

NAXOS

ROMANTIC
PIANO

ROBERT
VOLKMANNN

Musikakademie
in Liechtenstein

Piano Works

Piano Sonata • 6 Fantasiebilder • 4 Marches
Deutsche Tanzweisen • Lieder der Großmutter

Levon Avagyan



Robert
VOLKMANN
(1815–1883)

6 Fantasiebilder, Op. 1 (1837)*	14:19	4 Marches, Op. 22 (1855)	16:07
1 No. 1. Nachtstück: Allegro appassionato	1:45	17 No. 1. Fester Sinn: Männlich Ernst (Tempo di Marcia)	3:33
2 No. 2. Idylle: Tranquillo e cantabile	3:22	18 No. 2. Frühlingfahrt: Gemüthlich heiter (Allegretto)	2:49
3 No. 3. Walpurgis-Nachts-Scene: Allegro vivace	1:36	19 No. 3. Hochländer-Zug: Keck und lebhaft*	5:09
4 No. 4. Hexentanz: Allegrissimo	1:49	20 No. 4. Todtenfeier: Langsam*	4:36
5 No. 5. Humoreske: Allegro con moto	1:53		
6 No. 6. Elegie: Moderato	3:54		
 Piano Sonata in C minor, Op. 12 (1853)	 15:41	 Lieder der Großmutter, Op. 27 (1856)*	 10:42
7 I. Moderato cantabile	7:14	21 No. 1. Mäßig	0:49
8 II. Prestissimo	2:26	22 No. 2. Frisch	0:28
9 III. Andante pesante	1:59	23 No. 3. Ziemlich langsam	1:17
10 IV. Allegro molto	4:02	24 No. 4. Munter	0:34
		25 No. 5. Langsam und mit Ausdruck	0:29
 Deutsche Tanzweisen, Op. 18 (1854)	 10:31	26 No. 6. Bewegt	0:27
11 No. 1. Allegro moderato*	2:14	27 No. 7. Heiter bewegt	1:08
12 No. 2. Vivace ma non troppo	1:51	28 No. 8. Ernst	0:31
13 No. 3. Moderato serio	2:35	29 No. 9. Gemüthlich	1:02
14 No. 4. Tempo comodo*	2:29	30 No. 10. Zart und nicht zu langsam	0:47
15 No. 5. Vivo scherzando*	1:24	31 No. 11. Schnell	0:35
		32 No. 12. Sanft und langsam	1:54
16 Ungarische Lieder, Op. 20 (1855)	6:41	33 Nachspiel: Mäßig schnell	0:41

***WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING**

Romantic Piano • 8

Robert Volkmann (1815–1883)

(Friedrich) Robert Volkmann was born in Lommatzsch, near Meissen, Saxony, on 6 April 1815, and died in Budapest, Hungary, on 29 October 1883. The second son of a Lutheran cantor, Gotthelf Volkmann (1767–1833), Friedrich (he later used the name Robert) was trained in music by his father and learned to play piano and organ. By the age of twelve he had also become proficient in violin and cello (his favourite instrument throughout his life). In 1832 Volkmann commenced teacher training at the Freiberg Gymnasium, studying with its music director August Ferdinand Anacker (1790–1854), an admirer of Beethoven's music. The death of Volkmann's father interrupted these studies although Anacker's suggestion of a musical career bore fruit in Volkmann's relocation to Leipzig in 1836 where he became a student of Carl Ferdinand Becker (1804–1877). Organist of the Nikolaikirche, and later director of the Conservatory's organ department, Becker too was very supportive of Volkmann's career aspirations. Volkmann was able to make the most of Leipzig's vibrant musical life, meeting Schumann and attending the Thursday Gewandhaus concerts conducted by Felix Mendelssohn.

Becker kindly facilitated Volkmann's employment as a voice teacher in a Prague school commencing in 1839. However, Volkmann's desire to compose above all else began to assert itself and he shortly resigned as he was finding insufficient time to write music. In 1841 Volkmann became music tutor to the two daughters of the widowed Countess Stainlein-Saalenstein at her country estate in Szemeréd near Ipolyság, Hungary, where there was ample time for composition. As part of the countess's household Volkmann frequently visited Pest, the then largely German section of what is now Budapest. After resigning his position in Szemeréd in June 1841 he moved to Pest, where his first significant works emerged.

