

GRAND
PIANO

SZCZERBIŃSKI
COMPLETE PIANO WORKS • 2

GIORGIO KOUKL

ALFONS SZCZERBIŃSKI (1858–1895)

COMPLETE PIANO WORKS • 2

GIORGIO KOUKL, *piano*

Catalogue Number: GP884
Recording Date: 24 October 2021
Recording Venue: Studio Bottega del pianoforte, Lugano, Switzerland
Producer: Giorgio Koukl
Engineer and Editor: Michael Rast
Piano: Steinway, Model D
Piano Technician: Lukas Fröhlich
Booklet Notes: Wojciech Czemplik and Giorgio Koukl
English Translation: Bartek Świetlik
Artist Photographs: Chiara Solari and Zdeněk Žalský
Cover Art: Tony Price: *La faune et la flore study 8*
www.tonyprice.org

This album is dedicated to Guido Erluison.
The recording was realised with the help of the Festival Musica Sacromontana, Gostyń, Poland.

S T O W A R Z Y S Z E N I E
MIŁOŚNIKÓW MUZYKI ŚWIĘTOGÓRSKIEJ

Josefa^{IM.} Zeidlera

1	POLONEZ IN B FLAT MAJOR, OP. 13 Maestoso	08:02
2	RONDEAU IN F MAJOR, OP. 1 Vivace	06:19
	3 ROMANCES SANS PAROLES, OP. 8	09:15
3	No. 1. Souvenir	04:01
4	No. 2. Désir du Printemps	02:12
5	No. 3. Méditation	02:59
6	TEMA E VARIAZIONI IN G MINOR (ed. G. Koukl [b. 1953])	08:04
7	CHANSON SANS PAROLES IN E MINOR	01:44
8	CAPRICCIO IN D MINOR (ed. G. Koukl)	03:39
9	CHANSON SANS PAROLES IN A FLAT MAJOR, OP. 16	02:55
10	ANDANTE CON VARIAZIONI IN F MAJOR (ed. G. Koukl)	12:05
11	CHANSON SANS PAROLES IN C SHARP MINOR, OP. 31 Andante	05:51
12	FUGA IN C MAJOR (ed. G. Koukl)	03:15

WORLD PREMIÈRE RECORDINGS

TOTAL TIME: 61:52

ALFONS SZCZERBIŃSKI (1858–1895) COMPLETE PIANO WORKS • 2

The Composer

The second half of the 19th century was a time of upheaval, certainly in Europe. Giuseppe Garibaldi was forging the Italian state into its modern form, Otto von Bismarck was striving for a new, unified Germany. The global supremacy of Europe was rising to a new magnitude.

Poland did not partake in these developments at the political level, for the simple reason that the Polish state had disappeared from the map of Europe in the late 18th century, its lands partitioned among three overbearing neighbours: Russia, what was then Austro-Hungary, and Prussian-led Germany. Yet Polish culture remained alive, if subdued, and Polish artists partook in the general awakening of national awareness, creating works which, while rooted in the European tradition, featured uniquely Polish accents. Maria Szymanowska and Fryderyk Chopin in the realm of music... Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, and Kamil Cyprian Norwid in literature... Jan Matejko and Henryk Siemiradzki for the visual arts... These personages may have been Austrian, German, or Russian subjects and maintained cosmopolitan lifestyles, but they were Poles at heart, as eloquently attested to by their works.

Gostyń, Alfons Szczerbiński's home town in the western part of Poland then under German control, remained on the periphery of these currents. The composer was born on 2 April 1858 to Franciszek, a senior court clerk, and Julia née Kostrzewska. His teenage years were spent in the slightly larger town of Śrem (known in German as Schrimm) not far away, where he matriculated at the Gymnasium in 1870. Alfons Szczerbiński's first music instructor was most probably an organist by the name of Kraszkwicz. The boy remained under his tutelage only for half a year, but he was already demonstrating creative talents; in fact, Szczerbiński was already jotting down musical ideas at the ripe old age of 7, when he composed *Phantasy*.

