



Karl August HERMANN

COMPLETE PIANO MUSIC

Nicolas Horvath

FIRST RECORDINGS

KARL AUGUST HERMANN: AN ESTONIAN IDEALIST AND HIS TIME

by Anne Prommik

Estonia – with a culture and language that were already thousands of years old – spent much of the time from the Middle Ages until the beginning of the twentieth century being fought over by larger powers: Danes, Germans, Swedes and Russians. Estonian independence was achieved only in 1918 (and, of course, lost again between 1940 and 1991). But that independence did not come overnight: it was preceded by a period known as ‘national awakening’, beginning in the eighteenth century but picking up speed in the 1850s. This movement was spearheaded by a number of Baltic-German intellectuals,¹ who took their inspiration from the French Revolution and from the nationalism engendered by German Romanticism. During this period Estonian society changed at a staggering pace, and although the potential for further growth was limited by the poor economic situation of the rural population, from the 1860s onwards enthusiastic attempts were made to create a indigenous written culture. Music was also a means of establishing a national identity: choirs sprung up as mushrooms after rain. The quinquennial Estonian Song Festival is now one of the largest amateur choral events in the world, with around 30,000 singers; the first festival was held in 1869, giving a major boost to the choral and orchestral culture that had begun to flourish.

¹ From the twelfth and thirteenth centuries onwards, German traders and crusaders began to settle in Estonia and Latvia, becoming the ruling class for the best part of eight hundred years, although they formed only around ten per cent of the population. Under the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 Estonia and Latvia were assigned to the ‘Soviet sphere of influence’, and almost 21,000 Baltic Germans from Estonia and 61,500 from Latvia were resettled to the west, used as part of Hitler’s plan to ‘Germanise’ territory seized from Poles and Jews in occupied Poland. The Soviet defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 ensured the extinction of Baltic Germans as a cultural force.

At the forefront of this movement was Karl August Hermann. Linguist, journalist, composer, choir-leader, songwriter, historian, literary philologist and encyclopaedist, Hermann became one of the most important cultural leaders of the Estonian national awakening. He was a pioneer who took steps in unknown areas with a self-sacrificing patriotic sense of duty, in a naive and yet courageous way. Even though scholars of serious music turn up their noses at the mention of his name, it is to him that Estonians owe the fact that they are now known as a singing nation. Hermann published the first Estonian daily newspaper and the first music journal, wrote the first grammar of the Estonian language, was the author of the first published Estonian literary history, read the first lecture in Estonian at the University of Tartu, was the first Estonian encyclopaedist, composed the first Estonian opera (a *Singspiel* entitled *Uku ja Vanemuine ehk Eesti jumalad ja rahvad* ('Uku and Vanemuine or Estonian Gods and People'), premiered in 1908), was the first Estonian publisher of a violin manual and another on music notation. In addition, he organised and conducted choral concerts, published music and literature, composed, systematised and studied folk-tunes, participated in political debates in the columns of the newspaper *Postimees*, was the president of the 'Vanemuise' Society which ran the first theatre in Estonia, and actively participated in various cultural societies. With national awakening, schools began to be set up across Estonia and Hermann had a hand in that, too.

When Alexander III mounted the Russian imperial throne in 1881, he reversed many of the liberal reforms of his father, Nicholas II, and Baltic Germans and Estonians suffered alike: Russian replaced German as the official language, and primary schools teaching in Estonian were closed. The role of Estonian-language media now became more and more important, and in 1891 *Postimees* became the first Estonian daily newspaper, edited by Hermann.

Hermann's home in Tartu housed one of the few families of intellectuals whose mother tongue was Estonian. Because of his honesty and sincerity, Karl August was regarded as uncomplicated by his peers. He was an admirer of an era in which ethnic sentiment still seemed to be a real liberation and a force of development, and his deep faith in Estonians was an engine that drove him to act on several fronts simultaneously,

although there was naturally a limit to what this one-man-cultural revolution could achieve on his own. And as a naively eager and emotional nationalist, he was often hit by well-targeted stones from his critics. He suffered terribly from these attacks, but continued to work, conquering new areas, and seems to have worked his way back to health. The fragmentation of his efforts worked to his disadvantage, but at the same time it was also his virtue, since the awakening of the Estonian nation required characters like him, whose exertions established him as an authority and enlightener for the rural people.