Despite Volkmann's extremely frugal and modest lifestyle as a confirmed bachelor, financial concerns still needed to be met, and he commenced as a piano teacher and reporter for the *Allgemeine Wiener Musik-Zeitung*. Later, in 1848 he took on the duties of organist and choirmaster at the Reform Synagogue. In 1846 he composed a string quartet in G minor, later to become his *Second String Quartet, Op. 14* and it was followed a year after by what would become his *First String Quartet in A minor, Op. 9*, both written in straightened circumstances. Undoubtedly this was a testing period for Volkmann, a situation made worse by a deep and long-lasting rift with his family that commenced in 1844 and lasted for ten years, during which his mother died in 1852 apparently unaware of what had become of him.

Inevitably Volkmann's unhappy circumstances would make themselves felt through musical expression in some fashion and in late 1850 he completed what was to be his most successful work during his lifetime, the dramatic and passionate *Piano Trio in B flat minor, Op. 5*, published by Rózsavölgyi in 1852. Very sensibly and strategically Volkmann dedicated the work to Liszt, who was impressed and played it together with Joseph Joachim (1831–1907). In 1853, Volkmann developed a friendship with Hans von Bülow (1830–1894) and Bülow also became a staunch advocate of the *B flat minor Trio*, which he played for the first time in Berlin on 3 December 1853. Word of Volkmann the composer soon spread and Felix Draeseke (1835–1913), Alexander Ritter (1833–1896) and even Richard Wagner professed admiration for the *Trio*.

The fallout was equally dramatic socially, and Volkmann's elder brother became aware of his younger sibling's success, leading to a rapprochement, with Volkmann able to pay him a visit in 1854. Things went even further, and Volkmann moved to Vienna that year, remaining until 1858. Vienna at that time, along with Paris, was the apotheosis of European musical activity, especially compared with Berlin and Pest. While in Vienna Volkmann was able to cultivate a friendship with Johannes Brahms to their mutual benefit and maintained a resurgent enthusiasm for composing. Among the works that Volkmann wrote in Vienna are the *Variations on a Theme by Handel, Op. 26*, the *String Quartets in G major, Op. 34* and *E minor, Op. 35*, and a highly successful single-movement *Cello Concerto in A minor, Op. 33*, which was given its premiere in Vienna on 22 November 1857 by Karl Schlesinger (1813–1871).

Volkmann nevertheless missed his life in Pest and in Hungary, writing 'Whenever I think of Pest, my heart leaps. I feel that I am actually at home there after all.' As a consequence, he spent several summers away from Vienna in Pilismarót as a guest of publisher and art patron Gusztáv Heckenast, with whom a lifelong friendship developed. Heckenast, hitherto a book publisher, extended his interests into music publishing and entered into an agreement with Volkmann to publish all his music with fees guaranteed irrespective of sales success. Moreover, for some time Heckenast financed Volkmann's accommodation as well. Heckenast's generous philanthropy also extended to others such as Adalbert Stifter and Peter Rosegger. Volkmann could now return to Pest in 1858 free of financial worries and able to concentrate solely on composing, an extraordinary turnaround in circumstances compared with ten years previously.

Henceforward Volkmann's life is dominated mainly by significant works he composed, living in Pest until the mid-1860s and thereafter across the river in Buda. The *Konzertstück for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 42* (1860), his *First Symphony in D minor, Op. 44* (1863), his *Second Symphony in B flat major, Op. 53* (1864), the three *Serenades for String Orchestra*, and the *Overture to Shakespeare's Richard III, Op. 68* (1870), all received European wide acclaim. There were choral pieces too, including the 12th-century Christmas carol *Er ist gewaltig und ist stark, Op. 59* and Lieder.

Despite never learning Hungarian, Volkmann embraced the country's culture and aspirations, supporting the 1848–49 revolution and agreeing to teach at the new National Royal Hungarian Academy in 1875, having turned down a request from the Vienna Conservatory a year earlier. His warm feelings were handsomely reciprocated, and he appears with Ferenc Erkel in frescoes either side of a seated Franz Liszt on the façade of the 1907 National Academy building.

