



Emil FREY

PIANO MUSIC, VOLUME ONE

VARIATIONS ON A ROMANIAN FOLKSONG, OP. 25

LITTLE SLAVIC SUITE, OP. 38

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Luisa Splett

EMIL FREY, SWISS PIANIST AND COMPOSER: PIANO MUSIC, VOLUME ONE

by Luisa Splett

Emil Frey was born on 8 April 1889 in Baden, 25 km north-west of Zurich, and showed enormous musical talent even as a young child, and so his musical education (piano, composition, theory) began very early. Until 1897 his teacher was Ernst Markees in Basel, and from 1898 until 1902 he studied in Zurich with Robert Freund, a former student of Liszt. Frey continued his studies in Geneva, where his teachers were Willy Rehberg (piano), Otto Barblan and Josef Lauber (both composition). In 1905 he moved to Paris, where he studied at the Conservatoire: piano with Louis Diémer and composition with Gabriel Fauré and Charles-Marie Widor. In 1906 he received the Premier prix du piano at the Conservatoire, and his compositions first appeared in print, from Simrock and Durand. In 1907 he moved to Berlin, where he lived until 1910 (and perhaps later: the documentary record is unclear). Thanks to his acquaintance with George Enescu – probably from his days in Paris – he was introduced to Queen Elisabeth of Romania, a patroness of the arts, and herself a writer under the pseudonym Carmen Sylva; Frey wrote songs to several of her poems. Although still living in Berlin he was appointed official court-pianist to Carol I, King of Romania. In 1910 Frey participated, as both pianist and composer, in the international Anton Rubinstein competition in St Petersburg, winning a special diploma in piano and the Grand Prix in composition with his Piano Trio, Op. 23, and Piano Concerto, Op. 24. The chairman of the jury was Alexander Glazunov, who recommended the young Swiss composer to the Moscow Conservatoire. Frey was therefore invited to join the staff and, after his arrival in 1912, taught piano alongside such luminaries as Nikolai Medtner, Alexander Skryabin, Konstantin Igumnov and Alexander Goldenweiser. Frey also concertised in Russia, mainly during the holidays, and soon had played in all the major cities of the Russian Empire as well as across Europe. After the Russian Revolution of 1917 he was obliged to move back to Zurich, where he was invited to found a piano-soloist class at the Conservatoire. From 1925 he shared this responsibility with his pianist brother Walter. He continued to perform as a pianist

and even travelled twice (in 1927 and 1929) to South America together with Walter. Frey remained in Zurich as a teacher until his death, from a stroke, on 20 May 1946.

In 1933 his *Bewusst gewordenes Klavierspiel* ('Piano-Playing Become Aware'), a book on technique which illustrated musical advice with exercises, was published, and during the next decade Frey was often invited to join the juries of international piano competitions, such as the Chopin Competition in Warsaw in 1937 and the Geneva Competition in 1940 and 1945. Besides his professorship at the Zurich Conservatoire, he continued to perform and to write a good deal of music. At his death, he left a musical legacy of over 100 works, mainly music for piano solo, but also a lot of chamber music in different formations, art-songs, choral music (including a Mass) and orchestral works, among them two symphonies (one with a choral finale) and concertos for piano, violin and cello. Most of these works remain unpublished.

Contemporary criticism and musical memoirs agree that Emil Frey was a very gifted pianist with a superb technique and considerable musicality. But his music has occasionally run into some critical flak, not least because Frey the composer was often influenced by the outstanding composers with whom he came into contact, sometimes to the detriment of an individual style. The influences on his compositions can be broadly divided into four periods:

- French impressionism (Widor, Fauré)
- Romanian folkloric elements (Enescu¹)
- Russian music (Skryabin, Medtner, Prokofiev)
- German/Austrian music (Second Viennese School, Hindemith, Reger).

As an interpreter I often find that Frey's music is rich with musical ideas, but for that very reason it can sometimes be difficult to find an all-embracing homogeneity and to put all those ideas into a convincing line. There's no question, though, that all his piano music is written very pianistically: one can easily see the virtuosity of his playing in most of the pieces. This first recording dedicated to his music includes works from the four periods outlined above so as to give a representative impression of this interesting composer.

Emil Frey used to play on Bechstein pianos, which is why I chose to record this CD on a Bechstein piano as well.

¹ Enescu's First Piano Sonata, Op. 24, No. 1, completed in 1924, was dedicated to Frey.

The Music

Written in 1906, the **Berceuse** – No. 2 of Frey's *Vier Klavierstücke*, Op. 12 – is a wonderful example of his early impressionist period [1] and strongly suggests the music of his teacher, Gabriel Fauré. The melody is in the right hand and leads through the whole piece, accompanied by left-hand arpeggios in a comforting and quiet G flat major.

