TOCCATA CLASSICS

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TOCCATA CLASSICS

Julius RÖNTGEN

Chamber Music Volume One

Music for Violin and Piano I

Violin Sonata in E minor, Op. 40
Romanze in G minor
Sonata Trilogica
Aus Jotunheim
Phantasie for solo violin

Atsuko Sahara, violin
John Lenehan, piano

FIRST RECORDINGS

JULIUS RÖNTGEN, CHAMBER MUSIC, VOLUME ONE – WORKS FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO I

by Malcolm MacDonald

Considering his prominence in the development of Dutch concert music, and that he was considered by many of his most distinguished contemporaries to possess a compositional talent bordering on genius, the neglect that enveloped the huge output of Julius Röntgen for nearly 70 years after his death seems well-nigh inexplicable, or explicable only to the kind of aesthetic view that had heard of him as stylistically conservative, and equated conservatism as uninteresting and therefore not worth investigating. The recent revival of interest in his works has revealed a much more complex picture, which may be further filled in by the contents of the present CD.

A distant relative of the physicist Conrad Röntgen,[1] the discoverer of X-rays, Röntgen was born in 1855 into a highly musical family in Leipzig, a city with a musical tradition that stretched back to J. S. Bach himself in the first half of the eighteenth century, and that had been a byword for musical excellence and eminence, both in performance and training, since Mendelssohn's directorship of the Gewandhaus Orchestra and the Leipzig Conservatoire in the 1830s and '40s. Röntgen's violinist father Engelbert, originally from Deventer in the Netherlands, was a member of the Gewandhausorchester and its concertmaster from 1873. His German mother was the pianist Pauline Klengel, sister of the composer Julius Klengel (father of the cellist-composer of the same name), who became his nephew's principal tutor; the whole family belonged to the circle around the composer and conductor Heinrich von Herzogenberg and his wife Elisabet, whose twin passions were the revival of works by Bach and the music of their close friend Johannes Brahms. Among Julius' first piano teachers were Carl Reinecke, the

[1] Conrad's grandfather and Julius' great-grandfather were brothers.

John Lenehan has made more than sixty CDs, most recently the fourth volume of a complete edition of John Ireland's piano music on Naxos. This final disc in the series includes the Piano Concerto in which he is joined by the RLPO conducted by John Wilson. His other solo recordings include three discs for Sony Classical of minimalist piano works, a disc of Erik Satie (for Classic FM) and a *Gramophone* award-winning recording for Naxos, with the Ulster Orchestra, of Michael Nyman's Piano Concerto.

John is also active as a composer and has written and arranged for Angelika Kirchschlager, Kennedy, Julian Lloyd Webber, Tasmin Little and Emma Johnson. Recent writing projects include *Keynotes* – four books of piano repertoire published by Faber Music, each containing a new Lenehan work – and a collection of original pieces for flute and piano called *Little Gems*, published by Schott.

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Atsuko Sahara started playing the violin at the age of four. She graduated from Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music (Tokyo Geidai) with a Master of Arts degree. After studying with Kazuki Sawa, she went to Vienna for two years to continue her studies with Johannes Meissl at the Joseph Haydn Institut für Kammermusik und Spezialensembles. She was a prize-winner at the Allegro Vivo International Chamber Music Festival in 2001 and at the Foval Stradivarius Competition in Tokyo in 2003, and won the first prize at the Uralsk International Violin Competition in Kazakhstan in 2004. Her debut CD, with music by Dvořák, Matsushita, Wieniawski and Ysaÿe, was recorded with John Lenehan on the Quartz label. She has given recitals at the Newport Music Festival in the USA and the Lake District Summer Music festival in England as well as in India, Japan, Kazakhstan and Scotland. She is a member of the Ensemble of Tokyo and Geidai Philharmonia and has given concerts in various parts of the world.