Szczerbiński had the good fortune to come of age in a family which loved music, and in an environment where intellectual pursuits were encouraged. As a pupil of the Śrem Gymnasium, he took an active part in the musical

life of the city, appearing as an organist and playing in school concerts. Yet his artistic talents were not matched by physical stamina, and his parents – concerned at his persistently weak health – forbade Szczerbiński from continuing his education further afield than Śrem.

Only once his father passed away in 1877, and once he graduated from the Gymnasium, did Alfons Szczerbiński manage to head out to Berlin. Alas, he cut short his studies at the conservatory after only two years on account of financial problems. This disappointment was soon relegated to the past, however; in 1880, at only 22, he successfully sat his entrance auditions to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, playing his own pieces before a high commission headed by director Joachim himself. The professors were sufficiently impressed, also by his renditions of Johann Sebastian Bach's Fugues from *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier* in a variety of keys, that they admitted him to the Academy with a scholarship of double the usual amount and a benediction to the effect that, someday, he might become the new Beethoven. Szczerbiński duly continued to train as a composer under the tutelage of Edward Grell and Waldemar Bargiel, recognised teachers of the time, and completed his degree course in 1883.

Upon returning to Poland, Szczerbiński joined the household of Count Plater in Niekłań by Radom, working as a music teacher. Far from neglecting his compositional work, he turned out a steady succession of sonatas, chamber pieces, and compositions for vocals and piano. He regularly travelled west to visit his family, now settled in Śrem.

In 1893, Szczerbiński relocated to Kraków with plans to teach music to children of the aristocratic houses. This proceeded well enough, and he did not seem to complain about lack of work, but his ambitions as a composer and pianist remained unsatisfied. With time, Szczerbiński seems to have grown discouraged – his application for a teaching position at the Kraków Conservatory was rejected, and he was suffering money troubles again – and he began contemplating a withdrawal from worldly matters into religion. Father Łubieński, a Redemptorist, was doing his best to encourage the musician along this spiritual route. The two had an appointment to meet in Stary Sącz for another serious talk during which the friar would presumably renew his exhortations that Szczerbiński take his vows. But this was not to be – Szczerbiński suffered fume inhalation from a defective heating installation at his Stary Sącz lodgings and, rather than at Father Łubieński's monastery, ended up at his sister's home back

in Śrem, more dead than alive. His health went from bad to worse, and he died on 25 March 1895.

The name of Alfons Szczerbiński is not a household one outside specialist circles. Of the rare mentions of his work in the general press, we might cite this by Dr K. Zieliński, writing in *Dziennik Poznański*, a daily in the western part of the newly independent Poland in which Gostyń and Śrem are located, in an issue from March 1932:

[Szczerbiński's] outlooks and penchants were of a conservative nature. His talent assumed such an orientation already during his preparatory studies, when he developed a marked predilection for the works of Bach and of the classics, Haydn and Mozart chief among them. His studies in Berlin, under masters such as Bargiel and Grell – representatives of likewise conservative leanings – could only affirm him in these convictions of his. Thus, his *oeuvre* hews to a classic line. His works in bigger formats are particularly redolent of the classic masters. The Polish accent is very seldom heard in his works. We can discern it in the slow passages of his sonatas, and also in his short pieces, where it manifests itself in the effusive, passionate melodic lines. His *Grand Polonaise*, composed to mark the anniversary of the 3 May [1791] Constitution, is suffused with this Polish spirit; this is simply an exception in the *oeuvre* of Szczerbiński, being as it is a piece teeming with virtuoso flights of fancy not heard, certainly not to this extent, in his other piano compositions. Here, [Szczerbiński] departs far beyond the classicist framework, moving in the direction plotted by Chopin and by Liszt.'

Of course, by the time the cultured readers of *Dziennik Poznański* were reading these musings, Szczerbiński's heritage had been severely depleted. Many of his compositions did not survive the First World War; as far as we can surmise, Szczerbiński himself burned a significant number of his late pieces.