The trills, ornaments and harmony of the **Humoreske** – the first of another set of *Vier Klavierstücke*, Op. 20 – suggest that it was much influenced by Romanian folk-music [2]: it was written in 1911, when Frey had already spent time in Romania. It shows much variety in tempo and character: from a joyful, scherzo-like theme and virtuoso scales and octaves, a wide dynamic range, from *ppp* to *fff*, as well as melancholy melodies, and a sharp and edgy, even humorous, ending.

In the **Variations on a Romanian Folksong**, Op. 25 [3], in D major composed in 1910, Frey combines eastern European scales with elements of the instrumental improvisation styles he must have experienced during his work as the official court pianist of Carol I of Romania. In the opening *Andante con moto* the left hand takes the role of the bass-players, while the right hand plays the theme in $\frac{4}{4}$, which is joyful but still slightly melancholic, treading that line of emotional ambiguity traced by many varieties of folk-music. The theme has been identified by Speranța Rădulescu of the University of Music in Bucharest as a variant of a nineteenth-century urban tune from northern Moldavia known as a *horă boierească* or 'nobleman's dance'.² It is tripartite, with each part played twice in different registers. The six variations are highly contrasted, in tempo as in style, and are not numbered, perhaps because they depart from strict variation-form to offer little fantasy improvisations on different parts of the theme. The piece as a whole nonetheless does have an overall direction and builds up to a virtuosic culmination. The first variation, *Listesso tempo*, in $\frac{4}{8}$, has the melody in a middle voice – Frey writes *melodia un poco marcato [sic]* – accompanied by bell-like triplets above it. Only the first and second part of the theme can be distinguished. The second variation, marked *Allegro grazioso (il doppio tempo)*, is written in $\frac{4}{4}$, which makes sense, since it should be twice as fast as the theme. The left hand starts on its own in accompanying sixths before the right joins it with the melody from the first part of the theme, only much more accentuated and sharper. The theme (still just the first part) then passes to the left hand, while the right hand plays very fast short arpeggios in septuplets. The third part of the theme follows, leading to a first, dark

² E-mail to Martin Anderson, Toccata Classics, from Costin Moisil, University of Music, Bucharest, dated 1 December 2015.

culmination and a pause on a subdominant seventh chord. The third variation opens, *Lento ma non troppo*, in D minor and takes the listener from this subdominant chord in binary $\frac{6}{8}$, starting *pianissimo misterioso*, to another varied third part of the theme in the left hand. This variation modulates, ending in a distant F sharp major. The fourth, an *Allegro grazioso molto vivace*, still in $\frac{6}{8}$ and back in D major, is a tarantella-like virtuoso variation where all three parts of the theme can be found. It ends on a contra-octave D after a *ppp* Klezmer-style downwards scale, with a fermata on the following silence. The next variation, *Lento assai espressivo*, is in $\frac{3}{4}$ and in B minor. It is slow, *cantabile* and *espressivo*, preparing the ground for the final variation, *Allegro con fuoco*, which – back in D major and in $\frac{8}{8}$ – combines the different parts of the theme as one might expect of a the finale of a virtuoso show-piece for piano. One page of the manuscript at the beginning of this last variation was obviously composed later than the rest of the piece: it is written more hurriedly and on a different kind of paper, and one can even notice a slight stylistic difference: it is more dissonant and focuses mostly on the rhythm, like a mini-toccata.

Frey's *Sonata drammatica*,³ Op. 27, was written during his time in Moscow, in 1912–13; indeed, after each movement he wrote the exact finishing date – always in both Russian and European calendars.⁴ Skryabin and Medtner, who must both have been acquaintances of Frey during his time in Moscow, both gave names to their piano sonatas, and Medtner's (among them the *Sonata reminiscenza* and *Sonata tragica*) clearly had an influence on Frey. At first sight the musical texture looks very rich, even thick, posing problems for the pianist, not least since the work has not yet been published and the manuscript is not easy to follow. The first movement [4], which is in sonata form, has a real dramatic opening, marked *Allegro non troppo ma appassionato*: it rushes into the main theme in D minor. After a transition there is a sudden stop and a little oriental melody appears over a dark bass pulsation, only to give way to the lyrical second subject and a further theme in A minor. After the development, which uses all the themes, the recapitulation starts, with the oriental melody now in A and the second subject in D minor. The movement ends with a coda where, after a *martellato* passage, an arpeggio on diminished-seventh chord leads to the final D minor statement.

The second movement, a *Largo espressivo* in A major [5], starts with a very slow melody in the

³ The correct spelling is *drammatica*; the mistake originates in Frey's manuscript.

