

NAXOS

Ferdinand  
**RIES**

**Piano Sonatas and Sonatinas • 4**

**Susan Kagan, Piano**



## Ferdinand Ries (1784–1838)

### Piano Sonatas and Sonatinas • 4

Ferdinand Ries is known mainly through his connection with Beethoven, as his family friend, piano student, and early biographer. Ries's relationship with Beethoven began in Bonn and continued in Vienna, and later in London. Born in 1784, when Beethoven was fourteen, Ferdinand was the son of Franz Ries, violinist in the Electoral Court Orchestra, who taught Beethoven the violin and befriended his family during Beethoven's youth. Largely self-taught, Ferdinand first studied in Munich, but around 1803 he went to Vienna to study the piano with Beethoven, who sent him to the noted theorist-composer Johann Albrechtsberger for composition studies. Ries was probably Beethoven's closest friend during this period, carrying out all kinds of musical and secretarial tasks for him, copying parts, making transcriptions and arrangements, proof-reading and seeing to publications. Later, after years of touring as a concert pianist and short stays in Paris and Vienna, Ries married an Englishwoman and settled in London, where he continued to act on Beethoven's behalf.

Ries was a gifted and prolific composer in every instrumental genre, whose works, like those of so many composers of the time, were largely overshadowed by Beethoven's huge presence. Still, in his lifetime his music was published and widely known to the music-loving public. A brilliant pianist, Ries made his debut in Vienna in 1804, playing Beethoven's *Third Piano Concerto*. He toured for many years throughout Europe, including Russia, to great acclaim, and was made a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Music. In his lifetime virtually everything he composed was published, and often reissued by different publishers, attesting to his popularity. Eventually he and his family left England, settling finally in Frankfurt am Main in the Rhineland, where he conducted and continued to compose until his death.

Ries began composing his piano sonatas at a time when the genre was undergoing significant changes. His

models were those of the great classicists, C.P.E. Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and early Beethoven, who had perfected the sonata "ideal". Later, he was influenced by new trends in the sonatas of Beethoven, Clementi, Hummel, and others. Ries was a master of the prevailing classical forms, sonata form, ABA (song) form, rondo, variations, and that mastery, as well as striking originality, can be seen in all his compositions. What is most remarkable, however, is Ries's anticipation of the style of the great piano composers of the early Romantic period, Schubert, Mendelssohn and Chopin, who were not yet born or still young children when he was at the peak of his piano sonata composition, from about 1805 to 1818. Schubert's poignant harmonic language, Mendelssohn's expressive, sweet melodies, Chopin's brilliant figuration, all of these features prevail in Ries's piano writing in his sonatas, well ahead of their full flowering in the Romantic period after 1830. His last three sonatas, composed between 1823 and 1832, reflect a change to a more overtly romantic style that appealed to a changing public taste.

Robert Schumann, reviewing a work by Ries in 1835 in his *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, noted his "remarkable originality." Like Schubert, he had an abundance of lyrical melodic ideas in constant flow. This is borne out in his many sonata-form movements, where the first theme, the second, and the closing theme are each distinctive, and ingeniously developed. Among significant characteristics of Ries's style, many of which were to become hallmarks of the language of Romanticism, are dramatic dynamic contrasts, abrupt changes in tempo and mood, harmonic shifts, fluent ornate figuration, wide stretches and leaps, and radical use of the sustaining pedal to blur harmonies.

The *Sonata in D, Op. 9, No. 1*, composed in Vienna in 1808 following Ries's unhappy sojourn in Paris, appeared in print in 1811 with its companion piece, the *Sonata in C, Op. 9, No. 2* (*Complete Sonatas and Sonatinas, Vol. 3: Naxos 8.572204*). The first movement, in sonata form, is in a brusque, martial style ideally suited to the ceremonial

character of the key of D major, with jaunty dotted rhythms in both the first and second themes. A lyrical change of mood comes in the charming little codetta that closes the exposition and the recapitulation.

The second movement functions as both a traditional slow movement and a dance movement. It is a sombre minuet and trio (also featuring dotted rhythms) in the key of D minor. An important feature in this movement, unusual among Ries's sonatas, is the pervasive use of counterpoint and canon. The finale is a set of eight variations on a buoyant theme. The variations follow the traditional classical pattern of varying rhythmic figuration, and include one in the style of an eighteenth-century music box (Variation 4) and one in the parallel minor (Variation 7). The final two variations (Nos. 7 and 8) are extended, with cadenza-like passages in No. 7 and changes in tempo and character in No. 8.

