

NAXOS

**Heinrich Wilhelm
ERNST**
(1812–1865)

**Erlkönig
Le Carnaval
de Venise
Polyphonic
Studies**

**Josef Špaček,
Violin
Gordon Back,
Piano**



Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst (1812–1865) Music for Violin

Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst was probably born on 8th June, 1812, in the Moravian city of Brno (called Brünn in Ernst's lifetime), part of the nineteenth-century Austrian Empire and today the second largest city in the Czech Republic. Ernst attended the music school at the St Thomas monastery and made his first concert appearance in March 1824. Such was his progress that Ernst's parents agreed to send him to the Vienna Conservatoire for further musical instruction, and here he studied under the well-known pedagogue Joseph Böhm. Ernst's violinistic world was shattered by the advent of Paganini, whom he heard in March 1828, and his immediate ambition was to emulate the trail-blazing Italian master. In 1829 he played for Paganini, reportedly amazing the Italian by playing Paganini's *Caprice No. 9 (La Chasse)* entirely in artificial harmonics. Meeting Paganini during a German tour, Paganini encouraged Ernst to reject an offer of court musician in favour of working as a roving virtuoso. Ernst followed Paganini as he made his way to Paris, attending Paganini's concerts and giving his own concerts several days later in the same cities – Ernst even managed, when possible, to find lodging in rooms adjacent to Paganini's rooms. He arrived in Paris in 1831, where he lodged for a time with the great Norwegian violinist Ole Bull. In 1833 he gave a concert with Chopin, Liszt and others, and in Geneva he appeared on stage with the Irish pianist John Field. In 1837 Ernst and Paganini performed within days of each other in Marseille, and Ernst apparently outplayed the now declining Italian. Recognised now as one of the world's great violinists, Ernst was increasingly becoming known as a fine composer as well. By now he had established his characteristic nomadic lifestyle, never staying in one place more than a few months, a way of life that remained constant even after his marriage. Of Jewish extraction, Ernst was familiar with official discrimination in Moravia and the general anti-semitism current in the Europe of his time and place. Ernst scholar M. W. Rowe describes the "habit of elusiveness" that characterized many Jews in nineteenth-century Europe and which may have been one reason for Ernst's peripatetic lifestyle. He toured Holland, Germany, and the Austrian Empire from 1837 to 1840, playing at Mendelssohn's Gewandhaus in Leipzig (with

Schumann in attendance), before returning to Vienna and Brno. While in Vienna, he met ten-year-old Joseph Joachim, perhaps saving Joachim's future career in music by validating his talent and recommending his own old instructor Böhm. In Paris in 1841 Ernst again participated in a concert with Chopin before setting off on another concert tour through Germany, Poland and back to Paris. In Berlin, besides the usual concertizing, he renewed his friendship with the Mendelssohn family; in Warsaw he was met with an ecstatic reception. Beginning in the 1830s Ernst began to show signs of illness, including extreme paleness, sudden bouts of pain, unaccountable erratic out-of-tune playing, and eventually occasional paralysis. Though his disease cannot be diagnosed with certainty, he may have suffered from acute intermittent porphyria (a rare disorder that interferes with the proper production of haemoglobin). In November 1852 Ernst met the actress Amélie-Siona Levy, and the 41-year-old Ernst married the 22 year-old Amélie in 1854. By 1858 Ernst's health problems necessitated his retirement from the concert stage. He last visited England in 1862-4, where he and Amélie became fast friends of Edward Bulwer Lytton. In April 1864 Ernst suffered a relapse of ill health after a period of gradual improvement, and he and his wife travelled to Paris and then to Nice in September 1864. Ernst died in Nice on 8th October, 1865.

Ernst was one of a long line of violinist-composers who wrote music primarily for their own instrument and often for their own use. Much of his music consists of short salon pieces, including his famous variations *Le Carnaval de Venise* and his *Élégie sur la mort d'un objet chéri*. As is the case with most nineteenth-century violinist-composers, Ernst wrote paraphrases on opera tunes (such as a fantasy based on Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète*) and popular songs. He also wrote several works in larger forms, including the *Concerto Pathétique* and several string quartets. As in the music of Paganini, the technical demands in much of Ernst's output are formidable, and every weapon in the violinist's arsenal is in full display.

