



ROMANTIC  
PIANO

JOSEPH GABRIEL  
RHEINBERGER

Musikakademie  
in Liechtenstein

Piano Works

Piano Sonatas Nos. 2, 3 and 4 'Romantic'

Dmytro Semykras



## Romantic Piano • 10

### Joseph Gabriel Rheinberger (1839–1901)

Joseph Gabriel Rheinberger was born in Vaduz, Liechtenstein on 17 March 1839, and died in Munich on 25 November 1901. He was one of eleven children born to Johann Peter Rheinberger, the Prince of Liechtenstein's Treasurer, and Elisabeth Carigiet, who came from the Rhaeto-Romanic canton of Grisons. The first to discover his musical talent was organist and teacher Sebastian Pöhli, from whom he had his initial lessons at the age of five. He made such progress that at seven he became organist at the parish church in Vaduz, also composing music, including a three-part Mass with organ accompaniment. This caused a stir and led to him demonstrating his musical accomplishments to the local Bishop of Chur. At ten, his observation that an amateur quartet's violinist's A string sounded a semitone higher than his piano at home again drew attention to his musical gifts, persuading his father to let him live in nearby Feldkirch. There he was able to have intensive music lessons from choir director Philip Schmutzer, who emphasised the works of Bach and the Viennese Classical composers. Each week he would walk the ten miles back to Vaduz to play at the church. At this time the young Rheinberger was making frequent public appearances as a pianist, and further praise from the composer Matthäus Nagiller eventually convinced his father to send him to the renowned Munich Conservatory where he commenced in 1851.

Studies at the Conservatory continued until 1854 with J.E. Leonhard (piano), Johann Herzog (organ) and Julius Maier (counterpoint). Rheinberger remained in Munich afterwards, studying with Franz Lachner and teaching. He succeeded Leonhard as a piano professor in 1859, becoming a composition professor in 1861. When the Conservatory was dissolved in 1864 he acquired the post of coach at the Court Theatre, on one occasion playing and transposing at the piano Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* score virtually at sight. Between 1860 and 1866 Rheinberger was also organist at the Court Church of St Michael and from being accompanist of the Munich Choral Society from 1854 he was promoted to conductor in 1864.

In 1867 Rheinberger married a former pupil Franziska von Hoffnaass (1832–1892), who was socially well connected, culturally perceptive and poetically gifted, a facet appreciated by Rheinberger who set a good deal of her poetry to music. Rheinberger was now frequently plagued by ill-health, but continued to compose, enjoying the company of a limited circle of friends, which suited his retiring, somewhat melancholy nature.

Upon the reorganisation of the Conservatory under Hans von Bülow in 1867 Rheinberger was appointed professor of organ and composition, as well as Inspector of Instrumental and Theory Classes. The title of Royal Professor was conferred shortly thereafter. In 1877 Ludwig II of Bavaria appointed him a Knight of the Order of St Michael following his declining the Directorship of the newly establish Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt, choosing to remain in his Munich posts instead. In the same year Rheinberger resigned from his Munich Choral Society conductorship and was appointed Director of Court Church Music (Hofkapellmeister) in succession to Franz Wüllner. Already in receipt of various academic honours, in 1897 Rheinberger was awarded a papal knighthood by Pope Leo XIII in recognition of his fine church music. He became a Privy Councillor in 1894 and received a Doctor of Music degree, *honoris causa*, from the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich in 1899.

Rheinberger died in 1901. He and his wife were buried in Munich's Alter Südfriedhof but the grave was damaged during the Second World War and in 1950 they were reinterred in his hometown of Vaduz. Most of his letters, reviews, performance reports and diary entries are kept in the Joseph Rheinberger Archive in Vaduz, which has formed part of the State Archives since 1998. The composer's musical scores are kept in the Bavarian State Library in Munich.

Some have asserted that the importance of Rheinberger's musical legacy stems from his excellence as a teacher while others point to his twenty sonatas for organ as his crowning achievement. What is beyond doubt is his extraordinary facility as a composer in all forms as well as his unfailing industry as a musician, often in the face of poor health. At his death his published works alone reached opus 197 and included two symphonies, other orchestral works, two organ concertos, a good deal of chamber music, four operas, a vast array of church music, choral works, piano works and twenty organ sonatas.

The case for his legacy as teacher would certainly include a number of well-known American pupils such as Horatio Parker, George Whitefield Chadwick and Bruno Klein. Significant pupils from Europe included Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari, Engelbert Humperdinck, Richard Strauss and Wilhelm Furtwängler. That said, it should be born in mind that Germany was the preferred musical destination for students from all over Europe and America at the time. Impressive numbers of the finest students frequented many major conservatories that sprang up in Germany during the period.

Rheinberger's church music, for which he received a papal knighthood, also stands out for its sheer extent and the manner in which he followed his own path, contrasting favourably with the inflexibility shown by many of those from the Cecilian movement.

