



Alex Aguacil

PIANO SERENADE



Richard Strauss

Piano Works / Ständchen & Opp. 3, 5, 9



RICHARD STRAUSS (1864-1849)
PIANO SERENADE

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- ◆ 01 - Ständchen (Serenade) (arr. Giesecking) 2:49

- ◆ **Fünf Klavierstücke, op. 3 (1880-81)**
 - 02 - Andante (teneramente) 5:04
 - 03 - Allegro vivace scherzando 3:46
 - 04 - Largo 6:22
 - 05 - Allegro molto 4:15
 - 06 - Allegro marcatissimo 5:46

- ◆ **Sonata in B minor, op. 5 (1880-81)**
 - 07 - I. Allegro molto, appassionato 8:26
 - 08 - II. Andante cantabile 5:07
 - 09 - III. Scherzo. Presto 2:46
 - 10 - IV. Allegretto vivo 6:55

- ◆ **Stimmungsbilder, op. 9 (1882-84)**
 - 11 - Auf stillem Waldespfad ("In Silent Forests") 3:49
 - 12 - An einsamer Quelle ("Beside the Spring") 3:15
 - 13 - Intermezzo 3:55
 - 14 - Träumerei ("Reverie") 2:48
 - 15 - Heidebild ("On the Heath") 3:53

TOTAL TIME

01:08:58



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Pictures & design: **Ricardo Rios //ricardorios.es**
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THE PIANO MUSIC of RICHARD STRAUSS

Richard Strauss composed his piano music when he was between 16 and 20 years old -between 1880 and 1884-. As soon as he enrolled in Munich university -in 1882- his intellectual curiosity was awoken by his studies of art, history, and aesthetics, along with the reading of authors such as Shakespeare and Schopenhauer. His musical education, on the other hand -despite the fact that Strauss is considered the natural successor to Wagner- was oriented towards classical composers. In this, he was influenced by the figure of his father, a musician from the bourgeois tradition who did not tolerate anything after Mendelssohn and, consequently, Wagner, of whom he was a firm detractor. However, it took Strauss only a few years to find his own models and become the most prominent musical figure in Western Europe, finding his own artistic voice -ambitious, harmonically dazzling- and creating a sense of drama that would come from his superior talent.

Strauss would soon be able to create musical forms infused with great poetic content and a wide range of orchestral colors, whose piano reductions present both a daunting challenge and a unique musical experience. Unfortunately, Strauss devoted only a tiny part of his production to the piano, so we pianists must conform to transcriptions of his orchestral works, operas, songs -it is precisely *Ständchen* (Serenade) that opens this album- or at most his works for piano and orchestra: *Parergon*, op. 73, *Panathenaenzug*, op. 74 -both for the left hand- and *Burlesque*, written in 1885 at the age of 21, right after the composition of the piano works that concern us.

From his youth are also his two symphonies -one of which, the *Symphony*, op. 12, was favorably appraised by Brahms himself-, the *Quartet in C minor*, op. 13, the *Horn Concerto*, op. 11 or his *Violin Sonata*, op. 18, marking

the end of this youthful stage, before the composition of his first symphonic poems. These early works were modeled after the romantic style of Mendelssohn, Schumann or Brahms and, like the piano music on this recording, they do not display the bold chromatisms or tonal ambiguities typical of Strauss' most advanced works, an aspect that does not take away any beauty to these pieces. Although these works may not sound like the most idiosyncratic Strauss, their honesty and value should not be diminished, a fact sometimes determined by a fierce judgment of the evolution of music history.

In addition, some traits in the works of this adolescence period subtly anticipate the later Strauss, something even more perceptible given the homogeneity of language that the composer maintained throughout his life. The pianist Glenn Gould, an active supporter of Strauss' work, remarks precisely that **"although there are pages of Strauss' adolescent works (the first horn concerto for example) that could have been, on a harmonic diagrammatic level, composed by Mendelssohn or even Weber, one only need to listen for a few moments to realize that, despite all the influence of the great masters, we are dealing with a completely original technique"**.

These observations can certainly be applied to his piano pieces where, despite the background of his conservative musical education, we already perceive some Straussian traits, such as his symphonism -*Sonata op. 5-*, his lieder -*op. 9, no. 2 and no. 4-*, his sense of humor -*op. 9, no. 3-*, or the repeated use of musical motifs -*Klavierstücke*, op. 3-. On the other hand, the themes of these pieces include ideas that the composer would resort to throughout his life, such as the funeral march -*op. 3, no. 3-*, the dreams -*op. 9 no. 4-* or the hero, to name just a few.



