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Thalberg Revisited

The Piano Music of Sigismund Thalberg, Ian Hominick, piano. Titanic Records Ti-227 [DDD], produced by Jeanne Lippincott
Thalberg: Fantasies on Operas by Verdi, Rossini and Bellini. Francesco Nicolosi, piano. Marco Polo 8.223367 [DDD], produced by Tamás Benedek

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RECORD REVIEWS/ COMPTES RENDUS DE DISQUES

Thalberg Revisited

The Piano Music of Sigismund Thalberg. Ian Hominick, piano. Titanic Records Ti-227 [DDD], produced by Jeanne Lippincott.

Grande Sonate in C minor, Op. 56; Scherzo in C-sharp minor, Op. 31; Nocturne in A-flat Major, Op. 21, No. 1; Nocturne in E major, Op. 28; Tarantelle in C minor, Op. 65.

Thalberg: Fantasies on Operas by Verdi, Rossini and Bellini. Francesco Nicolosi, piano. Marco Polo 8.223367 [DDD], produced by Tamás Benedek.

Grande fantasia de concert sur l'opéra La Traviata de Verdi, Op. 78; Grande fantasia de concert sur l'opéra Il Trovatore de Verdi, Op. 77; Souvenir de Ballo in maschera de Verdi, Op. 81; Souvenir de Rigoletto de Verdi, Op. 82; Fantasia sur l'opéra L'Assedio di Corinto de Rossini, Op. 3; Bellini-Thalberg. Norma: Casta Diva, Op. 70.

Given the infrequency with which one comes across the music of Sigismund Thalberg (1812–71), either in the concert hall or on disk, it is remarkable to have two complementary CDs released in close succession.¹ Ian Hominick's recording is devoted to examples of Thalberg's original compositions, while that of Francesco Nicolosi is the fourth and final instalment of the composer's complete transcriptions and paraphrases.² Both disks contain about sixty minutes of his solo piano music, with no duplication in the recorded repertoire. The listener is thus provided ample opportunity to evaluate aspects of the creative output of one of the most famous piano virtuosos of the nineteenth century.

Thalberg was trained in Vienna, where his privileged upbringing included studies in theory and composition, in addition to piano studies with Sechter and Hummel. Subsequent studies with Moscheles and Kalkbrenner were un-

¹ Scattered examples of Thalberg's music have been recorded in the past. Raymond Lewenthal recorded Thalberg's fantasies upon Rossini's *Moses*, and Rossini's *Barber of Seville* (Op. 33 and Op. 63, respectively) on an Angel LP, S. 36079. Earl Wild recorded the fantasy on Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* (Op. 67) on a Vanguard CD, VCD-72010. Thalberg's *Grande Sonate* was available during the 1970s on a Genesis LP GS 1016, performed by Adrian Ruiz. None of the LP recordings appear to be available at this time.

² The other disks in the Marco Polo series are each devoted to fantasies based on the works of a single composer: Bellini (8.223355), Donizetti (8.223365), and Rossini (8.223366).

dertaken in London and Paris respectively. Thalberg was already a published composer by the age of sixteen and concertizing in Austria, Germany, and England at eighteen. Throughout his active performing career, he enjoyed a respect comparable to that accorded Chopin and Liszt. His technique appears to have been prodigious, as was his ability to produce a wide range of sonorities from the piano. Thalberg is credited with inventing the so-called “three-handed technique” in which a melody is played in the middle register with alternating thumbs while the remaining fingers play accompaniment patterns above and below the melody. This texture was quickly adopted by the leading pianist/composers of the day, and can be found in many works by Liszt. Thalberg did not restrict his concert tours to Europe, and he spent the years 1855–58 in the Americas, where a tour begun in Argentina and Brazil eventually led him as far north as Québec City. Concerts were also presented in Toronto, Hamilton, Kingston, and Montréal. Thalberg retired from the concert stage in 1864 and spent his remaining years in Italy.

