

WALTER NIEMANN

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Walter Niemann was a story teller in music and some of his music seem to be travelogues.

He was born in Hamburg on 10 October 1876 and died in Leipzig on 17 June 1953. He has to his credit about 190 works mainly for the piano.

He was the son of Rudolph Frederich Niemann (4. 12. 1838 - 4. 5. 1898) who was also a pianist and composer. Rudolph had a brother, Gustav Adolph Niemann (6. 12. 1841 - 6. 12. 1881) who was another pianist and composer.

At first, the young Walter took piano lessons from his father and then studied with Engelbert Humperdinck (1854 - 1921), whose style had changed after he had met Wagner in 1879 and assisted him with the preparation of a performance of *Parisfal* at Bayreuth. Humperdinck taught at the Conservatory in Frankfurt (1890 - 1897) after short periods of teaching in Barcelona (1885 - 1886) and Cologne (1887-1888). His most famous work is the opera *Hansel and Gretel* of 1893 but he wrote other operas and three string quartets.

Niemann's next teacher was Carl Reinecke (1824 - 1910). Although Reinecke was noted as a violinist he became the Court pianist in Copenhagen (1846 - 1848). He taught in Cologne, Barmen and Breslau before settling in Leipzig. He was the conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra (1860 - 1895) and professor of the Conservatory (1850- 1897) and then its director (1897 - 1902). He wrote five operas, three symphonies, four piano sonatas, much chamber music and many piano pieces.

Upon graduation with a thesis on ligatures and mensural music, Niemann was a joint editor of *Zeitschrift fur Musick*. He was a critic for a Leipzig newspaper. He used his literary skills in writing books on Scandinavian Music (1906), Grieg (1908), Sibelius (1917), Virginal music (1919), *Masters of the Keyboard* (1919) and Brahms (1920). From this it will be seen that he had an interest in all types of music and was not parochial.

Little else is known about him and so I will concentrate on his work and his biography of Brahms.

His *Four Ballades Op 81* were published by Peters in Leipzig. The first depicts a wanderer in front of an old temple who sees a vision of life in ancient Roman times. The second, *On a Northern Moorland*, tells of a hunting holiday ruined by finding the location of a murder. The third, *Sunday in Lisbon*, contrasts the sunny and dark sides of the Portuguese city and includes a serenade and the sound of church bells. The final ballade is entitled *A Cruise in the Northern seas*.

The opening ballade recalls Liszt and is elegiac in its almost motionless opening bars and is, rooted in F minor. The next section, in F, is a theme indicating walking. This becomes agitated and there is a short passage imitating the march of a Roman army. The music becomes heavy and dramatic before the elegiac mood returns.

The uneventful E minor music that opens the moorland walk develops into a sinister account on finding the gruesome location before the hunting party walks away from the horror associated with this place.

Niemann's interest in travel is shown in his Portuguese ballad. There are endless spread chords, a real sense of passion and an arpeggiated bass to accompany a serenade.

The finale, this ocean cruise, may not convey specific events but it is a movement of great pianism.

There are many problems in writing music as a story, or as a series of events. Most people call this programme



music. This is because people want to identify which part of the score refers to which event and often this is not clear and causes frustration.

The difficulty with these ballades are that the first three begin and end with slow music, sometimes very slow music indeed, and this is tedious and wearisome. Some of the chords and chord sequences in these slow passages do not seem to belong and give a convincing view of wrong notes. It is only when the music picks up that it can become satisfactory. The fourth ballade is the best because it maintains its continuity. Stop and start music is usually unsatisfactory.

As I understand it, the only book by Niemann, which has been translated into English, is his biography of Brahms.

It is a rather idyllic and imaginative account. But, as it appeared in 1920, it must be remembered that, in those days, there were certain things which were not put into print. Germany had just emerged defeated in the Great War. Niemann's book, while very valuable, was written 23 years after the death of Brahms and there would be people still alive who knew the master. Nothing therefore should be written about this hero and great man that would put a slur on him or the German people having just been humiliated in the 1914-1918 war.

That does not mean that I am saying that Brahms was in any way a dishonourable man. In fact the reverse is true. His devotion to the Schumanns was a loving, genuine and highly commendable friendship. After Robert Schumann's death, Brahms was a tower of strength to his widow, Clara, and their children. It is a very heart warming true story of a man's inestimable kindness and love. It is true that he loved Clara but it was never a threat to her marriage with Robert.

It is my opinion that Brahms is the greatest composer since Beethoven and all the evidence is that he was a great human being. But Niemann may be wrong in some of his facts. Or there is disagreement about them. Niemann makes the point that Brahms was a devout Christian, a typical Northern German protestant of the Lutheran School and that he loved the Bible. Some point to his German Requiem and the Four Serious Songs as expressions of his Christian faith. Others have written that he was an atheist. There is also Niemann's account that, when a boy, Brahms and his father played music at local dances in various halls for two thalers a night and all they could drink. Others have said that they were brothels or inns or halls that were used for such purposes.