⁴ Russia used the Julian Calendar (= 'Old Style'); which had been abandoned in most of Europe by 1600, until 1918, when it adjusted its dates to the Gregorian calendar (= 'New Style'). In the nineteenth century, the Julian calendar was behind the Gregorian by twelve days; from the end of February 1900, the discrepancy increased to thirteen days.

right hand accompanied by chords in the left. The movement is written in $\frac{9}{8}$, and one can feel the pulsation of the three dotted crotchets through the whole movement. After the introduction, which ends in E major, there is again a small fragmented part, where the left hand plays only groups of three pulsating Es and the right hand responds with a second, D sharp–E, beginning very softly but growing soon to the culmination of the first part of this movement. The middle section begins darkly and distantly: the left hand now plays the same interval of a minor second followed by a tenth upwards and a diminished seventh arpeggio downwards in triplet quavers accompanying a rising melody in the right. In two big waves the music swells to a climax which leads to the main theme again, now played *fortissimo* by the left hand, with the right hand supplying an accompaniment in quavers very similar to the one the left hand played in the middle section. The movement ends after another, shorter, fragmented episode on a very long concluding E.

The third movement [6] begins with a slow, pregnant *Andante* introduction: a chromatic descending scale starting on a diminished seventh chord – a tribute to the opening of Liszt's B minor Sonata? This gesture makes it almost impossible to know where the music is harmonically. Only after a low *subito forte* A (sub-contra-octave, or AAA) – the lowest key on most pianos – does the movement really begin, with a toccata-like theme in D minor. This last movement is typical of Frey: it brings reminiscences of the first two movements along with lots of new ideas, motives and a fairly complex structure. The date of completion at the end of the movement indicates 'Russian Easter Monday' (150s/28ns April 1913), and one can only speculate as to whether the church-bells of the Easter celebrations in Moscow were also an influence on this last movement of the *Sonata drammatica*. The first section of the movement ends with twelve strange and sinister chords – bells? The second subject opens in A minor, with the left hand playing the melody, accompanied by the right in Chopinesque manner. After a bright, lyrical episode with trills in the left hand, the pulsations of the oriental subsidiary theme of the first movement re-appear, followed by another set of chromatic descending scales, as at the beginning of the movement. After that Frey confronts both main themes of this third movement, only to return to the lyrical second theme of the first movement, suddenly in C minor. Another trill-episode leads to a climax, which brings back the toccata theme, again in D minor. A series of climaxes now follows, with improvisatory fragments followed by *ff* descending chromatic scales; the accompaniment of the second movement also re-appears. The movement ends with a brief *martellato* reminiscence of the oriental theme,

concluding finally with the triumphant return of the main theme of the first movement in a victorious D major.

The three-movement *Little Slavic Suite*, Op. 38, was written immediately after Frey's return to Switzerland upon the outbreak of the Russian Revolution in 1917. Frey was very fond of Russia and of Russian music and was sad to have been forced to leave, and this little suite constitutes his first musical memories of the time he spent in the east. The Präludium [7] is a lyrical piece in G minor: one can almost hear sleighbells as the three horses of a troika find their way through a Russian forest. The Mazurka [8] is a minor masterpiece – simple, but playful and humorous, and very beautiful – with the typical three beats of a mazurka and some light accents on the second one. The Kasatschok, a Cossack dance [9], is highly rhythmic: one can sense boots stamping and dancing. Frey interweaves two main themes and adds a fugato, which leads to a happy G major conclusion.

Frey wrote six suites for piano, the first, Op. 53, published in 1922 and the last, Op. 66, in 1933. Each has four movements, but he explicitly left it to the interpreter to choose whether to play combinations of these pieces or perform them singly. Frey performed the music of J. S. Bach throughout his career, studying his scores and arranging several pieces for piano, and Bach's Passacaglia in C minor, BWV 582, will have formed part of Frey's daily bread. This **Passacaglia** [10], the last movement of the last of Frey's suites, begins, as most passacaglias do, by articulating in the left hand the bass line that underlies the structure – and this bass is a typical eight-bar ostinato in $\frac{3}{4}$. In the music which follows, it is difficult to discern the composer of the 'Berceuse' of 1906 or the *Little Slavic Suite* of eleven years later – the influences on Frey now seem to be Max Reger, perhaps even the young Paul Hindemith.

Luisa Splett is an internationally recognised Swiss pianist. Born in Winterthur in 1983 to a family of musicians, she launched her piano career at the age of five and gave her first solo performance at seven. In 2004 she completed her undergraduate studies under Silvia Näsbom-Thellung and Karl-Andreas Kolly in Zurich at the Zurich Hochschule der Künste (ZHdK), and in 2006 she graduated (with highest distinction) under Yelena Scherbakova at the Universidad Mayor de Chile in Santiago, Chile. In 2007 she moved to St Petersburg for postgraduate studies under the tutelage of



Oleg Malov at the Rimsky-Korsakov State Conservatoire. She obtained her degree in 2009 with highest distinction.

Since October 2012 she has lived in Berlin as an independent artist and teacher. Beside her performing career, she is working on a dissertation at the Universität der Künste Berlin (UdK) on Emil Frey and his pedagogical influences on the pianists of his time and beyond.

Over the last ten years Luisa has performed concerts as a soloist and chamber musician all over Europe, Russia and North and South America and is often invited to teach master-classes at schools and universities. She speaks six languages fluently and so enjoys easy communication with her public, colleagues and students from all over the world.

Her website can be found at www.luisasplett.com.

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