Perhaps Rheinberger's organ sonatas have attracted the most consistent praise since being written. During the earlier and middle 20th century they remained a mainstay of Romantic repertoire for the instrument even during the period of the Baroque revival and modernist composition when repertoire by Liszt, Mendelssohn and others was often considered sentimental and vulgar. Even in those years a Rheinberger sonata would find a welcome place in organ recital programmes. Rheinberger's restrained elegant counterpoint, rooted in and informed by Bach although not at all slavishly, lent itself effortlessly to the organ's basic characteristics without the need for the orchestral tonalities and expressive capabilities added to later 19th-century instruments. Indeed, the sonatas have a timeless quality.

Rheinberger produced a considerable amount of solo piano music in which four sonatas occupy a prominent position (*Nos. 2, 3 and 4* are recorded here). Alongside his obvious facility with sonata form demonstrated in the organ sonatas, these piano sonatas are polished, beautifully balanced and tasteful. Rheinberger's style was quintessentially Classical-Romantic in the Mozart, Schubert, Mendelssohn tradition, drawing more on Beethoven, Schumann and Brahms in thoughtful rather than volcanic mood. Rheinberger is especially effective in producing lengthy flowing melodies that are both memorable and characterful and he possesses a masterful sense of key. Bachian contrapuntal foundations and mainly tonal harmonies predominate and there is always plenty of space for modulation and expressive features. A cultivated atmosphere prevails, and the chromatic explorations and virtuoso gestures of the Liszt-Wagner school are avoided.

### **Piano Sonata No. 2 in D flat major, Op. 99 (1876)**

#### *I. Non troppo mosso*

This compact movement contrasts almost languorous motifs with more brilliantly decorated materials, all within a refined framework and across both first and second subjects in sonata form. As a consequence, there is considerable feeling of uniformity and uninterrupted development throughout. Using a 12/8 moderate tempo the first and second subjects in D flat major and A flat major respectively lead to a development that involves them both before the D flat major recapitulation and a final return of the first subject with a slower coda.

#### *II. Romance: Andante espressivo*

The opening main theme in A major has an almost Schubertian, orchestral quality, with a pensive melody seemingly accompanied by pizzicato strings. Supported by shimmering bass semiquavers, the second subject in E major is altogether more romantically inclined. The two themes then alternate. The first theme finally returns in a coda-like manner. There is undeniable charm in the scenario created by this romantic musical dialogue.

#### *III. Finale: Con fuoco ed espressivo*

This determinedly high-spirited, good-natured movement contains two very memorable main themes, The first with rippling accompaniment in D flat major and the second, emerging from the bass into an exultant F major. The exposition ends quietly and the development explores both themes with a cadenza-like scalic passage announcing the recapitulation. Here both themes return in D flat major. Following the second theme's quiet ending the coda section concentrates on the energetic first theme with its rippling accompaniment transforming into a triumphant ending. Despite the scintillating writing and high levels of energy it is characteristic of Rheinberger that there is no hint of Lisztian virtuoso histrionics.

### **Piano Sonata No. 3 in E flat major, Op. 135 (1883)**

#### *I. Moderato e con espressione*

The first and second subjects of this sonata form movement echo Mendelssohn with touches of Brahmsian tonal depth. Both subjects project a warm lyrical mood, with the second subject reaching G major following the first subject's original key of E flat major. After a dramatic opening the development concentrates almost solely on the second subject with extensive modulation. The recapitulation brings back both subjects twice before ending with reminiscences of the second subject.

## *II. Scherzo: Vivo*

Beethovenian influence is strong in this high-spirited movement. The form is simple and clear with opening and closing Scherzo sections in G flat major bookending the slower middle Trio section which is largely in D major. A characteristic staccato accompaniment energises the Scherzos with an enticing use of hemiola rhythms occasionally.

## *III. Poco adagio*

A warmly reminiscent mood permeates throughout this sonata form cantabile song-like movement. The two main subjects appear in a compact exposition, the first in G minor, the second in B flat major. Dramatically denser figuration features in the more chromatic development before the first and second subjects recur in G during the recapitulation. Gentle lyricism permeates the G major ending.

## *IV. Finale: Allegro*

Rheinberger saves two of his finest themes for the spacious exposition and recapitulations sections of this last movement. The first theme is a lengthy Schubertian cantilena in E flat major, the second agitated and dramatic in C minor before moving to quieter material in C major. A series of slow gentle chords heralds a very short development before the recapitulation in E flat major. Another series of chords marks the start of the coda which ends in scintillating fashion.

## **Piano Sonata No. 4 in F sharp minor, Op. 184 'Romantic' (1864–96)**

Rheinberger's wife had died in 1892 and in 1894 he relinquished his post as Director of Court Church Music (Hofkapellmeister) due to poor health. Nevertheless, he continued to compose and this fourth and final piano sonata was published in 1896, the first and fourth movements newly written while the second and third movements had their genesis in 1888 and 1864 respectively. Using previous material is a common practice amongst composers and this is by no means the only example amongst Rheinberger's own works.