Although even now in Estonia composers of simple songs are accused of cultivating a 'Karl Hermann-ish' style, Hermann's choral songs are being still performed 150 years later, both at song festivals and in concert halls. And every Estonian can sing the finest achievement of Hermann's choral music, *Isamaa mälestus* ('Memory of the Fatherland'), written in Finland in the year 1880. Hermann took the text from the *Kalevipoeg*, the Estonian national epic that Friedrich Robert Faehlmann (1798–1850) and Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (1802–82) had compiled from folk sources. Other Hermann songs popular at the festivals include *Oh, laula ja hõiska* ('Oh sing and cheer') of 1873, which, like *Kungla rahvas* ('The People of the Kungla'), written a year later, enjoys a good tune. The first of these songs expresses joy, the other anxiety – and they were only two of the more than 400 song lyrics that Hermann wrote. Hermann's musicality was further, and prominently, expressed in his involvement in choral music as a conductor and organiser: he directed a number of choirs and organised several of the song festivals that were very important in the formation of an Estonian national identity. He was only seventeen when the first song festival was held, but he was the general director of four of the next five song festivals, from the second general song festival in 1879 in Tartu up to the sixth event in Tallinn in 1896.

As a musician, Hermann was self-taught, except for what he could learn in private lessons, and yet he managed to compose nearly 300 original songs and folk-tunes, as well as solo works for piano, pieces for violin and piano, and some orchestral ballads, some of which use sentimental German songs or Estonian folk-tunes. And, as mentioned, Hermann even went so far as to write the first Estonian opera, *Uku and Vanemuine*.

The value of Hermann's musical achievements has been debated up to this day, but it cannot be denied that he became the father of the renewal of the Estonian language, his linguistic activities having an effect felt even today. In 1884 he published the first systematic *Grammar of the Estonian Language*, with its own linguistic terms. Today, about 140 of Hermann's words are in circulation in Estonian. As a purist, he looked to replace foreign words with their Estonian equivalents. Some did not go into circulation – for example, his term for opera: *lauleldus*. But some of his grammatical and musical terms have become part of everyday language – words such as *helilooja* ('composer'), *käsitöoline* ('craftsman') and *sünnipäev* ('birthday') are now commonly used.

Karl August Hermann was born on 23 September 1851 in the village of Võhma, near Põltsamaa in central Estonia (between Tallinn and Tartu), purportedly the son of a blacksmith – although it was mooted that his father was more probably the Põltsamaa pastor, Emil August Hörshelmann, who also became his godfather. This boy from a simple family showed unusual abilities at an early age. When Karl August was five years old, his father and his stepmother hid the Bible away so that the boy would not spoil his eyes through his continuous reading. After parochial school, he continued his studies at the German elementary school in Põltsamaa, where he received his primary education in piano and violin. He also practised trumpet and trombone and sang in the choir. The first Estonian song festival, held in Tartu in 1869, left an indelible impression on him. In the same year he started travelling to Tallinn and seized the opportunity to take private lessons, learning piano, organ, harmonium and violin.