While much of Thalberg’s compositional output consists of piano music, his interest in vocal music is reflected in his *Lieder* compositions and his two operas, as well as the “vocal” nature of much of his melodic writing for piano. Much of Thalberg’s solo piano music consists of character pieces, transcriptions, and paraphrases of popular operatic melodies—music designed to be useful for his own concert tours. Likely his best-known work today is the early *Piano Concerto in F minor*, Op. 5, completed when Thalberg was only eighteen years of age.³

Ian Hominick’s recording presents five of Thalberg’s original piano works, and includes his sole example of piano sonata, the *Grande Sonate in C minor*, Op. 56, as well as four shorter pieces. Thalberg clearly meant to impress his audiences with the four-movement sonata when it was published in 1844. Lasting nearly thirty-five minutes in performance, the work places considerable demands upon the pianist, and is very serious in tone. Thalberg’s command over form is readily apparent, as is his ability to develop his themes. Only the choice of secondary themes in the first and last movements, both of which echo the salon rather than the concert hall, proves to disappoint. Chopin’s second piano sonata from 1839 may have served as Thalberg’s model (the third was published the same year as Thalberg’s work), for the order of movements is the same in each. While Thalberg’s work lacks the distinctive melodic profile of Chopin’s sonatas, it does bear the scrutiny of repeated listening and, in the right hands, is a work of considerable excitement.

The remaining works again beg comparison with Chopin’s music. The *Scherzo in C-sharp minor*, Op 31, lacks the feverish agitation of Chopin’s work in the same key, but it is an attractive work that would prove a welcome addition to modern concert programmes. Robert Schumann judged this work to be

³This work has been recorded by Michael Ponti, with Richard Kapp conducting the Westphalian Symphony Orchestra on MMG/Vox Prima MWCD 7151. This concerto, while much indebted to Hummel, demonstrates Thalberg’s buoyant melodies and his developed craftsmanship. Later works demonstrate a more complex harmonic idiom and more complicated figurations, but still reveal the composer’s interest in elegant “vocal” melodies.

Thalberg's best composition to date when it was published in 1841. Similarly, the two nocturnes found on this disk are works of considerable charm which demonstrate Thalberg's melodic skill and his ability to embellish and develop effectively. The *Tarantelle in C minor*, Op. 65, is known today through subsequent arrangements for band and orchestra. It is a piece of such immediate attractiveness that it is surprising that it has dropped from the piano repertoire.

Ian Hominick, originally from Nova Scotia, now resides in Chicago and has an active performing career in addition to teaching at De Paul University. He has won numerous awards, and has broadcast over CBC Radio, Radio-Canada, and the National Public Radio in the United States. He brings both sensitivity and a powerful technique to the performances on this recording. There are minor moments of strain in the finale of the sonata; however, tonal qualities are carefully judged, as are balances between melodies and accompanimental materials. The recording is satisfactory, although the rather studio-bound acoustic robs some of the brilliance from these scores. This is a minor complaint, however, given the high quality of these performances.

The disk by Francesco Nicolosi inhabits a very different world. Fantasies based on operatic themes were highly popular with nineteenth-century audiences who took delight in the familiar operatic tunes clothed in new and virtuoso guises. Thalberg's interest in vocal music made him a natural candidate for the composition of such fantasies. The examples on the present recording reveal him to be inventive and sensitive to the works from which he borrows his melodies. While considerable virtuosity is demanded, it is of secondary importance to the clear statement of the lyrical materials. Comparison with Liszt's operatic fantasies shows Liszt perhaps more interested in developing his borrowed themes in virtuoso settings, while Thalberg presents them less adorned, in settings of glittering elegance. Thalberg's fantasies contain many nocturne-like passages of great beauty. His transcription of the "Casta diva" from Bellini's *Norma* is striking, both for its seeming simplicity and its lyrical elegance.

Francesco Nicolosi is a young Italian pianist who appears to be ideally suited to the challenge of recording these works. He has the requisite virtuosity, tempered with great sensitivity and beauty of tone. Nicolosi has truly learned how to make the piano "sing" and the results are enchanting. The Budapest-based recording is warmly atmospheric without being overly resonant. Either disk can be recommended with enthusiasm; together, they present a well-balanced view of Thalberg's art.

Paul F. Rice