Composed in 1841-42, *ErIkönig – Grand Caprice in G minor, Op. 26*, is a transcription for violin alone of Schubert's song. Though written for violin alone, the score

is written partly on two staves, something unusual in a single violin part and a testament to the difficulty of the piece. Played *Presto* throughout until the last bars, the piece begins with rapid double stops with interspersed pizzicato and features a melody line in harmonics above a driving accompaniment in the middle and lower register of the violin.

The *Variations brillantes sur un Thème de Rossini in D major, Op. 4*, was composed about 1829 and is dedicated to the King of France. The theme derives from Rossini's opera *Zelmira*, and the piece consists of an introduction, the theme, and five variations. Rossini's graceful light-hearted theme is a perfect foil for Ernst's technically demanding variations.

The set of *Etudes pour le violon à plusieurs reprises (Mehrstimmige Etüden or Polyphonic Studies)*, again for violin alone, is among Ernst's most important works. Written towards the end of his life in 1862-64, the set of études was first published in 1864, and each of the six pieces is dedicated to a leading violin virtuoso among Ernst's contemporaries. *Study 1, Rondino scherzo in F major*, is dedicated to Ferdinand Laub. The jaunty rondo tune alternates with a lyrical theme accompanied by flowing sixteenth notes (quavers). *Study 2, Allegretto in A major*, is dedicated to Prosper Sainton and features much double-stopping, pizzicato accompaniment of the melody, and difficult off-the-beat double-stops. Ernst considered *Study 3, Terzetto (Allegro moderato e tranquillo) in E major*, dedicated to Joseph Joachim, as the best piece of the set. A passionate and lyrical piece, it includes numerous passages in double-stopped thirds and sixths. *Study 4, Allegro risoluto in C major*, is dedicated to Henri Viextemps. This étude includes only occasional double-stops; it is rather a study in nearly continuous sixteenth notes (quavers) in the style of a *moto perpetuo*, and demands an evenness of tone made famous by Viextemps. *Study 5, Air de ballet (Allegretto con giusto) in E flat major*, is dedicated to Joseph Helmesberger, and features a balletic theme enhanced by double-stops. *Study 6, Variations de Concert sur l'air national irlandais (The Last Rose of Summer) in G major*, is dedicated to Antonio Bazzini. This study is the most complex

of the set and includes an introduction, theme, four variations, and a finale. The variations feature double-stopped sixteenth notes (quavers) (first variation); melody accompanied by fast arpeggios (second variation); double-stopped counterpoint, including simultaneous octaves and tenths (third variation); and melody played pizzicato or in harmonics accompanied by fast arpeggios. Rowe wrote that the finale is a summing-up of violin technique: "scales on one string, double harmonics, rapid artificial harmonics, and pizzicato chords."

The *Feuille d'album pour violon avec accompagnement de piano in D major* is an arrangement of the piano piece *L'art de phraser, Op. 16, No. 14* by Stephen Heller (1813-1888). Ernst and Heller had collaborated on a set of pieces entitled *Pensées fugitives* (finished in 1842). The *L'art de phraser* dates from the same time, and in accordance with Heller's dislike of extreme virtuosity, the piece is gently lyrical and eschews virtuoso adornment.

Élégie sur la mort d'un objet chéri, composed in the mid 1830s, was one of the nineteenth-century's best-known violin pieces (it is mentioned in Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata*), and is often played, as in this performance, with an introduction by Louis Spohr (originally part of the *Adagio* from Spohr's *Sixth Violin Concerto*). Ernst's often lachrymose nature is well displayed in this melancholic and passionate piece, and there is some evidence that it is a musical expression of his distress at finding an early love dead on his return to Vienna in 1831/2.

Trio pour un violon in D major, a piece for violin alone, was composed in 1837 and consists of two bowed melody lines accompanied by left-hand pizzicato.

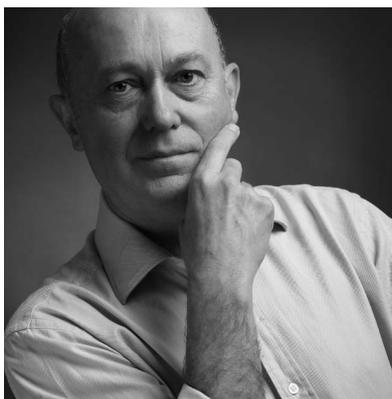
The final piece on the programme, also dating from 1837, is *Le Carnaval de Venise – Variations burlesques, Op. 18*. After an *Andante* introduction and a statement of the theme, 25 variations follow, displaying all the rich technique at Ernst's command – double stops, artificial harmonics, *spiccato*, sustained playing on the G string, and a general élan that was the heart of his art.

