

ALEXANDRE BOËLY

David C F Wright, DMus (2001)

Alexandre Pierre Francois Boëly was born on 19th April 1785. He was a member of a family of French musicians respected in Paris and, from a child was connected with the court orchestra of Louis XVI in Versailles. He was four years old when the French revolution broke out and three years later the monarchy collapsed.

His father was Jean-Francois Boëly who was a harpist and counter tenor in the Rameau tradition. He was also an excellent theorist. But his music ability did not produce an adequate income although he sent three of his children to the French Music Academy which had opened in 1796. But Alexandre and his family had an ongoing dispute with Gossec who was a director of the Academy and all three children left without completing their studies.

Francois Gossec was a Belgian composer who was born in 1734. He was a boy chorister at Antwerp cathedral before going to Paris where he was helped by Rameau. Gossec wrote about 30 symphonies, 20 operas and works in support of the French revolution. He died in 1829.



Alexandre took up the position of organist at Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois and those ten years were happy. He became a music teacher, once said to be the best in Paris, being very adept at the violin and the viola. In 1808, at the age of twenty three he had composed a collection of String Trios which had to wait twenty years to be published. Also in 1808, he wrote his two Piano Sonatas Op 1 and his Sonatas for piano and violin. Only the piano sonatas were published.

He was a competent pianist and a contemporary of Weber. Boëly studied with Ignaz Ladurner from the Tyrol and also studied the works of the German and Italian masters. He discovered Bach, Haydn and Beethoven who influenced him and he was fascinated by the theoretical writings of Clementi.

France was always involved in political intrigue and revolutions during Boëly's lifetime and he survived three revolutions. He did not assimilate the new age of Romanticism. That was left to Alkan some thirty years later who was known as the Berlioz of the piano.

Boëly was not always a popular man. He was accused of being too nationalistic and he was sacked from a teaching post in 1851 because his playing was austere.

Visibly affected by the political upheavals, and that little of his music was published. He turned his attention to other projects. He is probably the first composer to write etudes or studies and, from 1816 to 1846, he wrote over one hundred studies. Some of his works were dedicated to the musical giants of his time namely the two German composers Kalkbrenner and Cramer.

The two piano sonatas are both in three movements and they have a youthful energy and sparkle which was rare in French music of the time. The first sonata is clearly influenced by the great Beethoven. It is impetuous and exciting in the outer movements and stunningly original in its compelling energy. The slow movement is quite beautiful and the finale, a presto, is very exciting and untrammelled by

any boring academic style. The second sonata is equally, if not more, impressive with its spontaneity and sparkle and a festive last movement.

His music does not sound like Haydn or Mozart but it has a relentless freshness and conviction. It does not sound like 19th century music. It has more depth than Chopin and has the welcome felicity of Mendelssohn. These sonatas make up Op 1.

The Thirty Caprices or Piano Studies Op 2 show blossoming inspiration. There are some which remind us of other composers displaying a variety of styles. They are beautifully written The Allegro in C minor, number 23 in the series, scintillates and is an unashamed foot-tapper.

He also wrote much organ music and four string quartets. Some of his music is now available on CD.

His work was admired by Saint-Saens, Franck, Meyerbeer and Ambrose Thomas and his music clearly influenced composer of northern Europe but he was soon forgotten after his death on 27th December 1858.

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