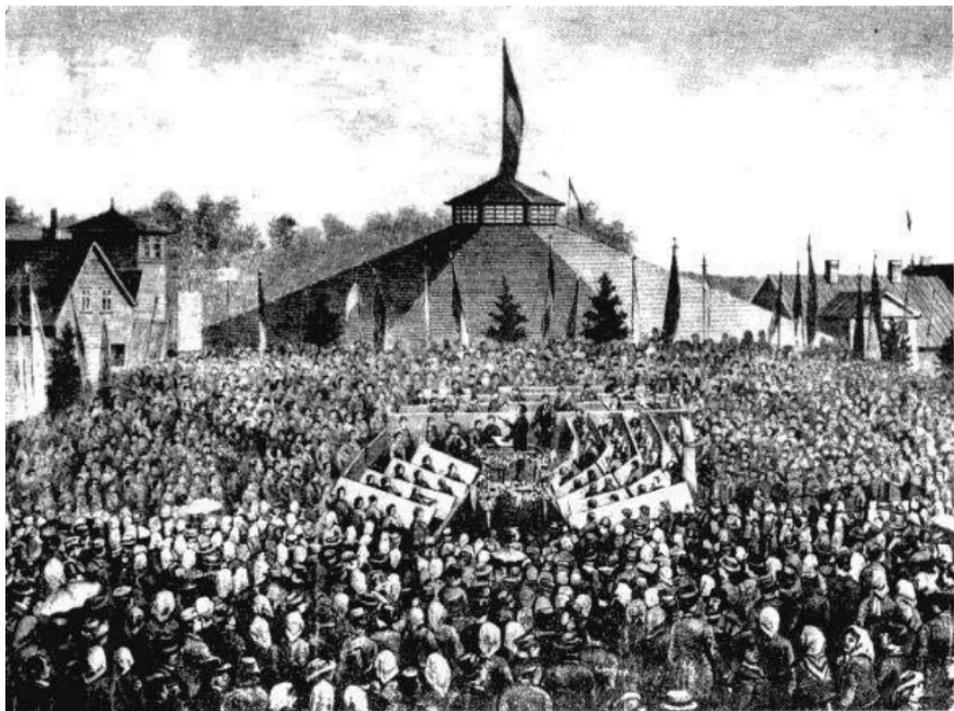
In 1871 he was appointed to a teaching post in St Petersburg, at the so-called 'English School', where the children of less-well-off foreigners studied. He hoped also to go to the Conservatoire (there was no higher music institution in Estonia at that time, and all Estonian professional musicians studied music in the closest Russian metropolis) but its first director, the pianist and composer Anton Rubinstein, considered the twenty-year-old Hermann too old to be admitted, and Hermann's lack of musical preparation told against him, too.

Some years later, thanks to the help of a wealthy relative, he succeeded in entering the Faculty of Theology at the University of Tartu. But his studies there were interrupted. Hermann's friends thought that he did not want to participate in the German-Baltic culture which predominated there, not least because of the influence of the Lutheran church. To everyone's surprise, Hermann then enrolled in the Faculty of Philosophy at Leipzig University and graduated in doctoral studies in Comparative Linguistics in only a year and a half. In Leipzig he also studied Chinese, Japanese and Mandarin: he was on his way to becoming one of the first polyglots in Estonia, ultimately becoming familiar with fourteen languages. He travelled back to Estonia during his studies, leading the second Estonian song festival in Tartu, which had been postponed to 1879 because of the Russo-Turkish war.

It was during the 1880s that the most important and influential period of his life began. When he returned to Tartu in 1880, he joined the staff of the newspaper *Eesti Postimees*, buying the title in 1886 and acting as its editor for the next decade. During this time, the paper actively encouraged the Estonians' efforts at establishing a national voice. Hermann was not a savvy publicist or an astute politician, but he tried sincerely to increase a sense of national dignity and to educate his readers. During his editorship, the number of subscribers grew, and the newspaper began to appear daily. Now *Postimees* is the only Estonian quality daily newspaper that is over 150 years old.

In 1888, Hermann followed the example of Jakob Hurt, one of the most important folklorists in Estonia,² and issued a call to action, explaining the importance of collecting folksongs, and asked everyone in the clergy, schoolmasters and other talented scholars to write folksongs down and send them to him. In this way Hermann collected no fewer than 2,587 folksongs. Several of them later appeared in his harmonised collection *Estonian Folksongs for Mixed Choir*, which appeared in three parts, in 1890, 1905 and 1908.

² In the 1870s Hurt (1839–1907), 'the king of Estonian folklore', ran a press campaign that enlisted 1,400 volunteer collectors who went door-to-door in Livonia (in southern Estonia) and amassed a huge amount of folklore. Hurt intended to publish it in a series of six volumes called *Monumenta Estoniae Antiquae*, but financial difficulties meant that only two appeared; it was over a century before the project was completed.



