

BERNHARD STAVENHAGEN

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Bernhard Stavenhagen was a German composer and virtuoso pianist said to be the finest pianist of his time, apart from Liszt.

He was born in Grez on 28 November 1862 and, in 1874, moved to Berlin. He studied piano with Theodore Kullak entering the university there. Kullak (1815-1882) is largely remembered for his educational piano music but he wrote a piano concerto and a piano trio. His pupils included Ilyinsky, Moszkowski, Reubke, Schwenka and many others. Stavenhagen also studied with Friedrich Kiel (1821-1885), who composed piano works, two string quartets, eight piano trios, a Missa Solemnis, and a piano concerto.



Stavenhagen with Liszt

In 1885, Stavenhagen became a pupil of Liszt in Weimar and travelled with him to Rome, Budapest, Paris, London and Bayreuth. What other pupil of Liszt had such an honour? Liszt said that Stavenhagen was his finest student and a loyal friend. Stavenhagen had learned ten new piano concertos and toured Europe and North America with them. He was a genius.

He was appointed court pianist to the Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar. This was in April 1890. The following year he married Agnes Dennighof (1860-1945) who was a soprano in the Weimar Court Opera. His Piano Concerto no 3 in B minor of 1898, is dedicated to her although no reliable evidence of this work is forthcoming.

There is the Piano Concerto no 2 in A which came into being in 1912 and was performed in November of that year with the composer conducting and one of his pupils, M H Reibold, as the soloist. The performance material was lost thereafter and only the piano reduction score survived. It was orchestrated by Dr Joachim Dietrich Link and a first performance of this revised version was given in Germany. There are four movements, the first two are played without a break. The work is influenced by Liszt and possesses a tension. The immediacy of the first concerto may not be so apparent but this concerto of 1912 throws into doubt the alleged third concerto of 1898.

Link was to orchestrate some of Stavenhagen's songs including Madchen, Standchen and Der Schwere Abend.

Few of Stavenhagen's works survive but he did write some piano pieces and cadenzas for Beethoven piano concertos.

In Weimar, he conducted six operas in 18 months. He also conducted 'new' works by Richard Strauss, Hans Pfitzner, Mahler, Debussy, Ravel, and Schoenberg at subscription concerts.

The year 1898 saw him attain an appointment in Munich and, in 1907, he moved to Geneva taking piano master classes at the Conservatoire.

He died on 25 December 1914 and was buried in Weimar.

There are many fine piano concertos and one such is Stavenhagen's Concerto no 1 in B minor Op 4. It is well-written, inspiring and gives a real joy that is quite rarely given. It dates from 1894 and was dedicated to Carl Alexander von Sachsen. It ranks alongside Rachmaninov Concertos 3 and 4.

Many of his works are sadly lost including a Piano Sonata in F. The impression is given that he concentrated on his piano playing and teaching and other duties at the expense of his compositions. Perhaps he was a modest man. But there exists piano rolls now on you tube of Stavenhagen playing Liszt including a memorable performance of the Hungarian Rhapsody no 12.

The neglect of this composer is a disgrace particularly the ignoring of that magnificent Piano Concerto no.1.

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