In Klavierstücke, op. 3, the initial melodic gesture of five notes serves as a motif that will appear in the rest of the pieces.

The cycle begins with *Andante, teneramente*, which in its texture recalls Schumann's *Humoreske* -also in B flat major-. However, in *Andante, teneramente*, the character seems more reserved, displaying a greater polyphonic density -up to five voices- suggesting a sound closer to the string quartet or the string orchestra. The central section is once again reminiscent of the *Humoreske -Einfach und zart*, (simple and delicate)- in the gestures of the melody and its internal voices. In this piece Strauss introduces the aforementioned "romantic longing motif" of this Opus, distributing it in the different voices, stressing it with accents before the final climax of the A section and in the beautiful stretto of the coda.

In *Allegro vivace scherzando* -a sort of scherzo "alla caccia"-, the longing motif appears fortissimo, in the left hand, which sets the character for the first part, contrasted with a distant trumpet call in pianissimo. The middle section transitions to a humorous tone, evocative of Schumann's *Kreisleriana* or Mendelssohn's *Jagdlied*, through meter changes and dotted-rhythms that emphasize the scherzando character.

In *Largo*, the motif appears in a funeral procession, in the characteristic key of the funeral marches -C minor- with a writing that suggests a gloomy orchestral sound, evoking Beethoven in the cantabile moments. The middle section -an oasis where the funeral march stops- contains a nostalgic "Song without words" in the relative major -E b Major-. The octave leap of the longing motif appears now downwards and fully

quoted at the end of the initial phrase. The new character is emphasized by expressive modulations and an impassioned melodic line, before being sustained to return to the initial funeral procession. This funeral character contrasted with a section evoking a joyful and nostalgic past can be found in a more transcendental way in his symphonic poem *Death and Transfiguration*.

The fourth piece, *Allegro molto*, is characterized by its graceful and elegant humor. The longing motif appears this time at a fast tempo and in different ways: extroverted, with a group of staccato notes in the form of laughter; dramatic, in a minor key with descending scales; or lyrical and gentle, in the middle section, going from A-flat Major to the distant key of E Major. After a last poetic passage, the piece returns to its original humorous tone, with a part of the longing motif hiding and reappearing suddenly in different voices, along with sudden changes of dynamic that indicate surprise and a fast rapid ascending arabesque that concludes the piece.

Allegro marcatisimo is a final march that seems to express the departure of the hero, his adventures taking place in a fugue for 4 voices and two themes. The first theme is composed following the structure of the longing motif, and the second contains the literal motif itself. As it is developed in a stretto that builds to an orchestral climax along percussion-like basses, the opening march reappears, portraying the return of the hero.





PIANO SONATA IN B MINOR, OP. 5

Strauss outlined two piano sonatas -and several sonatinas- before starting the composition of a work in such format that he deemed worthy of publication. That honor would go to the *Sonata in B minor*, originally in three movements and displaying a considerable mix of styles. After initially showing it to his closest circle of friends, he decided to make a total revision of the work, rewriting some passages and adding a fourth movement, making it the definitive version of the *Sonata in B minor, op. 5* (1881-82). Its language followed models of the classical and romantic Germanic school, such as Beethoven and Mendelssohn. Although these influences may have contributed to this work's lack of notoriety over time, on the date of its publication this was not a criticism, but quite the opposite: its powerful initial impression and its nobility of spirit were praised, as well as the character in search of independence, all emphasized by the young age of the composer.

The first movement, *Allegro molto, appassionato*, seems to convey an orchestral sound, with piano textures that resemble it, anticipating the instrument that perhaps Strauss already had in mind. It starts with a main theme of four repeated notes, similar to the famous theme from Beethoven's 5th Symphony -the fate knocking-, accompanied by a second gesture of three descending notes, envisioning a kind of lamenting motive; this second motive will be used organically in all the movements of the sonata as a material for new themes and

ideas. The Beethovenian repeated notes join a group of sforzando and secco chords, in a manner of an orchestral tutti, leading to a passage of descending octaves, *appassionato and fortissimo*. The secondary and contrasting theme -in D major- is of a lyrical and calm character, its melody conveying different solo instruments of the orchestra. Clusters of orchestral-sforzato chords reappear to culminate in the climax, this time drawn by the three-notes lament motive, before closing the exposition. During the development section the different registers on the piano again suggest various orchestral sounds: winds in the upper parts, strings in the chromatic progressions of the middle register, and percussion in the lower part of the piano. This is a stormy central section in which the two main motives seem to duel while displaying a bold and virile temperament, exhibiting a heroic and triumphant character that may anticipate later works, such as *Ein Heldenleben*.

