

Piano prodigy Ernst Levy, born in Basel in 1895, was only six when his performance of Haydn's Concerto in D caused a sensation. This early debut evolved into an enduring pianistic career which took him to Paris, where he settled in 1921. After political events forced him to emigrate to the US, he added to his pianistic activities a brilliant career as a college professor of music.

While during the first half of the 20th century Levy was considered one of the major pianists - spoken of in the same breath as Schnabel, Backhaus, Kempff, etc. – as well as a musical theorist and philosopher comparable to Busoni, his output as a composer met with an astonishing lack of response. For lack of a performance, Ernst Levy never even heard some of his works, and hardly any were printed. While this was hard to bear, he went on creating until the end, composing during his final years works of large format such as for instance the lively sonata for viola and piano, written in 1979 at the age of 84. Levy wrote for every genre, but his major contribution has to be the colossal 15 symphonies, up to one hour long and usually in one movement. But many chamber and piano works, as well as lieder, demonstrate his originality and striving for quality.

Levy himself considered it a “stroke of luck” that his career as college lecturer in the US meant that he did not have to conform to market forces, nor accept any creative limits as a composer. He did not see music as a means of communication, but rather as a kind of “communion” through which he could express his philosophical and spiritual convictions. This explains why he expended little effort on getting his works performed or published.

The result was a totally grotesque situation: up to now, not a single work by possibly our most original Swiss composer (and surely one of the most important !) has been available in print on the official market.

Composed in 1932, the Sonata for flute and piano dates from Levy's time in Paris; we have no way of finding out what inspired it. It was only premiered on 2nd May 1939, in New York's Carnegie Chamber Music Hall. The performers were Ruth Freeman, flute, and the composer at the piano. The concert, entirely devoted to Levy's music, also included the 1932 1st violin sonata and 8 lieder. It was financed by John McCullough, who for his wedding in 1932 had commissioned music from Ernst Levy.

The work is absolutely characteristic of Levy: his style of writing belongs to no school or tradition. In contrast to twelve-tone music, he was a believer in tonality, and always on the lookout for new means of expression. His preference for slightly varied motif repetitions, the frequent use of modal harmonies, and a certain archaism are typical. Levy wrote this about his repeated use of sonata form: “The main characteristic of a sonata, inherent in its concept, is that of becoming, of development. At the end of such a work, we are, so to speak, not whom we were at the beginning of the work.”

Although in one movement, the flute sonata clearly reveals the classical fast-slow-fast rule of three. When in bar 378 the initial motif reappears, it has even fulfilled the cyclic concept. What is immediately apparent in this sonata are its irregular bar lengths: the initial 4/4 indication soon seems like an ironical joke! The many changes of tempo are another distinguishing mark, creating a steadily changing musical organism that seems to breathe in and out. The rather unconventional piano writing and considerable demands on ensemble playing result in a most colourful, very unconventional, though not easy work.

This is a significant, indeed unique addition to the quite extensive literature for flute and piano, and in the course of time it is sure to find its legitimate place in the concert hall.

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