The known *oeuvre* of Alfons Szczerbiński largely consists of works for piano. Even this relatively modest sampling, however, identifies Szczerbiński as a prominent Polish talent in the Romantic mould who took it upon himself to compose music for poems by Adam Asnyk, Michał Bałucki, or Friedrich von Matthisson (some of the latter's poems were also set to music by Ludwig van Beethoven and by Franz Schubert).

As far as we can surmise, Szczerbiński composed most, if not all of his pieces for piano within a period of ten years. Only a few of his manuscripts are actually dated, and some of these are rough sketches rather than finished works. It would be hard to trace any significant evolution between the earlier pieces and the later ones. Also, it would be tempting to say that the composer made do with working titles – the majority of Szczerbiński's compositions for piano are entitled simply *Chansons sans paroles* ('Songs Without Words'). They are redolent of Mendelssohn, Liszt, and Chopin while, at the same time, displaying certain touches which seem to be Szczerbiński's own. In a text published in *Przegląd Poznański* in 1986, we read:

'[Bach] appealed to him with his deep harmonic combinations and his logical development of a simple musical motif, and Mozart – with that perfect polishing of form and that luminescence and joy of his music which Alfons Szczerbiński loved beyond all measure. His piano technique was quite elaborate. The collection of Bach Fugues and Preludes entitled *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier* was his daily bread, he played almost all of them from memory [...] His playing was highly artistic, always remarkable for its intelligence and diligence.'

In death as in life, Alfons Szczerbiński was blessed with a supportive family. On 4 September 1931, the Poznań studio of Polish Radio aired a programme dedicated to the composer, and a number of his pieces were performed by none other than his niece, the pianist Maria Szczerbińska. It is largely thanks to the latter's perseverance that approximately 65 Szczerbiński compositions (13 in print, the rest in manuscript form) were preserved through the wholesale destruction of the Second World War.

Maria Szczerbińska's abiding dream was that, someday, her composer uncle might have a homecoming of sorts to Gostyń, in the form of a museum to which she hoped to bequeath her treasured family heirlooms. In the event, Szczerbiński's music is preserved quite nearby, at the Święta Góra oratory just outside the Gostyń town limits. Once again, a serendipitous family connection was involved: between 1945 and 1948, and again between 1955 and 1958, the monastery of St Philip Neri housed at Święta Góra was headed by Stanisław Szczerbiński, whose general love of music which, as it were, is part and parcel of his job description as a member of the order was combined with a soft spot for the works of his forebear.

Barbara Hesse-Bukowska, the accomplished pianist and teacher – winner of the second prize in the Chopin Competition of 1949, had this to say after hearing the premieres of Alfons Szczerbiński's compositions for piano:

'Seemingly simple music, not too complicated, but when one listens to a good performance of it, its melodies and magnificent feel for phrasing are captivating. As a composer of music for the piano, Szczerbiński is a representative of the brilliant style. In this, he is not much different from his contemporaries. This wasn't one to forge new paths, one for the avant-garde; rather, he was an earnest, sensitive, and talented artist (...) equal in all things to renowned European composers along the lines of Hummel, Field, or the later Romantics.'

Wojciech Czemplik

Translated from Polish by Bartek Świetlik

The Music

Alfons Szczerbiński's conservative outlook as a composer and his attraction to the musical styles of the past – in particular to the work of Bach, Haydn and Mozart – can be observed throughout his oeuvre. As Dr K. Zieliński observed in his press review of Szczerbiński the composer (cited on page 6): 'The Polish accent is very seldom heard in his works.' However, there are exceptions, the most obvious being the *Polonez, Op. 13*, which stands alone among Szczerbiński's piano pieces as being closer in spirit and style to the piano music of Chopin and Liszt. Dedicated 'to the memory of the first Polish Constitution of 3rd May 1791', the *Polonez* was probably written to commemorate the centenary of this milestone in Poland's history. Poland's was the first constitution in Europe and, after the United States Constitution, the second in the world. Its establishment remains a point of huge national pride among Polish citizens, and unsurprisingly Szczerbiński wanted to mark the occasion through his music. *Polonez* is vigorous, rhythmically trenchant and, with its flights of pianistic brilliance and virtuosic octave leaps, perfectly in-line with similar works by Chopin.

