryk. While the correlation between the ballade and his personal life cannot be proven, it does offer a compelling possible source of inspiration.

This ballade loosely follows sonata form, opening with a recitative section before presenting the first theme in E flat minor, marked *con duolo* ('with pain'). The *sostenuto* second theme later emerges in D flat major, featuring a chorale-like texture. The development undertakes some surprising modulations, leading to a recapitulation in the distant keys of F sharp minor (main theme) and C major (second theme). Just as a second development section appears to be underway, the chorale theme reappears in E flat major, marked *grandioso*. The mood becomes triumphant, as if overcoming all of the struggles that had preceded it. However, an unexpected deceptive cadence and a sudden return to E flat minor leads to a final statement of the first theme. Subdued and heartbroken, the ballade concludes in unquestionable tragedy.

### **Piano Sonata in B minor, Op. 22 (1858; second version c. 1890)**

The phrase 'Piano Sonata in B minor' immediately brings to mind the two celebrated masterworks of Chopin and Liszt, two composers Wieniawski closely associated with. However, this work is no mere imitation, representing the pinnacle of the composer's contributions to the piano repertoire. The difference between the two editions some three decades apart is quite substantial, showcasing Wieniawski's evolution as a composer. Most notably, there is an increase in counterpoint and a wider variety of textures, as well as a significant truncation of the recapitulation in the first movement and the complete omission of a scherzo third movement. The revised version recorded here only contains three movements instead of the original four.

The first movement adheres rather closely to a Classical sonata-allegro form, with a lyrical second theme in D major and a lengthy development. However, the recapitulation completely skips the main opening theme, starting right on the second theme, now in B major. Notably, Chopin's sonata forms – including his own B minor sonata – also follow this form, often referred to as 'Type 2' sonata form.

The second movement, in G major, offers a welcome respite from the stormy mood of the first. It follows ternary form, with lyrical outer sections full of sensuous rolled chords and operatic melodies interrupted by a wandering, increasingly tempestuous middle section.

Full of drama and tension from the very opening, the *perpetuum mobile* third movement makes for a hair-raising finale to the work. Perhaps the most unexpectedly exciting moment in the entire sonata occurs in the coda, when just as the sonata nears its conclusion Wieniawski launches into a C minor version of the opening, before finally arriving at the long-awaited Picardy third of B major.

### **Polonaise No. 2 in A flat major, Op. 21 'Polonaise triomphale' (pub. 1862)**

Of the four polonaises, Wieniawski's second is both the most ambitious in scope and the most virtuosic. One can draw many comparisons with Chopin's '*Heroic*' Polonaise in the same key. Both polonaises open with a dramatic E flat pedal tone leading into a heroic main theme in A flat major. Furthermore, both contrasting middle sections are in the key of E major, and both feature virtuosic and triumphant codas that put an exclamation mark on the rest of the piece.

That said, Wieniawski found ways to make his own voice equally prominent, too. After the E major theme, a lengthy, tumultuous development and re-transition section follows back to the opening material, exploring many different keys along the way. He also captures the polonaise rhythm's spirit in a different way than Chopin, with even more melodic embellishments and the near-constant polonaise rhythmic feeling in the left hand.

### **Polonaise No. 3 in G sharp minor, Op. 27 (1881)**

The only of the four polonaises in a minor key, the third polonaise follows a similar blueprint as the others in its structure with three contrasting sections anchored by a main theme in the home key. This time, the major-key heroic themes appear as contrasting episodes, while the recurring G sharp minor theme takes on a more sombre character. While this polonaise does end with a Picardy third in the parallel major, it does so in an understated way that does not fully leave the dark character of this polonaise behind.

### **Polonaise No. 4 in G major, Op. 48 (pub. 1892)**

This polonaise was among the composer's final works (his second-to-last for the piano), and certainly ranks among his most mature pieces. While the second and third polonaises both open with introductory cadenza-like passages functioning as a pedal tone on the dominant, this introduction begins in the distant key of G sharp minor, as if having never left the world of the third polonaise, leading to an extended rhythmically free section before finally arriving to the main G major theme. The melodies are among the composer's most poignant and nostalgic; when heard side-by-side with the much more youthful early polonaises, the difference is rather striking.

### **Polka brillante, Op. 11 (pub. 1852)**

A relatively early work of Wieniawski's, this polka is cast in rondo form, with the charming main theme returning many times alongside three different contrasting episodes. These episodes rarely stray far from the home key of D major, offering a light-hearted, capricious character that shines throughout the piece. Near the end, the texture shifts from a simpler dance to scampering virtuosity that would be equally at home in a Chopin étude, leading to a boisterous coda full of joy.

## Andrew Cannestra



Pianist and composer Andrew Cannestra first rose to prominence as the winner of the 2021 Aeolian Classics Emerging Artist Competition, where he was unanimously lauded by the jury. In 2024 he was awarded the Bronze Medal at the Seattle International Piano Competition. His debut album, *Mystic Pool*, was released in 2022, featuring one of his own compositions alongside works by William Grant Still, Alexander Scriabin, Fryderyk Chopin and Henri Dutilleux. He recently gave the Oregon premiere of Amy Beach's *Piano Concerto* with the University of Oregon Symphony, as well as the world premiere of Ryan Johnston's *Piano Concerto No. 1* with the Boston-based Horizon Ensemble. Cannestra currently resides in Northfield, Minnesota, where he serves on the piano faculty at his alma mater, St. Olaf College. He is also a doctoral candidate at the University of Oregon, studying with Alexandre Dossin and David Riley.

Józef Wieniawski, younger brother of Henryk, was a prolific Polish composer and virtuoso pianist renowned throughout Europe. After studies in Paris he spent two years in Weimar studying with and absorbing the compositional style of Franz Liszt – Wieniawski’s work combines the pianistic flair and poetic intensity of both Liszt and his fellow countryman Chopin. These qualities can all be heard in the virtuoso *Polonaises* and the tragic *Ballade* as well as the *Piano Sonata in B minor* – the pinnacle of Józef Wieniawski’s many contributions to the piano repertoire. Andrew Cannestra’s recording of *Polonaise No. 1* is available for streaming and download on a digital single (9.70388).

Józef  
**WIENIAWSKI**  
(1837–1912)

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|----------|---|--------------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>Barcarolle in B flat major, Op. 29 (1884)*</b>                     | <b>6:18</b>  |
| <b>2</b> | <b>Ballade in E flat minor, Op. 31 (1884)</b>                         | <b>10:47</b> |
|          | <b>Piano Sonata in B minor, Op. 22 (1858; second version c. 1890)</b> | <b>23:04</b> |
| <b>3</b> | <b>I. Allegro con brio</b>  | <b>10:19</b> |
| <b>4</b> | <b>II. Andante</b>  | <b>7:11</b>  |
| <b>5</b> | <b>III. Allegro tumultuoso</b>  | <b>5:34</b>  |
| <b>6</b> | <b>Polonaise No. 2 in A flat major, Op. 21</b>                        |              |
|          | <b>‘Polonaise triomphale’ (pub. 1862)</b>                             | <b>9:34</b>  |
| <b>7</b> | <b>Polonaise No. 3 in G sharp minor, Op. 27 (pub. 1881)*</b>          | <b>7:48</b>  |
| <b>8</b> | <b>Polonaise No. 4 in G major, Op. 48 (pub. 1892)*</b>                | <b>8:08</b>  |
| <b>9</b> | <b>Polka brillante, Op. 11 (pub. 1852)*</b>                           | <b>4:43</b>  |

\***WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING**

**Andrew Cannestra, Piano**

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