

FRANZ BERWALD: 1796-1868

By KATHLEEN DALE

Franz Adolf Berwald was the most remarkable Swedish composer of the nineteenth century, and at the same time the most neglected by official musical circles in his native land during his lifetime and later. He spent the first twelve years of his musical career as a string player in the court orchestra, but never again succeeded in earning a living as a musician, either at home or abroad. He sought his musical fortune on the continent, in Berlin, Vienna, Paris, and Salzburg, between 1829 and 1849, but although he won respect and no little renown with his compositions, especially in Austria, he could not obtain a musical appointment which would guarantee a livelihood for himself and his family. He amassed money from time to time by utilising his ingenuity as an inventor. For instance, in Berlin he designed remedial medical appliances and founded and directed an orthopaedic institute for several years.

When on his return to Sweden in 1849 his applications for the posts of conductor of the court orchestra and director musices at Uppsala were refused, he had to decide to go into business. For nearly ten years he managed a glass factory in northern Sweden. Then in 1858 he returned to Stockholm to undertake other prosperous commercial projects which eventually yielded an income sufficient to enable him to devote the last seven years of his life exclusively to music. But not until 1864 were his outstanding gifts tardily recognised in Sweden by his being elected a member of the Royal Academy of Music, and only a year before his death was he appointed to the staff of the Stockholm Conservatorium as teacher of composition.

His posthumous recognition as a composer, which began in the eighteen-eighties when some of his works were published in Sweden, has steadily gained momentum. In 1909 a Berwald Foundation was established to encourage the performance and publication of his most representative compositions, and in 1946 the 150th anniversary of his birth was celebrated with festival performances on an impressive scale planned by the principal Swedish musical institutions.

Despite the numberless disappointments Berwald experienced all his life, he never ceased to compose. Works poured from his pen: operas, cantatas, symphonies, concertos and chamber music. Nothing seemed to check the flow of his inspiration. He was a musician through and through, by descent and by upbringing, a member of a large family of composers, conductors, instrumentalists and singers, of whom at least fourteen have won distinction from the early eighteenth century to the present day. The Berwalds were of north German origin; they came originally from Bärwalde in Neumark. Franz's father and uncle settled in

Berwald's statement that his works were written in an entirely individual manner has much to justify it. It was possibly this individual manner that made his music difficult of comprehension by his fellow Swedes. Characteristic melodies containing many short sequential figures and wide intervals, sudden insertions of a phrase of pianissimo chords, in minims into a context of bustling activity, daring harmonic experiments and startling modulations are scattered throughout his works. The most distinctive features of his style may, however, be seen in the structural planning of his instrumental compositions. He often joined two movements together (as in the Quartet for piano and wind and the "Sinfonie sérieuse"), or he wrote works in one long sweep with each movement bearing a fresh key-signature but indissolubly connected to each other (Piano Trios and Quintets), and he delighted in designing the central movement as a triptych, with the Scherzo as the inner panel between the two wings of the Adagio (for instance, in the "Sinfonie singulière" and the Septet). In the String Quartet in E flat he extended the scope of this procedure by building up the whole work arch-wise in five sections, the last a partial replica of the first, and the central curve of the arch, the Scherzo, flanked by two stretches of Adagio.

The vigorous "Sinfonie singulière", written in Stockholm in 1845, displays some of the other unusual methods in the arranging of the thematic material which distinguished many of Berwald's instrumental compositions and lend them great fascination for the devotee of musical analysis. First, in the opening Allegro fuocoso, the immediate note-for-note repeat of the principal subject-group (here as mysterious, predominantly pianissimo section of rising fourths and falling sevenths), its entire omission at the beginning of the recapitulation but its ultimate resurgence as the coda. Secondly, in the Scherzo, the restatement of a long section at the interval of a tone below instead of at the more usual fourth above; and thirdly, the quiet recalling in the presto finale of a haunting tune from the Adagio, in its original key and above the same dominant pedal-point. Strangely enough, the finale of this "singular" Symphony in C major is in C minor. Only a few bars before the end does it suddenly swing round into the major for an emphatic tonic-and-dominant coda in the manner of Beethoven.

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