Bruce R. Schueneman



Josef Špaček

Czech violinist Josef Špaček is fast emerging as one of the most talented virtuosos of his generation. He studied with Ida Kavafian and Jaime Laredo at the Curtis Institute of Music and Itzhak Perlman at The Juilliard School. He was a laureate of the International Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels (2012), won the Michael Hill International Violin Competition (2009) and received Third Prize at the Carl Nielsen International Violin Competition (2008). He combines a flourishing solo career with the position of concert-master of the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra. As a soloist he makes guest appearances with orchestras in Europe, the United States and Asia, including the Philadelphia Orchestra, Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, Prague Philharmonia, Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra, Kansas City Symphony and Queensland Symphony Orchestra. He has appeared as a soloist under conductors such as Jiří Bělohlávek, Christoph Eschenbach, Manfred Honeck, James DePreist, Asher Fisch, Roy Goodman, Jakub Hrůša, Eliahu Inbal and Rossen Milanov. As a recitalist he regularly performs at music festivals around the world.



Gordon Back

Gordon Back's distinguished career as a pianist has taken him all over the world, performing and recording with artists such as Menuhin, Milstein, Vengerov, Rosand, Suk, Kavakos and the Cleveland Quartet. His recordings include the Bach-Schumann *Sonatas* and *Partitas* with Jean-Jacques Kantorow, which received a French Grand Prix du Disque, the Schubert *Arpeggione* and *Rachmaninov* Sonatas with cellist Daniel Lee, for Decca, and a series of recordings with clarinetist Emma Johnson. Gordon Back was one of the youngest ever professors to join the faculty of the Guildhall School of Music (London) in 1974. He gives regular master-classes as guest professor at the Cleveland Institute of Music, Curtis Institute and the Royal Northern College of Music. In the summer he teaches in Courchevel, France and Valdres, Norway. He is a jury member at many international competitions and artistic advisor of the Hattori Foundation. Gordon Back is Artistic Director of the Menuhin International Violin Competition held in Cardiff 2008, Oslo 2010, Beijing 2012 and Austin, Texas in 2014.

The Moravian Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst is a dazzling example of the nineteenth-century violinist-composer, of whom the greatest was Ernst's sometime rival, Paganini. Indeed it was the Italian who persuaded Ernst to follow the life of a touring virtuoso, in which rôle he was to perform with the greatest musicians in Europe, earning the admiration of men such as Chopin and Mendelssohn. The *Elégie sur la mort d'un objet chéri*, mentioned by Tolstoy in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, was one of the best-known violin works of the century, and the *Polyphonic Studies* offer a compendium of violin technique on a par with the works of Paganini himself.

Heinrich Wilhelm ERNST (1812–1865)

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|---|---|
| 1 Erlkönig – Grand Caprice, Op. 26 (after Schubert, arr. for solo violin) 4:07 | 9 Feuillet d'album (after <i>L'art de phraser, Op. 16, No. 14</i> by Stephen Heller; arr. for violin and piano) 2:28 |
| 2 Variations brillantes sur un Thème de Rossini, Op. 4 14:47 | 10 Elégie sur la mort d'un objet chéri (with Introduction by Louis Spohr) 6:45 |
| 3 I. Rondino scherzo 4:40 | 11 Trio pour un violon 0:54 |
| 4 II. Allegretto 2:09 | 12 Le Carnaval de Venise – Variations burlesques sur la canzonetta <i>Cara mia mamma</i> , Op. 18 15:49 |
| 5 III. Terzetto 6:35 | |
| 6 IV. Allegro risoluto 3:12 | |
| 7 V. Air de ballet 3:07 | |
| 8 VI. Moderato, "Die letzte Rose" (The Last Rose of Summer) 8:53 | |

Josef Špaček, Violin • Gordon Back, Piano 2, 9, 10, 12

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 (12) • Cover portrait of the composer by Chai Ben-Shan