



Wilhelm
STENHAMMAR

DDD
8.553730

Piano Works

**Late-Summer Nights • Piano Sonata in G minor
Three Fantasies • Three Small Piano Pieces**

Niklas Sivelöv, Piano



Wilhelm Stenhammar (1871-1927) – Piano Works

Wilhelm Stenhammar is one of the most distinguished representatives of Swedish music, with a limited but particularly fine body of work. Stylistically he belongs with Brahms, yet without the latter's 'massive' side, with clear roots in classicism and early romanticism. His mature works can be characterized as aristocratically measured, sometimes wilful, rich in feeling but without unbridled sentimentality or play for effect. Among his sources of inspiration are Bruckner and finally Sibelius.

To his contemporaries Stenhammar appeared out of date. He departed from the generation of composers that appeared in Sweden around 1900 by making little use of folk elements in his music. While European pioneers dedicated themselves to the disintegration of harmony and the use of ever more extensive sound resources, he stubbornly placed importance on melodic articulation and contrapuntal invention. He cannot be seen as either a National Romantic or a Late Romantic in the continental mould. Despite a certain amount of isolation he was nevertheless regarded, on the strength of his artistic integrity, as one of the great composers of his day, at least amongst colleagues and connoisseurs. For the rest of us it is precisely those traits which distinguished him from the masses which have contributed to his promotion as perhaps Sweden's most important composer from the beginning of this century. Several latter-day colleagues have adopted his noble, frugal ideals, not least via Hilding Rosenberg, his only composition pupil.

Few genres were unfamiliar to Stenhammar. His *œuvre* encompasses two symphonies, a large-scale orchestral serenade, two piano concertos, a couple of romances for violin, operas, music for the theatre, cantatas, songs, chamber music and works for piano. In his six string quartets, a development can be traced from

reminiscences of Beethoven, through more daring methods of expression to an austere polyphony which looks forward to the newer currents from between the wars.

Stenhammar's limited creative output can be partly explained by his extensive activities as a practising musician. Ten years as a conductor in Stockholm were followed by fifteen years as Principal Conductor of the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra. This now highly renowned orchestra enjoyed its first golden age under Stenhammar, both in terms of quantity of work and in variety. Among new names that were introduced at this time was that of Mahler.

In addition Stenhammar was regarded as one of the leading pianists in Scandinavia. He was not, however, a 'piano giant', otherwise so typical of the romantic era. His playing was said to have been soulful rather than brilliant, which did not exclude moments of intensity or power when the music demanded it. Superficial virtuosity was not in his nature. He does not seem to have played any Liszt, and only a very little Chopin, even though the latter seems to have influenced his early compositions. Nevertheless he must have commanded a formidable technique. When he made his debut as a 21-year old in 1892, he dared to perform something as demanding as Brahms's *First Piano Concerto*, which had not been performed in Sweden before, and would not be played there again for a long time. His own *First Piano Concerto*, completed the following year, makes similar demands. With this work he won success in England and Germany, as well as in Sweden. When he played it with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, no less a figure than Richard Strauss conducted. (The same orchestra gave the first performance of his *Concert Overture Excelsior!* under Arthur Nikisch).

Stenhammar's first piano teacher had studied composition under Franz Berwald. In adolescence he continued his studies with the renowned Richard Andersson, who had been taught by Hilda Tegerström, a pupil of Berwald, Liszt and Clara Schumann, and then between 1892-93 in Berlin, with Heinrich Barth, who had studied with Liszt's pupil Hans von Bülow. Thus, as a young man, he came into close contact with the great central European piano tradition, with its roots stretching right back to Beethoven. For a long while he was seen primarily as an interpreter of Beethoven; he even performed a complete cycle of his sonatas. Later he devoted more interest to the music of Schubert and to Mozart's piano concertos, music still unusual in Sweden.

Stenhammar, however, was arguably best known as an accompanist and chamber musician, at least outside the big cities. In this capacity he often played with the violinists Tor Aulin and Henri Marteau and accompanied singers such as John Forsell on extensive tours. Above all, though, he played throughout Sweden with Aulin's Quartet Ensemble, with occasional forays into the other Scandinavian countries.

In view of his tireless work as a pianist, Stenhammar's limited interest in his own solo piano music is surprising. Apart from youthful attempts there are only four works on a larger scale: two relatively independent sonatas, *Three Fantasies* and the collection *Sensomnarnätter* (Late-Summer Nights). One explanation could be that his predilection for melody and counterpoint made media such as the quartet and orchestra more suitable.