John Lenehan's performances and recordings have been acclaimed throughout the world. As a soloist he has appeared with leading orchestras at home and abroad. His innovative recital programmes often include film-projection and jazz repertoire. In a performing career spanning more than 30 years John has collaborated with many leading instrumentalists and is recognised as an outstanding accompanist and chamber musician. During the past few years he has appeared in major concert halls in Amsterdam, New York, Salzburg, Seoul, Shanghai, Tokyo, Toronto, Vienna and Washington. Recent performances have included Mozart and Shostakovich concerti with the Sinfonia Varsovia at the Evian Festival and Beethoven with the Symphony Orchestra of India in Mumbai. He recently returned to India in 2011 and performed in China with Tasmin Little.

composer and director of the Gewandhaus concerts. He also studied harmony and counterpoint with Moritz Hauptmann in Leipzig and composition with Schubert's friend Franz Lachner in Munich. But despite having Conservatoire teachers he never studied at the Leipzig Conservatoire, as might have been expected. Röntgen was educated by his parents and grandparents and was considered a child prodigy, performing his own compositions regularly not only in Leipzig but in such centres as Düsseldorf and Hamburg. At this early period his stylistic sympathies leaned more to the 'New German' school of Liszt, to whom he was introduced at the age of fourteen, but before long he came under the spell of Brahms, whom he first met in 1874 and who had a profound effect on many of his early compositions. The young Röntgen was indeed a precocious *Wunderkind*: like that of the young Mendelssohn or Korngold, his early music is almost preposterously assured, but in Röntgen's case with Brahms as an obvious model. They reveal a composer who moves within the Brahmsian orbit as naturally as breathing, but whose own innate creative gifts are so strong that he seldom fails to produce delightful music of character and distinction, albeit utterly unabashed about its antecedents. Brahms, who was fond of Röntgen and esteemed his music, once commented that he had 'remained a child, so innocent, pure, frank, enthusiastic',[3] which certainly seems to be true of the unforced spontaneity of his creative gifts.

In January 1878, at the age of 22, he accepted a post as a piano-teacher in Amsterdam, and from this small beginning rapidly became one of the most important figures in Dutch musical life. He was soon conductor of the Excelsior Choral Society and the Felix Meritis orchestral concerts, and enthusiastically engaged in introducing Brahms' music to Holland. As a pianist he appeared in Brahms' B flat Piano Concerto under the composer's baton; he also conducted such novelties as the first Dutch performance of Bach's B minor Mass. Writing to the critic Eduard Hanslick in spring 1880 about musical life in Holland, Brahms commented that 'Röntgen […] was a very curious *Wunderkind* and has meanwhile become a very proficient, finely inspired musician'.[2] In 1884 he co-founded the Amsterdam Conservatory, and appeared in concert with many leading soloists

[2] Letter to Clara Schumann, February 1896, in Berthold Litzmann (ed.), *Clara Schumann – Johannes Brahms: Briefe aus den Jahren 1853–1896*, Breitkopf und Härtel, Hamburg, 1927, Vol. 2, pp. 616–17. Brahms had just attended a performance of Schumann's *Dichterliebe* in which Röntgen was the accompanist: 'every tone and every chord sounded as if it had been struck with especial love. He is moreover a quite exceptional and most lovable man'.

[3] *Johannes Brahms. Life and Letters* selected and annotated by Styra Avins, translated by Joseph Eisinger and Styra Avins, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, p. xxx.

of the day, including Joseph Joachim, Carl Flesch and Pablo Casals; he also established a close friendship with Donald Tovey at Edinburgh University. Perhaps the decisive friendship of Röntgen's life, apart from that with Brahms, was that with Edvard Grieg, which began in 1883, eight years after their first meeting. There was a high degree of temperamental affinity between the two men, who often holidayed together and kept up a voluminous correspondence.[4] After Grieg's death Röntgen would eventually publish a book about him,[5] and also produced a completion and performing version of Grieg's unfinished Second String Quartet. Grieg's treatment of Norwegian folk-music gave Röntgen an example which he followed in working with Dutch folk-material. He also spent many holidays in Denmark and became fluent in Danish.

At the end of World War I one of Röntgen's sons[6] was called up for military service by the Germans, since Röntgen was still technically a German citizen. Another of his sons emigrated to the USA and joined the US army. In 1919 Röntgen himself adopted Dutch citizenship, though he continued to feel affection for Germany and, improbably, struck up a friendship with the ex-Kaiser Wilhelm II who after his abdication lived in Holland, at Doorn near Utrecht.

