



Dora Pejačević: Complete Symphonic Works

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This is my first encounter with the music of Dora Pejačević. Chandos recorded the piano concerto and the symphony. All the works here have appeared on cpo, variously coupled; the Osnabrück label's recording of the symphony comes from 2008. They have proved to be excellent promoters for her, releasing piano music, chamber music and songs, and two discs of orchestral works.

Pejačević was a Croatian aristocrat, a countess, raised in a beautiful stately mansion, the Neo-baroque Pejačević Castle in Našice. Her father and grandfather held high-ranking positions in the Croatian government. Her father was of Croatian-Hungarian descent, her mother was Hungarian nobility. The family fitted wealthily into the complex demographic of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Dora grew up surrounded by music and literature, and naturally gravitated to the world of the arts. She studied music in Dresden and then in Munich. WW1 interfered, and she moved back to Croatia. After the war she met a Viennese nobleman. Within 18 months of their wedding, she died at 37, shortly after the birth of her son; she succumbed to postpartum sepsis of the kidneys, a dangerous disease often fatal before the invention of antibiotics.

The earliest work here is the Piano Concerto. I agree with Nick Barnard's comment on its lack of provision for the orchestra to ever take the lead. It merely supplies a pleasant but unadventurous cushion of music to support the piano. The piece does not appear to have any of the distinctive character that Pejačević's music developed later. Whilst not so anodyne as Chopin's accompaniments, they are certainly designed for a piano-centric concerto; the orchestra steps back, just giving a neutral backdrop for the soloist to shine.

I read that Pejačević was known to appreciate Rachmaninov's music, but the compositional style in his concertos, where the orchestra is a real partner in the music, outclasses this work, even though he had completed his third concerto four years earlier. But I must be careful here. Rachmaninov was 12 years Pejačević's senior, and received formal musical training from a young age. She emphatically did not: she was largely self-taught until Dresden. She had probably little experience of studying concerted scores of recent composers, so lacked that facet of musical education. It would have helped if the melodic invention had been of a higher order but, to be frank, it is just pleasant.

The next works by date are the orchestral songs *Verwandlung* (it means transformation) and *Liebeslied*. It seems to me from this limited selection of her



songs that she could hold her own with other composers working in a late-Romantic fin de siècle style. I read that Arnold Schoenberg, no less, praised *Verwandlung* but sadly held the typical 19th-century attitude to female composers. He wrote “with the reservation that a woman cannot be a creator of music”. Well, all I can say is that this is a strikingly memorable song, which Annika Schlicht sings expressively. The other songs are not quite in the same league. Still, I am sure all Pejačević’s songs should be given a far greater outing than has been the case so far, not only because of their quality, but because of her groundbreaking contribution to the development of classical music in Croatia.

The Sinfonie in F sharp minor is by far the most impressive work in this collection. Some seven years had elapsed between the Piano Concerto and the symphony’s final version, and what a change! We can hear the far greater sophistication of orchestral sound, and Pejačević’s own melodic style developing into something Croatian. It is difficult to say in just what way it sounds special. Given her Hungarian roots, it may be that I correctly detect traits similar to Bartók’s early, unjustly neglected “piano concertos” – *Rhapsody for Piano and Orchestra Sz27* and *Scherzo Burlesque for Piano and Orchestra Sz28*, from 1905 and 1904 respectively. Whether this comparison is justified or not, no one who likes lushly orchestrated, mildly chromatic, tonal early twentieth-century music should hesitate in making acquaintance with the symphony. They might enjoy the confident sweep of the music, and the appearance of a xylophone and glockenspiel in the third movement.

The Nocturne in C sharp Minor appears in Igor Kuljerić orchestration, used in the 1993 semi-biographical film *Kontessa Dora*, a romanticised account of the composer’s life.

Pejačević’s last orchestral work was the Overture in C sharp minor. The piece makes one regret her early death even more. This vigorous rhythmic work has a striking main theme and what sounds like a multitude of other themes. She creates tension in a short time frame. I wonder what would she have achieved had she lived longer.

The contrast between the Piano Concerto and the Phantasie concertante in D minor could hardly be greater. The orchestra and piano are protagonists, not servant and master as in the earlier work. The orchestration is colourful. The orchestral opening is very striking in its brooding manner, into which the piano steps ready for the 16-minute combat.

I have enjoyed these recordings very much, but I have not heard the competition. Audite’s Hi-Res excellent recording captures the orchestra in a warm acoustic that allows the resolution of orchestra sonorities. The piano is balanced a trifle prominently, but no more so than is the norm. A similar comment applies to the voice/orchestral balance.

Annika Schlicht, aged 36 when she made this recording, has a mature, pleasing voice. The downloaded booklet does not contain any sung texts, so I cannot comment on her interpretation of the poems. (The booklet does give a biography of the composer and the usual biographical details and photos of the performers.) Martina Filjak has an impressive competition history, including First Prize at the Cleveland International Piano Competition in 2009. She is very well recorded here, and gives a positively galvanic performance of the Phantasie.

Staatskapelle Weimar was the first to be founded in the German lands; its precursor ensemble dates from 1482. It has been associated with several distinguished names. The most celebrated period may have been when Franz Liszt was Kapellmeister in

1842-1858 (after Johann Nepomuk Hummel's tenure in 1819-1837). Liszt's activities with the orchestra were highly influential in championing new works and conducting premieres. Here, with conductor Ivan Repušić, they give committed performances of Dora Pejačević's music.



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Dora Pejačević (1885-1923)
Complete Symphonic Works
 Annika Schlicht (mezzo-soprano), Martina Fijak, piano)
 Staatskapelle Weimar / Ivan Repušić
 rec. 2024/25, Staatskapelle Weimar Hall, Weimar, Germany
 Reviewed as a download 96KHz / 24 bit
Audite 23.449 [110]

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Jim Westhead

Contents
 Sinfonie in F sharp minor Op.41 (1916-1917 rev. 1920)
 Nocturne in C sharp major op.50/1, orch. Igor Kuljerić 1980 (1918)
 Overture in C sharp minor Op.49 (1919)
 Phantasie concertante in D minor op.48 (1919)
 Klavierkonzert in G minor Op.33 (1913)
 Verwandlung Op.37b (1915)
 Liebeslied Op.39 (1915)
 Zwei Schmetterlingslieder Op.52 (1920)

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DORA PEJAČEVIĆ
 Complete Symphonic Works
 Annika Schlicht (performer), Martina Fijak (piano), Staatskapelle Weimar, Ivan Repušić

Pejačević: Metamorphosis (Verwandlung), Op. 37b
 Annika Schlicht (performer)
 Staatskapelle Weimar
 Ivan Repušić

Pejačević: Love Song (Liebeslied), Op. 39
 Annika Schlicht (performer)
 Staatskapelle Weimar
 Ivan Repušić

Pejačević: Zwei Schmetterlingslieder, Op. 52
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