The second movement, *Andante cantabile*, is a sort of *Song without words* in the style of Mendelssohn, with a lyrical melody of romantic aspiration that soon is accompanied by a second voice, simulating a love duet. However, it seems to suggest an orchestral sound -like the orchestral passages in the Largo from Beethoven's *Piano Concerto in C minor*, also in E major-. This becomes more evident in the central part of this movement, where again different sections of the orchestra seem to be implied through several piano textures, such as large arpeggios, grace notes in the



high register and repeated groups of chords. In an organic and ingenious way, Strauss uses here the three-notes lament motive from the first movement to develop groups of staccato chords, later turning it into a fast arabesque that will be used in the *Scherzo* of the third movement, a piece that recalls Mendelssohn's Scherzos or his *Song without words op. 67, no. 4 "Spinning song"*. This Scherzo concludes with a horn call and a false ending in the form of a joke.

The fourth movement, *Allegretto vivo*, is a small operatic drama where the duets of the second movement return, this time with greater insistence and alternating moods of joy and sorrow, represented by the

changes of major and minor modes. While the first theme comes from the three-notes lament motive, the second theme has clear references to Mendelssohn's Sonata for cello and piano. Of a similar influence are other compositional devices of this movement, such as the left-hand melodies accompanied by broken arpeggios in the right hand -*Jagdlied, op. 19, no. 3*- or the martellato octaves from the end -*Rondó Capriccioso, op. 14*-. However, the way Strauss transitions between the different themes, the different sections that suggest different scenes and the various duets that suggest different characters give this finale a certain dramatic feeling, somehow anticipating the operatic and theatrical future of the composer.

Allegro molto appassionato. Metr. ♩ = 184.

pp grazioso un poco moto

SCHERZO.
Presto. Metr. ♩ = 160.

sempre pp

FINALE.
Allegretto vivo Metr. ♩ = 80.





STIMMUNGSBILDER, OP. 9 (1882-84)

In *Stimmungsbilder, op. 9* (mood fancies) Strauss explores the forest motif, a common reference in Romantic literature and art, with the fantasy and mystery of some of the themes that usually accompany it, such as water -*An einsamer Quelle (in a solitary fountain)- or dreams -Träumerei-*. The cycle is a short journey that begins with the entrance to the forest -*Auf Stille Waldespfad (in a silent forest)* and ends with the exit to the plain -*Heidelbild (in the heath)-*, with a humorous Intermezzo as a central piece. These small works offer already a glimpse of Strauss' style: *An Einsamer Quelle* is composed in the same moving and calming spirit as his later works, Intermezzo contains a playful humor, reminiscent of *Till Eulenspiegel*, and *Heidelbild* depicts a lifeless, funereal landscape. A very neglected opus that contains considerable doses of fantasy.

Auf Stille Waldespfad (in a silent forest) seems to evoke the music of Schumann -*Scenes from the forest-*, its influence apparent in its calming mood. Slow and lyrical, the music seems to describe the entrance to a forest, walking through it while observing the soft movement of the leaves or, in the central section and through mysterious chromatisms, the murmurs in the depths of the forest. The apparent simplicity of the piece contrasts with the 4-voice polyphonic writing, adding a difficulty that in fact helps to emphasize the needed expressiveness.

An einsamer Quelle (in a solitary fountain) is a quiet and restful piece, like some of Strauss' later compositions, for example

the song of his next Opus, *Allerseelen*, with a similar melodic opening. The gently accompanied melody of *An einsamer Quelle*, somewhat reminiscent of Schubert, anticipates the successful lieder composer that Strauss would become. The triplets of thirty-second notes of *An einsamer Quelle* ingeniously create the effect of the small water games of this solitary fountain, which represents a feeling of melancholy. We hear some harmonic progressions, such as the key change to the relative minor without a bridge chord, that we also find in the opening bars of *Im Abendrot*, from his *Four last Songs*. Several transcriptions for solo instruments with accompanied piano have been written from this small piece.

