

For Peter Roy Cook
FELIX BLUMENFELD
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Some of the most attractive and well-written piano music is that of the Russian, Felix Mikhailovich Blumenfeld. His 24 Preludes, Op 17, of 1892 are as good, if not better, than those of Chopin and certainly superior to those of Scriabin. Blumenfeld's preludes have thematic material and a purpose teaching there until 1922. Among his pupils was Vladimir Horowitz who was born in Kiev in 1903. This pupil achieved great fame which was not afforded to his teacher who dedicated his Episodes dans la vie d'une danseuse Op 52 to him. But it does not appear that Horowitz ever played these pieces. He was a somewhat arrogant young man.

Blumenfeld moved from Kiev to the Moscow Conservatory as a professor in 1922 until his death on 21 January 1931.

While most of his works are for the piano he gave the premiere, as conductor of Scriabin's Symphony no. 3 known as The Divine Poem and also conducted the Poem of Ecstasy in 1907 although he had strong misgivings about it. He also conducted operas by Rimsky-Korsakov. Blumenfeld also wrote a symphony entitled A la memoire des chers defuncte, Op 39. There is also a string quartet, Op 26.

We are left with a great question. Why is his music rarely played and, in many quarters, completely unknown?

His piano music may not have the scope and originality of Liszt but a great part of it is of a high quality and not contaminated by the popular salon music of its time with umpteen waltzes and mazurkas. Much of the music for the salon was popularised by Chopin being music for the reception or drawing rooms of grand houses and is of a showy superficiality. Most of it was played to impressionable women while the men smoked their cigars in another room. Hence the music is often effeminate, predictable and designed for the male-composer-pianist to show off to the fairer sex. There is much music by Blumenfeld which is devoid of this insincere nonsense.

The Etudes fantaisies, Op 25 were published by Balaieff in 1898 and are dedicated to Josef Hofmann the greatest Russian pianist of his time of whom Scriabin was 'criminally jealous' as his contemporaries reported. Blumenfeld's Ballade in the form of variations Op 34 is worthy of pianists attention. The theme, set in five flats but ending in F minor is marked andante lugubre of some imagination. The variations are not numbered and the music plays continuously employing pianistic devices and contrast of moods leading to an exciting Presto non troppo finale.

The Sonata-Fantasia Op 46 appeared in 1913 and dedicated to his friend, Nicolas Terechtchenko. The first movement, allegro non tanto, begins in B minor and ends in B major. The suggested leisurely speed means that the music is held back, but it has thematic material as well as the usual pianistic gymnastics. The slow movement contains a fine melody and is poetic. The third movement has a slow introduction and a powerful allegro con fuoco but it loses both its way and continuity in the middle, but eventually regains its purpose and ends furiously.

But it must not be said that Blumenfeld was merely a pianist-composer. He had an excellent working relationship with his teacher Rimsky-Korsakov. He assisted the master in preparing for a concert in December 1893 which included Tchaikovsky's Symphony no. 4 and Francesca da Rimini an amazing piece. Felix played the accompaniments on the piano at the house of the master of his opera Snyegoorochka. He was also the accompanist for 'Mozart and Salieri', the opera based on the Pushkin nonsense that Salieri had poisoned Mozart although Blumenfeld was not in sympathy with this work of his teacher. When the master gave up conducting the Russian Symphony Orchestra he was succeeded by Lyadov and Glazunov and then by Blumenfeld and Nicolay Cherepin.

Rimsky-Korsakov's opera the Tsar's Bride was conducted by Napravnik who was rather surly at this task and the baton passed to Blumenfeld who also conducted the rehearsals of Pan Voyovoda. In 1906 he gave

eleven performances of Snyegoorochka and, in the 1906-7 season, conducted the operas Cherevichski and Snyegoorochka.

In May 1907, Blumenfeld, Rimsky-Korsakov, Rachmaninov, Glazunov, Josef Hofmann and the composer Alexander Scriabin met together to study and discuss Scriabin's new work Poem of Ecstasy and some of his piano music. Apart from the composer, the verdict was that Scriabin was 'out of his mind, if he had a mind at all'.

In February 1908 Blumenfeld conducted excerpts of Rimsky-Korsakov and Mussorgsky and Glazunov's The Sea, Stravinsky's The Faun and the Shepherdess and Borodin's Symphony no. 2 in B minor. Blumenfeld also performed orchestral works by his illustrious teacher in Paris in 1908.

Clearly Blumenfeld was a very accomplished musician.

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