As a composer, Röntgen was extremely prolific. He is reputed to have composed at least 25 symphonies (though only 21 survive), fifteen solo concerti, a double concerto for violin and cello, a triple concerto for violin, viola and cello, and two concertos for string quartet and orchestra, 32 or more string quartets, sixteen string trios, fourteen piano trios, many sonatas for his string-player sons, as well as works in almost every other genre, including a cantata on Goethe's *Faust*, a monodrama to a text by August Strindberg and numerous works based on Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish and even Irish folktunes. It was Grieg, in an encomium of his friend, who said that Röntgen's music was more powerful than the X-rays discovered by his famous relative, because it went 'right through the bone'.[7] Röntgen's music is certainly the work of a powerful creative intellect,

[4] Published as Finn Benestad and Hanna de Vries Stavland (eds.), *Edvard Grieg und Julius Röntgen, Briefwechsel 1883–1907*, Koninklijke Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis, Utrecht, 1997.

[5] Röntgen's *Grieg* (J. Philip Kruseman, The Hague, 1930) is essentially an edition of the letters Grieg sent him, with the inclusion of some recollections.

[6] Röntgen had six sons, five of whom were musicians. The pleasure he took in writing music for family performances goes some way to explaining his enormous output of chamber music.

[7] In an article in *Afternposten* on 2 March 1907, on the occasion of a visit by Röntgen to Christiania; *cf.* Jurjen Vis, *Gaudeamus: Het leven van Julius Röntgen (1855–1932), componist en musicus*, Waanders Uitgevers, Zwolle, 2007, pp. 225–26.

first appearance, followed by a contrapuntal invention over a D pedal-point. The music eventually flows into a tranquil coda, in which motto-theme, lament and Bachian melody are all heard, singly or in combination.

Dated 12 August 1921, Röntgen's ***Phantasie* for solo violin** was composed at Taufers in South Tyrol. Divided into four movements played without a break, it has something of the character of a sonata for unaccompanied violin. Perhaps surprisingly, in view of his own Bachian leanings, unlike the unaccompanied violin works written only a few years previously by Max Reger, Röntgen does not attempt any kind of Bach pastiche but writes a work both eloquent and capricious that is very much in his own style and in which one may appreciate the flexibility of his melodic language, which admits several influences without being dominated by any one of them. Brahms is hardly even a background presence here, though he might have been proud to have written it. The meditative first movement [6] lives up to its *quasi improvisando* marking, growing out of a falling three-note figure to brief bravura flurries of activity and a chordal section marked *piangendo* (weeping). There follows a lively *Allegretto scherzando* [7] based on a four-note motif and its immediate inversion, with hints of a country dance, and then a short *Lento* slow movement [8] that returns to the materials of the first movement, but in a varied, more compressed way. It could be considered an extended introduction to the powerful *Allegro energico* finale [9] – the longest movement and by far the most strenuous for the violinist, whose technique is tested in all manner of ways. An *Adagio* epilogue [10], combining elements of this movement with the *quasi improvisando* music of the opening, brings this striking and resourceful *Phantasie* to an end.

Malcolm MacDonald is the author of the volume on Brahms in the 'Master Musicians' series (Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2002). He has also written The Symphonies of Havergal Brian *(three vols., Kahn & Averill, London, 1974, 1978 and 1983) and edited the first two volumes of* Havergal Brian on Music *(Toccata Press, London, 1985 and 2009); further volumes are in preparation. His other writings include books on John Foulds, Schoenberg, Ronald Stevenson and Edgard Varèse.*

(three works in one), but a 'Trilogy-Sonata' (one work looking in three directions). One could also think of it as a triptych, two moderately paced movements surrounding a fast and passionate one. In strong contrast to the E major Sonata, Röntgen here seems to be throwing Classical decorum to the winds: the work is powered by a strong emotional impulse and is full of unexpected shifts and changes of direction. Overall the impression is of an utterance of conflicting emotions which eventually achieves clarity and *quietus* through the polyphonic pacification of the finale.

It opens [15] in D minor with a grave eight-bar bass theme, stated in octaves by the pianist's left hand, which recurs throughout the first movement at significant junctures, always in the bass, as a kind of motto. The piano part then dissolves into a flowing ostinato pattern that becomes the background to a long lamenting (and entirely un-Brahmsian) violin melody. As this section closes, the lamenting theme is combined with the bass motto, and a new section arrives, *mesto* in F sharp minor, in alternating bars of 3/4 and 2/4. The phosphorescent piano-writing here is impressionistic, almost Debussian, and the restless, muted line of the violin perfectly matches its sense of disquiet. Structurally it is only an episode, but its mood and some of its figuration are retained into a coda that again combines the lamenting theme with the bass motto, the latter heard this time in diminution. The last few bars desolately alternate D minor and F sharp minor before plumping for the latter in a wan shaft of impressionistic moonlight.