## *I. Moderato*

Some may link this restless and at times quite defiant sonata form movement to Rheinberger's situation in 1896. It certainly justifies the title 'Romantic', with the turbulent first subject in F sharp minor balanced by the more settled D major second subject, although this too has its outbursts. The development and recapitulation allow for Rheinberger's full panoply of modulations and sensitivity to key colour, especially the beautiful move from minor to major when the second subject enters in the recapitulation.

## *II. Romance: Andante molto*

The hymn-like theme and following variations show Rheinberger's finely honed ability to reference Bachian textures in an entirely Romantic fashion without pretension or the shadow of pastiche. The slightly reverential, melancholy and elevated mood belies the use of the normally bright B flat major key as it does the title 'Romance'.

## *III. Intermezzo: Largo – Allegro*

This festive Minuet and Trio movement is in Classical ABA form with both the Minuets and the middle Trio sections heralded by the same seven-note motif. The delightful Trio in F sharp major is feather-light compared with the slightly heavier Minuets in A major.

## *IV. Finale: Presto agitato*

The form of this movement, with its frequent sectional changes and lack of developmental work, has its roots in Classical sonata rondo finales. Rheinberger's version uses three main themes, the first in an agitated F sharp minor, the second an operatic cantilena and the third exhibiting a delicate balletic pizzicato. They give considerable melodic diversity while still allowing for a characteristically brisk Finale character. While roaming through a wide variety of keys and modulations, Rheinberger always uses F sharp minor for the first main theme's five returns. This ensures the listener is given a sense of tonal stability amongst the modulatory bustle.

## Dmytro Semykras



Photo: Alona Nikolaienko

Born in Sumy, Ukraine, Dmytro Semykras graduated from the city's music college before continuing his education at the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz with Milana Chernyavska. He has refined his artistry in masterclasses with Claudio Martínez Mehner, Lily Dorfman, Vanessa Latarche and Alexei Grynyuk. Semykras has won prizes at the Santa Cecília, Île-de-France, Samson François, Ettlingen, Vladimir Krainev, Vladimir Horowitz, Young Musicians (Enschede) and Siegfried Weishaupt international piano competitions, and is also a recipient of the Yamaha Scholarship Programme. As a soloist, he has appeared with the Orquestra Sinfónica do Porto Casa da Música, National Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine, Kyiv Philharmonic Orchestra, Kharkiv Philharmonic Orchestra and Lviv National Philharmonic, and has collaborated with renowned conductors including Roberto Tibiriçá, Volodymyr Sirenko, Vitaliy Protasov and Yuriy Yanko. Semykras has participated in numerous international festivals, including the Nohant Festival Chopin and Engadin Festival, and has performed at many prestigious venues across Europe, including Wigmore Hall, Casa da Música, Porto and Angelika Kauffmann Hall in Schwarzenberg. He is a scholarship holder of the Musikakademie in Liechtenstein.

[www.dmytrosemykras.com](http://www.dmytrosemykras.com)

Joseph Gabriel Rheinberger's musical legacy can be found in his reputation as a renowned organist and professor as well as in his extraordinary facility and productivity as a composer in all forms, including a considerable amount of solo piano music. From the high-spirited *Second Sonata* to his final *Fourth Sonata* with its defiant opening and hymn-like *Romance*, Rheinberger's piano sonatas are polished, beautifully balanced and tasteful, drawing on established Classical-Romantic traditions while being especially effective in producing flowing and memorable melodies.

Joseph Gabriel  
**RHEINBERGER**  
(1839–1901)

Musikakademie  
in Liechtenstein

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|---|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
|   | <b>Piano Sonata No. 2 in D flat major, Op. 99 (1876)</b>                 | <b>19:06</b> |
| ❶ | <b>I. Non troppo mosso</b>                                               | <b>7:09</b>  |
| ❷ | <b>II. Romanze: Andante espressivo</b>                                   | <b>6:03</b>  |
| ❸ | <b>III. Finale: Con fuoco ed espressivo</b>                              | <b>5:54</b>  |
|   | <b>Piano Sonata No. 3 in E flat major, Op. 135 (1883)</b>                | <b>27:48</b> |
| ❹ | <b>I. Moderato e con espressione</b>                                     | <b>8:40</b>  |
| ❺ | <b>II. Scherzo: Vivo</b>                                                 | <b>4:24</b>  |
| ❻ | <b>III. Poco adagio</b>                                                  | <b>7:59</b>  |
| ❼ | <b>IV. Finale: Allegro</b>                                               | <b>6:45</b>  |
|   | <b>Piano Sonata No. 4 in F sharp minor, Op. 184 'Romantic' (1864–96)</b> | <b>27:45</b> |
| ❽ | <b>I. Moderato</b>                                                       | <b>8:53</b>  |
| ❾ | <b>II. Romanze: Andante molto</b>                                        | <b>6:04</b>  |
| ❿ | <b>III. Intermezzo: Largo – Allegro</b>                                  | <b>6:23</b>  |
| ⓫ | <b>IV. Finale: Presto agitato</b>                                        | <b>6:25</b>  |

**Dmytro Semykras, Piano**

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