Niemann makes the point that Brahms was a tease and a practical joker. He would throw snowballs at schoolgirls and had a dry wit. His letters were friendly and he was modest and therefore not Elgarian. He was kind to almost everyone and even spoke well of banal and inconsequential music such as the waltzes of the Strauss family. But Niemann seems to present Brahms as a perfect person.

Brahms was a man of good judgment. He venerated Beethoven. He orchestrated the Kreutzer Sonata and wrote a piece In the Manner of Beethoven with excellent orchestration. He was an avid reader of worthy literature and was known as a bookworm. He loved art, particularly portraits of great musicians. He had his regular inns where he would drink beer with friends. He had a rough exterior and as he grew older he appeared grave and gruff. But he had a heart and it was a big one. During a performance of Schumann's A minor Quartet, which reminded him so much of Clara, he sobbed. She died the year before Brahms in 1896.

He was man of habit with a daily routine loving his strong Mocha coffee and cigars. But the loss of Clara and his drinking from his boyhood days gave rise to liver cancer which killed him.

It is amazing and both very distressing and unforgivable that people like Benjamin Britten condemned the music of both Beethoven and Brahms.

Niemann's Kleine Sonata, Op 88 (Sonata no. 4) was published by Simrock in 1922. The opening con moto movement in A major has the theme in both hands and in the course of the piece there are the usual spread

left hand chords, grace notes and the music is attractive. The music modulates into C major and follows the pattern of many composers by introducing accidentals and making the key ambiguous. There is a strong second theme and then a passage of great delicacy before the opening material returns and the movement ends slowly and quietly. The second movement is a minuet in D in which the theme undergoes several transformations and a wide contrast of tone. The finale is a joyous Vivo but its continuity is broken by slower music marked *tranquillo* and *amoroso*. The music is passionate but the constant changes of character and tempi does not make for a satisfactory whole.

It might be helpful to list all his sonatas and sonatinas here

Three sonatinas Op 24

Sonata no. 1 Op 60 Romantic

Sonata no. 2 Op 75 Nordic

Sonata no. 4 Op 88 Kliene

Sonata no. 5 Op 96

Two small sonatas numbers 6 and 7 Op 98

Sonatina Op 103

Three small sonatas numbers 8, 9 and 10, Op 127

Sonata no. 11 Op 150

Two sonatinas Op 152

Sonatina Op 155

Sonata no. 12, Op 162

Three sonatinas, Op 178

There are three Chamber concertos: for piano and strings Op 153, for piano and small orchestra Op 164, and for piano and chamber orchestra Op 165

He also wrote a set of 24 Preludes Op 55, but his Opus 1 was a choral Festive March.

His interest in the outdoors is shown again in his Garden Music Op 117 published by Peters in 1929. The composer wrote it in Gersau in the summer of 1928. There are three movements, often with some simple music, which soon develops into cascades of sound. There is a lot to commend this music and the fact that it does not tell a story, or attempt to, and is, therefore, absolute music, makes it worthwhile. The first piece has an Oriental sound with hints of sadness. It is a romantic piece, perhaps erotic but a gorgeous unassuming piece. The second is somewhat plaintive but melodious although it meanders and is somewhat repetitive. The third has a mercurial flow with still a trace of the Orient. It is an attractive piece with cascades of sound which may recall heavy but soft rain in a garden.

The Variations on a Dutch sarabande Op 118 no. 2 is a well written work. The theme is probably by Gisbert Steenwick written about 1670. The theme is simple and effective and Niemann rightly maintains the character of this stately dance throughout but varies the dance style expertly. There is a pavane, a gagliardo, a courante, a minuet, a sicilene, a rigaudon and the music is not hindered by pianistic gymnastics which would be out of keeping with a 17th century dance. It must also be remembered that Niemann studied early music and was an expert on it. It is sad that many people today, who claim to be music lovers, do not value early music.

What are we to make of Walter Niemann and his music? He certainly wrote a lot of piano music and, perhaps, that is the problem. So many composers cannot stop composing and so their work varies in quality. I think the programme element of much of Niemann's music may deter some and he is not in the same class as Liszt... who could be? There were so very many piano composers between 1850 and 1930 that the piano repertoire is saturated. He did not write a piano concerto and in any event, his orchestration, like that of Chopin, is so very poor which can be detected from Niemann's few orchestral scores.

However his best piano music should be made generally available and there is a good recording of Noriko Ogawa playing Japan, one of his many travelogue pieces.

WARNING

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