Rondeau, Op. 1, while not Szczerbiński's first composition, is the piece he deemed worthy of the designation 'opus 1'. Written in Classical rondo form, it is dedicated to 'Monsieur le Comte Sigismond Plater', head of the noble Polish family for whom Szczerbiński worked for a time as a private piano teacher. The F major theme is interpolated by two contrasting sections and ends with a brilliant coda. The style is very traditional, sometimes even recalling a young Haydn.

The *Trois Romances sans paroles, Op. 8* each bear their own title: *Souvenir*, *Désir du Printemps* and *Méditation*. The mood throughout is highly romantic although the work is not without surprises. *Souvenir*, in A minor, is the most structurally complex of the three: having reached its conventional ending there follows a surprisingly complicated coda, leading into an unexpected and highly refined A major close. *Désir du Printemps* is based around a chromatic ascending theme with an intricate harmonic structure requiring the pianist to divide the melody between the left and right hands. Szczerbiński, who was an excellent pianist, would have been familiar with the techniques required of the player. The last piece, *Méditation*, is a slow melody, accompanied by left-hand triplets, which rapidly grows into a type of chorale.

Tema e variazioni was extremely difficult to decipher because the only existing manuscript pages have suffered major damage. Only thanks to Szczerbiński's tendency to work with the thematic material in a predictable way, and with many repeated passages, was I able to complete the missing bars. The variations, despite being quite distinct from one another, tend to flow from one to the next without clear distinction.

The *Chansons sans paroles* ('Songs Without Words') that constitute most of Szczerbiński's piano works are reminiscent of Mendelssohn, Liszt, and Chopin. This example, though brief (like many of Szczerbiński's piano pieces), is intense and full of dramatic colours. Its main melody is built around an E minor triplet theme.

Capriccio was probably intended as a brilliant, toccata-style virtuoso piece. It is characterised by sudden changes of mood and passages that begin *pianissimo* and end in a burst of pianistic fireworks. Unfortunately, the middle section has not survived the ravages of time.

Chanson sans paroles, Op. 16 was probably written as a companion piece to the *Chanson sans paroles*, although there is insufficient evidence to list both works under the same opus number. The two pieces have stylistic elements in common and were written on the same type of manuscript paper. The music builds upon a slow, dawdling theme with harmonic shifts that begin in A flat major and drift as far as B flat minor, demonstrating Szczerbiński's immense capacity for harmonic fantasy. The delicate, 'mist-like' ending seems to dissolve into a series of ethereal ascending chords.

Szczerbiński's last *Chanson sans paroles, Op. 31*, is the most complex of all the composer's piano works. From the outset, the unusual choice of C sharp minor implies a different approach. This is the most experimental of the composer's piano works, in which the beautiful theme is housed within a rondo-like form, interspersed with three secondary themes, and ends with a splendid *Allegro con fuoco* coda.

The *Andante con variazioni* is, at over twelve minutes' duration, the longest composition on this recording. The slow, sad F major theme bears some similarity to that of the *Tema e variazioni*. Szczerbiński explores the theme through a variety of rhythmic variants, but as with the *Tema e variazioni* the individual variations flow from one to the next. In terms of musical structure, the *Andante con variazioni* is the most complex of Szczerbiński's piano

works. Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* are clearly the model here, but the fact that this manuscript, too, is badly damaged means we are unlikely to ever know how Szczerbiński planned to complete the work. The coda, which re-uses the original theme, is extended and arranged in such a way as to allow the piece to conclude with a very delicate, clockwork-style finale.