Stenhammar wrote his first sonatas when he was nine. The *G minor Sonata*, actually his fourth, was composed in 1890 at the age of nineteen and clearly shows the influence of Beethoven and lyrical romanticism. The dream-like *Andante* conveys an air of Schumann and Chopin and other parts remind one of

Grieg. This sonata cannot have been fully developed, as it shows few personal traits, compared to later works, but in Stenhammar's development it plays a rôle which should not be underestimated. Only three years later he produced the excellent *First Piano Concerto*.

The *Three Fantasies* were composed in 1895, in the same period as the two string quartets. In that year the *Second (Fifth) Sonata* appeared, along with a group of three small piano pieces. The first of these storms forth in an unusually charged manner for Stenhammar, with the spirit of Brahms more than hinted at in the piano part. The same passionate attitudes would shortly run through *Excelsior!* and parts of the *Second String Quartet*. The second piece is much more delicate, a playfully floating little *scherzo* of a type that he had already attempted in the piano concerto. Here a comparison with Mendelssohn is more appropriate. The triptych closes with a dreamy, mournful fantasy, whose outer passages (in the character of a song without words), frame a lighter, accelerating martial episode.

Together with the four larger works Stenhammar wrote a number of independent pieces, sometimes for publication in those piano albums so popular at the time, or in the Christmas supplements of newspapers. In this way in 1898 the *Intermezzo*, widely heard at the time, and the *Impromptu* recorded here first appeared.

The suite *Sensomnarnätter* is Stenhammar's most important and personal work. It is thought that certain ideas go back as far as 1900, while the major part came into being in 1904, at the same time that the *Second Piano Concerto* was being formulated. The collection was finally completed a decade later. Originally the work contained six or seven pieces, but these were finally whittled down to five. Even here something of the spirit of Brahms hovers over the music, although now it is not a question of *Sturm und Drang* extravagance without associations, whether conscious or not cannot be discerned, with the ageing master's

thoughtful serenity. Although most of the suite was written by a 33-year old, with almost a quarter of a century left to live, it is difficult to avoid the impression of approaching autumn, of a settling up with life with glimpses of farewell. Yet this music contains more than

that. One can sense “a peaceful atmosphere, enchanted song, fantasies, shadow play and the disquiet of the soul”, as the Stenhammar scholar Bo Wallner has put it.

English version: Andrew Smith

Niklas Sivelöv

Niklas Sivelöv was born in Skellefteå in Sweden in 1968 and started his career as an organist, winning awards and prizes throughout Sweden. At the age of fourteen he turned his attention to the piano and studied at the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm, making his début in Stockholm in 1991, when he was the soloist with the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra in the *Second Piano Concerto* of Bartók. He continued his studies in Helsinki, Bucharest and London, while winning prizes in international competitions in Geneva

and Cincinnati and in 1994 the Swedish Golden Apple Award. In 1995 Niklas Sivelöv was Artist in Residence with the Swedish Radio Stockholm. Now winning acclaim as a composer in his own right, Sivelöv has a wide concert repertoire, with concertos ranging from those of Rachmaninov to Lutosławski and Ligeti to piano concertos dedicated to him by contemporary Scandinavian composers such as Einar Englund and Anders Eliasson.

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STENHAMMAR: Piano Works

NAXOS



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STEREO

Wilhelm STENHAMMAR

(1871-1927)

Piano Works

Niklas Sivelöv, Piano

DDD

Playing
Time
57:44

NAXOS

STENHAMMAR: Piano Works

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Tre fantasier, Op. 11 (Three Fantasies)

(12:56)

- | | | |
|---|--------------------|------|
| 1 | Molto appassionato | 4:20 |
| 2 | Dolce scherzando | 4:11 |
| 3 | Molto espressivo | 4:20 |

Sensommarnätter, Op. 33 (Late-Summer Nights)

(14:51)

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------|------|
| 4 | Tranquillo e soave | 3:49 |
| 5 | Poco presto | 2:00 |
| 6 | Piano. Non troppo lento | 3:12 |
| 7 | Presto agitato | 3:17 |
| 8 | Poco allegretto | 2:23 |

- | | | |
|---|---------------------------|------|
| 9 | Impromptu in G flat major | 3:53 |
|---|---------------------------|------|

Tre små klaverstycken (Three Small piano pieces)

(15:32)

- | | | |
|----|----------------------------|------|
| 10 | Molto tranquillo, semplice | 2:43 |
| 11 | Allegro | 1:19 |
| 12 | Polska (En miniature) | 1:25 |

Piano Sonata in G minor (20:09)

- | | | |
|----|-------------------------------|------|
| 13 | Allegro vivace e passionato | 7:58 |
| 14 | Romanza: Andante quasi adagio | 4:10 |
| 15 | Scherzo: Allegretto | 2:24 |
| 15 | Rondo: Allegretto | 5:29 |

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on 20th and 21st February, 1996.

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(Museum of Music, Stockholm)

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