Volkmann wrote to a friend in 1864 'Some people still think I am a *Zukunftsmusiker* [musician of the future] while others want to see me in a pigtail [i.e. an old-fashioned wig]; what do you think? All I know is I want to be neither "the musician of the future" nor a pigtail, but merely Volkmann, and that is my misfortune: people find it hard to forgive such a lack of principle.' Volkmann's two *Trios*, the Beethovenian *Op. 3 in F major* (1842) and the incandescently tempestuous *Op. 5 in B flat minor* (1850) are sometimes seen as representing the two sides of his character. German music at the time was dividing into two camps, the more radical led by Wagner and Liszt and the more conservative inspired by Schumann and Brahms. Noticeably Volkmann stands in the middle, owing his career to Franz Liszt's enthusiasm for the *Trio, Op. 5*, yet clearly striking up an admiring friendship with Brahms. Indeed, it has been remarked that Volkmann's most original compositional feature lies not in his harmonic language but his creative use of pulse and rhythmic groupings that permeate much of his writing.

Sechs Fantasiebilder, Op. 1 (1837)

Dating from Volkmann's student days in Leipzig, these works show definite influences from both Schumann and Mendelssohn, composers with whom he came into contact during that period. They also illustrate his adoption of sturdy keyboard figuration covering a wide pitch range and drawing rich sonorities from quite dense harmonies, traits which continued through much of his later music. *Nachtstück's* Schumannesque driving triplets and *Idylle's* Mendelssohnian *Songs Without Words* lyricism both employ Binary form. The *Midsummer Night's Dream* whimsy of *Walpurgis-Nachts-Szene* is encased in Ternary form with a major middle section. Both *Hexentanz*, with its deliberately irregular five-bar phrases and *Humoresque*, with its original chromaticism feature Ternary form, using a *da capo* for the return of the first section. Perhaps aptly, the two dramatic outer sections of *Elegie* contain echoes of Schumann while the sunnier major middle section sings in a more Mendelssohnian fashion. While Volkmann's indebtedness to these two major composers in his student years is unsurprising there is certainly a more original voice emerging as well.

Piano Sonata in C minor, Op. 12 (1853)

The *Sonata* was written at a time of hope for Volkmann. His *Piano Trio, Op. 5* was making headlines across Europe, and he was about to reunite with his family in Vienna the following year. Amidst a flurry of compositional activity, the *Sonata* stands out as an attempt to retain the Classical roots of Romanticism from Beethoven and Schubert, a model for the conservative German school. The sonata-form first movement is remarkably compact with both the first and second subjects closely aligned in material but differentiated by the second subject's more dramatic treatment. The crotchet–minim–crotchet rhythm of both subjects permeates the entire movement. The *Prestissimo* second movement alternates 6/8 and 2/8 time generating a melange of cross rhythms that sometimes allude to 4/4 but never with a heavy tread thanks to the subtle syncopation resulting from the time signatures. Schumann too was fond of such felicities in pulse. The tiny ruminative *Andante* third movement is barely more than an extended half close cadence in C minor, hovering around the chord of G. The fourth movement, *Allegro molto*, takes its cue from Beethoven's bustling final Rondos although Volkmann chooses sonata form and the more straightforward 4/4 time. The rolling arpeggiated C minor first subject contrasts with the attractive rising motif of the E flat major second subject. The scintillating development with its broken octaves leads on to a recapitulation where the second subject appears in A flat major before an insistent coda in C minor.

Deutsche Tanzweisen, Op. 18 (1854)

Volkman's time living in Vienna from 1854 to 1858 resulted in further stylistic development, in particular as a result of his new friendship with Johannes Brahms, also resident there. The five waltzes in this set all pay respects to the city of Johann Strauss in similar fashion to Schubert and to Brahms himself. All are in Ternary ABA form with the exception of the Binary form final waltz. They cleverly contrast speed and mood and would have suited drawing room performances by amateur pianists of the day.

Ungarische Lieder, Op. 20 (1855)

Volkman's empathy for Hungary and Pest remained strong as evidenced by this compilation of Hungarian songs. Three main themes dominate, the swaggering A major theme with succeeding variations inevitably recalls Liszt's virtuoso Hungarian inspired works with octave pyrotechnics and glittering runs. A quieter slower *Andante* section follows with an F sharp minor theme before the third *Allegro* theme appears with even more technically taxing cimbalom effects including 'broken' notes in the treble near the end, with a final reminiscence of the first theme marked *Grandioso*.