After this comparatively short preludial movement, the central part of Röntgen's triptych [16] is a wild, barnstorming scherzo (without trio) that keeps both players fully occupied. The passion is kept at fever-pitch, the violin continuously voluble and protesting, the piano part frequently dissonant. The movement modulates widely and introduces plenty of material of its own, but also harks back to the first movement: the lamenting theme reappears in various shapes, registers and contexts, and at one point the motto-theme, in diminution, appears not in the bass but high in the violin.

The third and last movement [17], which follows without a break, begins exactly as the first, with the motto-theme in left-hand octaves; but now this theme becomes the ground bass that, in retrospect, it was always destined to be. The movement thus opens in the manner of a passacaglia, with a new, rather Bachian theme in counterpoint above it. But it soon evolves into a rather more complex set of variations, the ground bass changing shape or posed in counterpoint against itself while both new and familiar themes and episodes crop up. The re-appearance of the flowing ostinato from the first movement heralds the return of the lamenting violin melody exactly as on its

but also a warm heart. It wraps itself round the sensibility quite snugly, a source of considerable pleasure, but occasionally administering little jabs of disquiet and disorientation that belie the composer's reputation as a hopeless conservative who went on writing in the vein of his idol and mentor Brahms into the 1920s. Clearly Röntgen's late idiom went far beyond Brahms and took stock of more contemporary trends, but he did so in a subtle, sometimes witty, but never flashy way. It is music for the connoisseur of post-Romanticism. Although many of his early works might be categorised as 'Brahmsian' in style, Röntgen evolved an individual expressive synthesis that drew also on the Baroque (especially Bach) and more contemporary influences such as French impressionism and bitonality: he even wrote a *Bitonale-Symphonie* in 1930. The result was an idiom that became ever more personal, even if it sometimes seems astonishingly detached from the work of his most important contemporaries.

Following his retirement from the directorship of the Amsterdam Conservatoire in 1924, Röntgen's rate of production – already very fertile – increased considerably. In Gaudeamus, the house designed for him by his son Frants, who was an architect, he is calculated to have composed around 200 works before his death in Utrecht in September 1932.

Music for violin features prominently among Röntgen's vast output of chamber music, from his very earliest years (a *Romanze* in G major written at the age of nine) to the very latest (the *Boerenliedjes uit een oud kermisboekje* of 1930). Something of that span of time is reflected in the works chosen for this first volume devoted to Röntgen's violin music. From an early age he had an intimate knowledge of the violin (he must have had, after all, the sound of his father's Stradivarius constantly in his ears).

One of Röntgen's most popular pieces in his lifetime was the 'suite on Norwegian folktunes' ***Aus Jotunheim*** ('From Jotunheim'), composed in 1892 and issued in three different forms – the original (completed on 19 May 1892) for violin and piano, one for horn and piano and a third for full orchestra. In Norse mythology, Jotunheim is the home of the ice-giants and rock-giants who threaten the human race in Midgard. The name also refers to a mountainous area of south Norway (it contains the country's 29 highest mountains), a favourite with hikers and climbers since the middle of the nineteenth century. Grieg and Röntgen had frequently hiked in this region, and though *Aus Jotunheim* has its Brahmsian moments it is much more an expression of Röntgen's close friendship with Grieg. Indeed, the work is dedicated to Grieg and his wife on their 25th wedding-anniversary. In general the Norwegian colouring of the themes is patent, and the

five-movement work as a whole floats pleasantly in the stylistic orbit of Grieg, early Delius and even early Percy Grainger,[8] the most substantial movement being the slow, elegiac finale, to which Röntgen gave the title 'In Jotunheim'. But what shines out most clearly is Röntgen's sheer love of the folk-material.

The first movement [11] begins with a four-bar piano introduction with a motif of two falling thirds that recalls the opening of Brahms' Fourth Symphony (in the orchestral version this phrase is given to the horn, increasing the resemblance); but the motif turns out to be integral to the beautiful folk-melody, which one can easily imagine had been harmonised by Grieg himself. In fact many passages in the work remind one of the idioms and textures of Grieg's three violin sonatas. Röntgen marks the concluding measures of the tune *quasi Buckhorn* – the cow-horn, calling the flocks across the mountains, is an iconic sound-image of Norwegian music. As the movement unfolds, it elaborates lyrically and dramatically on the principal melody, rising to a climax before the final restatement.