*The second general song festival, in Tartu in 1879,
of which Hermann was general director*

That publication was part of a larger trend. In 1893, a choral-song anthology in German, *Völkerlieder*, was published in Leipzig, featuring folksongs from 27 nationalities, including 55 songs by Estonian composers. But Hermann's most systematic effort took the form of the monthly publication *Laulu ja mängu leht* ('Song and Music Paper'), which between 1885 and 1898 taught its readers, in Estonian, how to write music down, presented Estonian composers and fostered the development of choral singing and the collection of folksongs. During its thirteen years of life, this periodical published a total of around 800 songs. It also featured theoretical articles such as 'Learning Musical Notes', 'Learning the Violin' and 'Learning Music and Composition'. As a boy, the Estonian national writer Anton Hansen Tammsaare dreamed of becoming a violinist when he studied violin from Hermann's handbook.³

Scientific contributions to the Learned Estonian Society had also made Hermann known in university circles. From 1889 until his death he was a lecturer in Estonian at the University of Tartu. When in 1895 Russian was imposed as the official language of the university, Hermann remained a lecturer on Estonian, although he had to teach Estonian grammar, literary history and other language-related courses in Russian. A sword of Damocles hung over these lectures about, if not in, the Estonian language, since the Rector of the University was against the teaching of Estonian, but members of the Estonian Student Society ensured that Hermann's lectures had enough listeners.

During this university period, Hermann's creative activity was particularly intense, and over the course of fifteen years he published a series of books on music, language and history, one of them being his extensive *The History of Estonian Literature*, which appeared in 1898.

Working in so many different disciplines had, over the years, brought Hermann occasional complaints of fragmentation and superficiality. When in 1908 his opera *Uku and Vanemuine* was premiered, it was acclaimed as a success, but some musicians

³ Tammsaare (1878–1940) is best known for his five-volume *Tõdu ja õigus* ('Truth and Justice'; 1926–33), each novel exploring a different aspect of human existence. A park in central Tallinn, named after him, contains a statue of Tammsaare, erected to mark the centenary of his birth.

criticised it very heavily. Artur Vahter, Hermann's biographer, even considered⁴ that Hermann's fate was shaped by a destructive review of the opera by one of the Estonian students at St Petersburg, the later composer Mihkel Lüdig,⁵ which delivered a final blow to Hermann's already weakened nervous system: he suffered a paralysing stroke which, on 11 January 1909, abruptly snuffed out his bright life, at a mere 57 years of age.

Karl August Hermann's forgotten piano pieces

In Estonian musical life Hermann is remembered only as a choral composer. It took an inquisitive 'Estophile' French pianist, Nicolas Horvath, to find a long list of manuscripts in the endless collections of the Estonian Theatre and Music Museum in Tallinn and now, over a century after the death of the great Estonian enlightener, they are here recorded for the first time. Hermann's output contains 33 known pieces for solo piano, but eight of these manuscripts have either been destroyed or have disappeared without trace. All 25 that have been preserved can be heard in this recording.

Several of his piano pieces are transcriptions of folk originals or were written on the basis of folk themes. Every Estonian knows by heart the *Valse nationale des Esthoniens* [5], written in 1882. The most commonly heard version of this dance is the other Estonian waltz, *Eesti Waltz* [12]. But Hermann's waltzes were not only popular in origin: they also often reflected the music of other Romantic composers he had heard. On 20 April 1896 Hermann travelled to Tartu to hear a concert of music by Baltic-German composers, and exactly a week later, on 27 April, he wrote his *Valsituju* or *Walzerstimmung* [17], where the tunes sound as if they have come straight out of a Tchaikovsky ballet. *Pace* its title, Hermann's *Estnische Volkslied* ('Estonian Folksong') [9] is obviously indebted to the German *Liedertafel* tradition that constituted the idea of art-music for most of the Baltic Germans. Estonian national song often involved various types of play, in which the characters sing and dance, as in *Alletamine ja sarvening torupilli lugu* ('Humming, Horn and Bagpipe Song') [13]; and there is a kind of group-play in *Pulli Hansu pulmad* ('Funny Hans' Wedding') [11].

⁴ Artur Vahter (ed.), *Karl August Hermann'i päevik* ('The Diary of Karl August Hermann'), Eesti, Raamat, 1990.