From his youth and throughout his life, Szczerbiński stretched himself by writing complex contrapuntual musical essays. There exist several dozen manuscript pages of these exercises, although rarely did he complete them. One of the earliest such studies is the *Fuga* that concludes this volume. It is the only surviving manuscript dating from Szczerbiński's youth: the handwriting is clearly immature, as is the command of harmony, and even the instrumentation is missing. Yet in other aspects it is surprisingly mature – in the unusual harmonic solutions he comes up with, and in his quite free treatment of the fugue, which in this example is closer to a *fugato*.

Inside the monastery of Gostyń in Poland there reside many more pages of piano music by Alfons Szczerbiński, but the material is fragmented, damaged or incomplete. Unless more reliable sources can be found, there is little chance of reviving this music. One hope is that other manuscripts from this fascinating composer could yet be discovered in Berlin and Kraków, where research has not yet been undertaken, and where there is a chance that unknown source material – or at least other versions of known material – will help shed more light into Szczerbiński's intriguing harmonic universe.

Giorgio Koukl

GIORGIO KOUKL

Giorgio Koukl is a pianist/harpsichordist and composer. He was born in Prague in 1953, and studied there at the State Music School and Conservatory. He continued his studies at both the Conservatories of Zürich and Milan, where he took part in the masterclasses of Nikita Magaloff, Jacques Février and Stanislas Neuhaus, and with Rudolf Firkušný, friend and advocate of Czech composer Bohuslav Martinů. It was through Firkušný that Koukl first encountered Martinů's music, prompting him to search out his compatriot's solo piano works. Since then he has developed these into an important part of his concert repertoire and is now considered one of the world's leading interpreters of Martinů's piano music, having recorded that composer's complete solo piano music, together with five discs of Martinů's vocal music and two discs of his piano concertos. As a logical continuation of this work, Koukl has recorded the complete solo piano works of Paul Le Flem, Alexander Tcherepnin, Arthur Lourié, Vítězslava Kaprálová, Witold Lutosławski, and, more recently, Alexandre Tansman and Tibor Harsányi.

www.koukl.com




GIORGIO KOUKL
© Zdeněk Žalský

STEINWAY & S



ALFONS SZCZERBIŃSKI

ALFONS SZCZERBIŃSKI (1858–1895)

COMPLETE PIANO WORKS • 2

Polish composer Alfons Szczerbiński was a Romantic who revered Bach, Haydn and Mozart above all others. Many of his scores were lost during the First World War or destroyed by the composer himself. His most extrovert music exudes the panache and rhythmic brio of Chopin whilst his series of *Chansons sans paroles* display a flair for harmonic fantasy and melodic beauty reminiscent of Mendelssohn. Giorgio Koukl's second volume of Szczerbiński's complete piano music reveals yet more discoveries by this unjustly neglected composer.



GIORGIO KOUKL

1	POLONEZ IN B FLAT MAJOR, OP. 13	08:02
2	RONDEAU IN F MAJOR, OP. 1	06:19
3–5	3 ROMANCES SANS PAROLES, OP. 8	09:15
6	TEMA E VARIAZIONI IN G MINOR	08:04
7	CHANSON SANS PAROLES IN E MINOR	01:44
8	CAPRICCIO IN D MINOR	03:39
9	CHANSON SANS PAROLES IN A FLAT MAJOR, OP. 16	02:55
10	ANDANTE CON VARIAZIONI IN F MAJOR	12:05
11	CHANSON SANS PAROLES IN C SHARP MINOR, OP. 31	05:51
12	FUGA IN C MAJOR	03:15

WORLD PREMIÈRE RECORDINGS

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 61:52



SCAN FOR MORE
INFORMATION



© & © 2022 HNH International Ltd. Manufactured in Germany. Unauthorised copying, hiring, lending, public performance and broadcasting of this recording is prohibited. Booklet notes in English. Distributed by Naxos.

GP884