The *Sonata in A flat, Op. 141*, Ries's penultimate solo sonata, composed in 1826 following his return to the German Rhineland, exemplifies the last phase of Ries's

sonata composition. The piano he wrote it for, probably a new acquisition, had an extended range of 6½ octaves, and undoubtedly an increased sonority. Its publication in 1827 by the French publisher Zetter was announced as *Grande Sonate*, and indeed it is a work of large proportions, bringing together varying characteristics of Ries's style, many of them enumerated above in the description of romantic style elements in his music. The first movement, in 6/8 metre, has a basically tranquil character, with passages of Chopinesque figuration; but the development contains quite a lot of drama. The slow movement (E flat, *Adagio con moto*), with its singing right-hand melody, is reminiscent of similar highly expressive slow movements in many of Beethoven's piano sonatas. Ries casts this movement as an ABA form, with a stormy middle section. The finale is something of a romp: a rondo form, with a strongly rhythmical bass figure and much virtuosic figuration.

**Susan Kagan**



## Susan Kagan

Susan Kagan, a pianist, author, and educator, holds a Ph.D. from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Her dissertation on the music of Archduke Rudolph, Beethoven's only composition student, was published by Pendragon Press in 1988, under the title *Archduke Rudolph, Beethoven's Patron, Pupil, and Friend*. Susan Kagan taught music history at Hunter College, CUNY, where she founded the New York Chapter of the American Beethoven Society in 1995. She is also a reviewer of new recordings for *Fanfare* Magazine. Her discography includes three CDs issued by Koch International, in partnership with the renowned Czech violinist Josef Suk. She has also recorded two sets of Mozart piano concertos with the Suk Chamber Orchestra of Prague on the Vox and Koch Discover labels. Her CD of solo piano music by Beethoven and his pupils, Ferdinand Ries and Archduke Rudolph, was released by Koch International in 2001. In 2002 Susan Kagan was awarded the Antonín Dvořák Award by the Masaryk Academy of the Arts in Prague for her contribution to Czech musical culture. In 2007 she received the Ira F. Brilliant Lifetime Achievement Award for Beethoven Performance and Studies from the American Beethoven Society. She serves on the Advisory Boards of the American Beethoven Society and the Schubert Society of the United States.

8.572299

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Playing Time  
58:45© & © 2010  
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Booklet notes in English • Kommentar auf Deutsch  
Disc Made in Canada  
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Susan Kagan is an eloquent advocate and sympathetic interpreter of Ferdinand Ries's piano sonatas and sonatinas, on which she is an acknowledged authority. While clearly indebted to his teacher Beethoven, Ries was nonetheless praised by Schumann for his 'remarkable originality' and eagerly explored the expressive potential of the piano, often anticipating the achievements of Chopin or Schubert. '[Ries is] a composer whose music deserves to be heard' (*Fanfare*). Volumes 1–3 are also available (8.570796, 8.570743 and 8.572204).

Ferdinand  
**RIES**  
(1784-1838)

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|--|--------------|
| <b>Sonata in D major, Op. 9, No. 1</b> | <b>30:06</b> |
| 1 Allegro                              | 10:42        |
| 2 Tempo di menuetto ma molto moderato  | 6:49         |
| 3 Theme con variazioni: Allegretto     | 12:35        |
| <b>Sonata in A flat major, Op. 141</b> | <b>28:35</b> |
| 4 Allegro                              | 14:30        |
| 5 Adagio con moto                      | 6:09         |
| 6 Allegro                              | 7:54         |



**Susan Kagan, Piano**

Recorded in the Beethoven-Saal, Hanover, Germany, 28 December 2008

Producer & Editor: Michael Fine • Engineer: Wolf-Dieter Karwatky

Piano by Steinway • Piano tuner & technician: Gerd Finkenstein

Booklet notes: Susan Kagan • Editions: Simrock, Bonn (tracks 1–3); Nägeli, Zurich (tracks 4–6)

Cover photo: Marksburg Castle, Rhineland, Germany (© Walter51 / Dreamstime.com)

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