⁵ Lüdig (1880–1958) was active as pianist, organist and choral conductor and is best known for his *cappella* choral songs, some 60 in number.



Karl August Hermann and his wife, Pauline Henriette

In spite of the length of Hermann's worklist, he did tend to recycle the same melodies, and the simple folksong *Kadund kinnas* ('Lost Glove') [21] and *Taurig und freudig* ('Sad and Happy'; 1891), spiced with folk dances [23], are better known as male-voice choral songs. The Schubertian *Winter und Frühling* ('Winter and Spring'; 1891) [4] can be found as a work for violin. And the *Air estonien varié et modulé* ('Varied and Modulated Estonian Tune'; 1897) [7] ten years later became an aria for Lemmingine, the handsome cheerleader in *Uku and Vanemuine*.

Similarly, the polka-waltz *Ausser Athem!* ('Out of Breath!') [6] sounds familiar to Estonians but – ironically, given the title – in a Hermann arrangement for a wind band (wind orchestras, too, take part in the song festivals). Hermann wrote this piece in 1875, when he went on a major trip around northern Europe, visiting Norway, Denmark and Sweden. In a radio interview with me in April 2017, Nicolas Horvath found similarities with other composers from the north: 'It's the same as Grieg and Sibelius [...] – this kind of movement that happened at the end of the nineteenth century.'⁶ Indeed, the cheerfulness of *Air d'été* ('Song of Summer'; 1885) [10] recalls Grieg's *Lyrical Pieces*, the first volume of which was published in 1867. Grieg-like piano colours also glimmer around the simple melody of *Suve õhtu eha ajal* ('Summer Evening at Twilight') [1]. Another influence was more distant in time, when Hermann honoured the German who had laid the ground for Romanticism: *Tundline unistus* ('Emotional Dream'; 1872) [2] begins by quoting Schubert's song 'Der Lindenbaum' from *Winterreise*; many Estonians therefore mistakenly assume it is an Estonian folksong. The figurations of *Die Lösung des Rätsels* ('The Solution to the Puzzle') [8] suggests that Hermann was probably familiar with Beethoven's piano concertos, too.

The sad *Des Lebens Kampf* ('The Combat of Life') [3] may have an autobiographical element: it was composed in November 1896, the year in which his weak health forced Hermann to step down from the editorship of *Postimees* and hand it over to Jaan Tõnisson, the chief news editor, who later became an important statesman.⁷

⁶ Online at <https://arhiiv.err.ee/vaata/delta-kulaline-nicolas-horvath>, much of it overdubbed in Estonian.

⁷ Tõnisson (born in 1868) was twice Estonian prime minister in 1919–20, State Elder (head of state) in 1927–28 and Foreign Minister in 1931–32. The Soviet authorities arrested him in autumn 1940, and he is presumed to have been executed in July 1941, after which he became a symbol of Estonian resistance to the Soviet occupation.

TM
Valse nationale des esthoniens.

Con fuoco. n. n. 395...

Sol. et arr. par
L. d. Hermann.

mf

mf

f

mf Ped. * Ped. *

Ped. * *f* Ped. * Ped. * Ped. * *f* Ped. * Ped. *

The manuscript of Hermann's Valse nationale des esthoniens

A handwritten musical score for piano, consisting of four systems of staves. The notation includes treble and bass clefs, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and various musical notations such as notes, rests, and ornaments. The score is annotated with several dynamic and performance markings:

- mf* (mezzo-forte)
- ff* (fortissimo)
- 8va* (octave up)
- Ped.* (pedal)
- *Ped.* (pedal)
- mf* (mezzo-forte)
- ff* (fortissimo)
- 8va* (octave up)
- Ped.* (pedal)
- *Ped.* (pedal)
- mf* (mezzo-forte)
- 8va* (octave up)
- Ped.* (pedal)
- *Ped.* (pedal)

The score is written on aged, slightly yellowed paper with some ink bleed-through from the reverse side.

This reflective, thoughtful mood continues with Hermann's *Andantino* [18], *Albumi leht* ('Album Leaf') [19] and *Allegretto* [20], all written during this same period.