The second movement, *Vivo ed energico* [12], is a vigorous G minor dance in the style of a *halling*, but constructed as a scherzo. There is a slower, mellifluous trio in the major before the dance returns. It is elaborated on this reappearance, and moves into an exciting *Presto* coda. The third movement, an *Andante con moto* in B flat [13], is a slower dance with an off-beat accompaniment. This is the only tune that Röntgen identifies by name, as 'Gendines Vuggeslåt': it belongs to the large store of *Slåtter* – fiddle tunes from the Hardanger region with which Grieg concerned himself so fruitfully in the last years of his life. A *pizzicato* episode leads to G major, and then the tunes return in the piano with a free counterpoint in the violin, before a nostalgic coda.

The *Allegro giocoso* fourth movement [14] forms the dynamic climax of the suite, being an exceptionally brilliant and vivacious movement in folk-fiddling style – it might be thought of as a second scherzo to balance the second movement, but is much more of a contest for the two players. It is the finale which forms the emotional climax [15]. It begins with the violin, unaccompanied, playing *con gran espressione* a phrase in the tradition of Norwegian 'cow-calls', and answered by a hymn-like tune in the piano. Such music is clearly intended to evoke the mountain distances of Jotunheim. A transition-passage leads unexpectedly to a reminiscence of the third-movement dance, and eventually to the concluding bars of the melody from the first movement. The 'cow-call' resounds for the last time, introducing a peaceful coda.

[8] Röntgen, Grieg and Grainger were friends.

Composed in 1900, first published in 1904, and revised and re-published in 1917 (it is the second edition that is recorded here), Röntgen's **Sonata for Violin and Piano in E major, Op. 40**,[9] is perhaps the most ambitious of any of the works in this programme – a full-fledged, four-movement, post-Romantic conception. It is certainly a composition which shows Röntgen still working through aspects of his Brahmsian patrimony, especially in the first and last movements. The opening movement (the first subject is an idea of classic beauty: the kind of tune that, once heard, you seem to have known all your life) is almost a textbook lyric sonata-form [2], in the tradition of Brahms' G major Sonata, Op. 78, which it recalls at several points; the piano-writing is Brahmsian, and Brahmsian, too, is the natural yet thorough working-out of the yearning motivic material. The last movement [5], on the other hand, takes the manner of Brahms' galloping scherzo-finales for its model (here the relevant movement of the D minor Sonata, Op. 108, seems the inspiration).

The inner movements are more personal. The second [3] is a heavy-footed peasant-dance scherzo in A minor rather resembling the second movement of *Aus Jotunheim*, with a poetic spinning-wheel of a major-key trio section based around the idea of an inner pedal A; the return of the scherzo is no simple *da capo* but an intensification and acceleration of the original. The C sharp minor *Lento* [4] is a searching, multi-faceted movement that begins in lament and makes much use of canon: it rises to heights of near-sublimity before it joins on seamlessly to the opening bars of the finale.

As already mentioned, Röntgen's first violin-and-piano composition was a *Romanze* in G minor. Altogether he seems to have composed five *Romanzen*; the example included here dates from 1920, and it is also in G minor. It is a surprisingly substantial piece, quite removed from the mere salon trifle one might expect. With a distinct second subject in B major, it evolves a large sonata-like form, its main sections separated by interludes that show off Röntgen's command his instruments. The mood remains lyrical and tranquil throughout.

Completed on 27 June 1915 according to the printed edition, but in 1925 according to the official catalogue of Röntgen's works,[10] the ***Sonata Trilogica*** for violin and piano is a work of very different orientation from the E major Sonata – exploratory, even perhaps experimental, finding its own form. The title suggests not, as with Nikolai Medtner's Op. 11 for piano solo, a 'Sonata Trilogy'

[9] Of course, Röntgen had composed far in excess of 40 works by 1904. He seems to have adhered to the then still-common convention that a work should be assigned an opus number only when it was published.

[10] Jurriaan Röntgen (ed.), *Julius Röntgen. Oeuvrecatalogus*, Donemus, The Hague, 1998.