Four Marches, Op. 22 (1855)

During his Vienna years Volkman had not yet achieved the financial independence later bestowed through his publisher Heckenast's generous agreement. Writing short character piano pieces for amateurs to play in middle-class drawing rooms was a normal activity for many composers to make a living and Volkman followed suit. Dances and marches would have proved popular in Biedermeier Vienna and these four marches, *Fester Sinn* ('Resolute Mind'), *Frühlingsfahrt* ('Spring Journey'), *Hochlander-Zug* ('Highland Trail') and *Todtenfeier* ('Ceremonial Funeral March') all illustrate strong moods and feelings. Each is written in three-part ABA form, featuring a quieter smoother middle section.

Lieder der Großmutter, Op. 27 (1856)

Also arranged for piano duet, these thirteen, mostly single-page 'Grandmother's Songs' are untitled except the final *Nachspiel* ('Epilogue'). Collectively, they carry the alternative title of *Kinderstücke*. As such they resemble Schumann's *Album for the Young, Op. 68* (1848), written for young players, rather than Schumann's *Scenes from Childhood, Op. 15* (1838) written for mature aged performers. Major and minor keys up to four sharps and two flats are used, the harmonic language is determinedly diatonic, the moods are whimsical, and challenging counterpoint is reserved for the *Nachspiel*.

Rodney Smith

Levon Avagyan



Armenian pianist Levon Avagyan combines virtuosity and depth with a distinctive musical sensitivity. In 2017 he garnered international recognition as the winner of First Prize, the Audience Prize and several special awards at the Maria Canals International Music Competition in Barcelona. He has since performed as a soloist with renowned orchestras across Europe, and is a regular guest at major festivals such as the Gstaad Menuhin Festival, Kissinger Sommer, Marbella International Piano Festival, Arsonore and Alpenarte. Born in Yerevan, Avagyan received his education at the Yerevan Komitas State Conservatory under Vagharshak Harutyunyan, and continued his studies at the Kunstuniversität Graz with Milana Chernyavska, graduating with distinction. Since 2017, he has been teaching and accompanying at the Kunstuniversität Graz und Konservatorium, and has collaborated with renowned artists in international masterclasses, including at the Musikakademie in Liechtenstein, the International Summer Academy at the Mozarteum University in Salzburg and the Accademia Perosi. His discography includes *Soler: Keyboard Sonatas Nos. 87–92* (Naxos 8.574021).

A native of Germany, Robert Volkmann was virtually unknown as a composer until the 1840s when he moved to Hungary. It was there that Volkmann achieved wider recognition due in part to Franz Liszt, Hans von Bülow and Richard Wagner expressing admiration for his *Piano Trio, Op. 5*. Volkmann's music straddles the radical and conservative camps in the music of his era, with the early *Fantasiebilder* influenced by Schumann and Mendelssohn, and the scintillating *Piano Sonata in C minor* retaining the Classical roots of Beethoven and Schubert. From the cimbalom effects in the *Ungarische Lieder* to the whimsy in *Lieder der Großmutter*, Volkmann's expressive potency is always infused with a compulsive rhythmic verve.

Robert
VOLKMANN
(1815–1883)

Musikakademie
in Liechtenstein

1–6	6 Fantasiebilder, Op. 1 (1837)*	14:19
7–10	Piano Sonata in C minor, Op. 12 (1853)	15:41
11–15	Deutsche Tanzweisen, Op. 18 (1854)**	10:31
16	Ungarische Lieder, Op. 20 (1855)	6:41
17–20	4 Marches, Op. 22 (1855)**	16:07
21–33	Lieder der Großmutter, Op. 27 (1856)*	10:42

***WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING**

****WORLD PREMIERE COMPLETE RECORDING**

Levon Avagyan, Piano

A detailed track list can be found inside the booklet.

Recorded: 3–5 August 2024 at the Academy of Music in Liechtenstein, Peter Kaiser Konzertsaal, Nendeln, Liechtenstein

Producer, engineer, and editor: Tim Burton (K&A Productions Ltd) • Booklet notes: Rodney Smith

Publishers: August Cranz **1–6**, Kistner **7–10** **17–20**, Rózsavölgyi & Co. **11–16**, Edition Peters **21–33**

Piano: Steinway, Model D • Piano technician: János Selmeczi Horváth

This recording was made possible thanks to sponsorship from the Academy of Music in Liechtenstein (www.musikakademie.li)

Cover photo by katalinks (www.shutterstock.com)

© & © 2026 Naxos Rights (Europe) Ltd • www.naxos.com