As Hermann spoke a total of fourteen languages, it's not surprising that several of his piano pieces have French titles. *Pensées de vie* ('Thoughts of Life'; 1898) [14] calls to mind Adolphe Adam's *Minuit, chrétiens!* of 1847 (also known as the *Cantique de Noël*, and *O Holy Night* in English), whereas the *Marche de Fête* ('Festival March') of 1873 (*Pidumarss* in Estonian) [15] opens like the Marseillaise. The development of the piece quotes a tune that every Estonian knows from one of Hermann's most famous choral songs, *Oh, laula ja hõiska* ('Oh, Sing and Cheer').

In 1893 Hermann, noticing a deterioration in his health, took time off work and travelled by train to Bad Nauheim, where he bathed and breathed in salt vapours. During this trip, he visited a number of major German churches, and composed his *Pensée Musicale* ('Musical Thought') [15] and *Concert-Étude* [22]. By contrast, the *Three Characteristic Pieces* from around this time have Latin titles: 'Per aspera ad astra' [24], 'In hilaritate' [25] and 'Polca futura' [26], and suggest the beginnings of impressionism.

Although this corpus of piano music has remained unknown until now, its effects were felt nonetheless. In 1908, Mart Saar, a composer 31 years younger than Hermann, recorded piano versions of Hermann's folksongs for the Zonophone record label in the UK, thus linking Hermann's work with the modern era. And Saar's own 130 piano pieces, which created a solid foundation for the composers of the next generation, were possible because of the roads that Karl August Hermann had paved.

Anne Prommik is a music journalist, currently working as an editor at the Estonian classical-music radio channel Klassikaraadio, presenting broadcasts of classical concerts and operas, hosting concerts and being responsible for a weekly review programme, Helikaja. Graduating as a classical singer from the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, she often works as a reviewer of opera and vocal recitals for the Estonian daily Postimees, the weekly cultural newspaper Sirp and monthly magazine Teater. Muusika. Kino. She also studied Estonian linguistics at Tallinn University and journalism at Tartu University. As the composer of the first Estonian opera, Karl August Hermann has been her special subject of interest.

An unusual artist with an unconventional résumé, **Nicolas Horvath** began his music studies at the Académie de Musique Prince Rainier III de Monaco. At age sixteen, he caught the attention of the American conductor Lawrence Foster, who helped him to secure a three-year scholarship from the Princess Grace Foundation in order to further his studies. His mentors include a number of distinguished international pianists, including Nelson Delle-Vigne, Philippe Entremont, Gérard Frémy, Bruno Leonardo Gelber, Eric Heidsieck, Gabriel Tacchino, Oxana Yablonskaya and the Liszt specialist Leslie Howard. It was Leslie Howard's invitation for him to perform for the Liszt Society in the United Kingdom that helped to lay the foundations for Nicolas Horvath's current recognition as a leading interpreter of Liszt's music. He is the holder of a number of awards, including First Prize of the Skryabin and the Luigi Nono International Competitions.



Photo: Claire-Cécile Michon

Known for his untrammelled musical explorations, Nicolas Horvath is an enthusiastic promoter of contemporary music: he has commissioned numerous works (including no fewer than 120 as part of his 'Homages to Philip Glass' project in 2014) and collaborated with such leading contemporary composers as Régis Campo, Alvin Curran, Mamoru Fujieda, Jaan Rääts and Valentin Silvestrov. He is also a rediscoverer of forgotten or neglected composers such as Champion de Chambonnières, Jaquet de la Guerre, Kalkbrenner, de Montgeroult, Karl August Hermann and many others.

Nicolas Horvath has become noted for the organisation of concerts of unusual length, sometimes lasting over twelve hours, such as the performance of the complete piano music of Philip Glass in the Salle Boulez of the Paris Philharmonie before a cumulative audience of 14,000 people, Alvin Curran's *Inner Cities XL* and the complete piano music of Erik Satie. In October 2015 he gave the closing-day concert in the Estonia Gallery at the Expo World Exhibition in Milan with a programme of music by Jaan Rääts. His career has taken him to concert venues around the world, and he is also an electroacoustic composer.



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