Intermezzo displays again the Straussian humor, *mit Laune* -whimsical-, a character emphasized by the sudden changes of articulation that suggest small mockery. In the *agitato* of the central section -restless and playful- the jokes follow one another with those grimaces of the triplets with pauses, reminiscent of those of *Till Eulenspiegel*, while the phrases end on a piano dynamic, beginning the following ones in sudden forte, jumpily.

Träumerei, reverie, is a dream with a tender and fanciful character. The Straussian style of ascending arpeggios -whose rhythm recalls the "prophet bird" from Schumann's *Forest Scenes-* unfolds the imagination and fantasy of the dream. Sometimes the music stops to give way to short cadence passages, with ornamented melodies reminiscent of a shepherd's flute in the distance, with repeated phrases as an echo.





After these works, Strauss did not compose for piano solo again, giving way to the orchestra as his main instrument.

Heidebild (In the Heath) describes the desolate environment of a swamp, with its brambles and dead bushes. We are now outside of the forest, in a desolate landscape represented by static fifths, lifeless. The tinkling character of a kind of firefly in the high register contrasts with funeral waves in the central register. The piece concludes with a sudden waterfall and the vision of the fireflies disappearing, while again we hear the initial fifths, this time in the distance, closing the whole cycle.

As in the *Sonata in B minor, op. 5* or in *Klavierstücke, op. 3*, it becomes also evident in *Stimmungsbilder, op. 9* that sometimes the composer had more of an orchestral sound in mind rather than a pianistic one, which is actually a very inspiring stimulus when performing these works. On the other hand, it is my impression that this last Opus should be played freely and spontaneously, since just the simple metric execution of some passages -in *An einsamer Quelle* or in *Intermezzo-* can be too constrained, far from the free character of these compositions.

After these works, Strauss did not compose for piano solo again, giving way to the orchestra as his main instrument. With no pretensions and a few resources, these early and charming pieces show a little known facet of the Bavarian genius, some of them anticipating certain traits yet to appear later, heightened by the imagination and creative force of his youth.

Alex Alguacil



ALEX ALGUACIL biography

Alex Alguacil has been recently acknowledged as **“a pianist who enters his interpretative maturity”** –Scherzo Magazine-. A musician with considerable international exposure, his performances have taken him to important venues in the United States and Japan. He is praised by the critics as **“a sensitive pianist, with a sharp musical sense”** -El País- and an **“intelligent musician, with a high-quality talent”** -La Vanguardia-. On his orchestra-début in Spain, he was described as a **“brilliant pianist”** -El País- and his presentation recital at Carnegie Hall in New York in 2008 was identified as **“one of the most outstanding recitals of the season”** -New York Concert Review Magazine-.

Alex Alguacil is a guest artist at leading festivals as well as soloist with main orchestras in Spain. He first performed as a soloist with an orchestra in Barcelona’s Palau de la Música, in 2003, playing Shostakovich’s First Piano Concerto with the Orquestra Simfònica del Vallès. Alicia de Larrocha, who attended this concert, was impressed with his performance and agreed to advise the young pianist in his future career, thereby establishing an artistic relationship which would last for a number of years and which would provide him with the opportunity to work in depth on the repertory of Spanish and Catalan composers.

His recordings have been widely praised by critics and audiences. His album dedicated to the music of Sergey Prokofiev received a number of enthusiastic reviews, which praised it as **“fully appealing, thrilling rhythmically and with a savage touch in Prokofiev’s 6th Sonata”** as well as showing **“an exquisite interpretation of the Visions Fugitives”** –Scherzo Magazine-. Similarly, his CD, *The complete piano works of Salvador Brotons*, was described as **“a real discovery for those who love music full of spirit and truth”** -Andrés Ruiz Tarazona (el arte de la fuga)-.

Alex Alguacil has been invited to give Master classes at Universities such as the **Columbia College in Chicago** and the **Tokyo College of Music in Japan**, and he is regularly invited to **Conservatories in Catalonia and Spain**. He is currently a piano professor at the **Conservatori Superior de Música del Liceu in Barcelona**.

