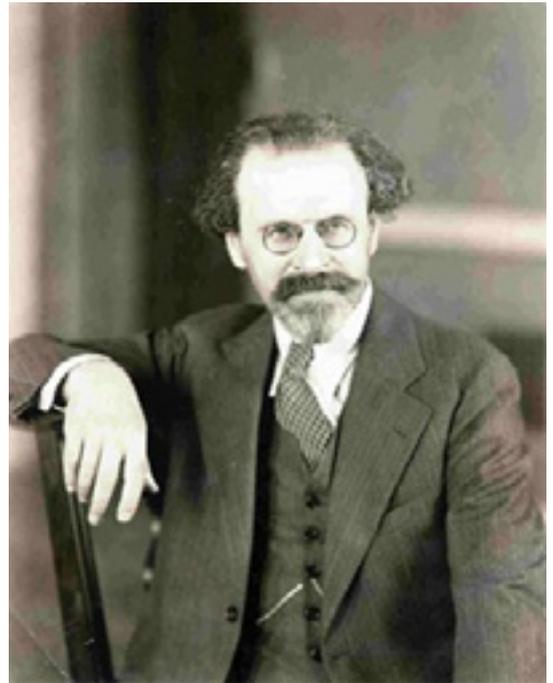


ZYGMUNT STOJOWSKI

David C F Wright

Sigismund Stojowski was a Polish composer and pianist. Sigismund is the German version of his name whereas Zygmunt is the Polish version and by which he should be identified.

His music is not well-known, yet it must be the finest piano music by any Polish composer. It is vastly superior to Chopin and there can be no doubt about that. Stojowski's music has greater depth and purpose, is far more original and does not depend on those ghastly Chopin clichés. Stojowski's music is more masculine and clearly more satisfactory. His music does not belong to the inane musical box tinkling. He did not write endless waltzes, nocturnes and mazurkas or set them off as an art form. He was interested in absolute music, not superficial music that has no consequence.



Take for example, his Opus 1, *Deux Pénsees musicales*. The first piece, *Melodie*, is very attractive, yet not banal.

It is lovely music being sensual and sensitive yet not mawkish and never weak or feeble. It does not have the grand empty gestures of Chopin. The second piece, *Prelude*, has an ostinato rhythmic left hand which could become a little tedious but it has splendid climaxes with very impressive music and a real passion. I cannot think of any other Polish piano work of this time which has such drama which evolves from the natural progression of the music.

The *Deux Orientales Op 10* was published in 1894. The opening piece *Chant d'amour (Love Song)* is a truly romantic piece of yearning and sometimes full of agitation rooted in F major. There are florid passages over a sostenuto platform and the occasional passionate music coupled with introspection is memorable. There is one moment of unbridled passion followed by piano cascades with powerful and sometimes anguished piano writing. This piece is probably a narrative; it is deeply felt and is dedicated to his friend, Paul Bergon.

The second piece is dedicated to Joseph Hofman and is a caprice of perpetual speed and excitement over a rhythmically impressive bass. It is full of excitement and virtuosity. The central section in A is a type of scherzo before the original allegro in A minor returns.

The *Four Pieces Op 26* are very interesting. The third is dedicated to Julia Fuller and is in six flats and has a lovely glowing theme over persistent quavers which, sadly, could appear as a vamp as in Chopin's *Prelude in E minor* or some of the Schubert stuff. When the music evolves into A, it is passionate but the G flat music returns in deeply sumptuous tones, but it is not mawkish music. The fourth piece is a set of competent variations on a Croatian theme.

The *Fantasie Op 38*, published in 1912, is a tremendous piece replete with lyricism, melody and virtuosity. Compare it with Chopin's *Polonaise -Fantasie, Op 61* and you will see instantly that the Stojowski work is far, far better. In fact, there is no comparison.

With 20 students, I played the Chopin and Stojowski in professional recordings without telling them what the works were or giving them any clues. They all preferred the Stojowski and, indeed, admired it. They did not like the Chopin. In fact, most of them complained about it.

I appreciate that in many of essays, I have disclosed the weaknesses in Chopin and for those who have read those essays more references here to Chopin here may prove tedious. But each essay is a separate essay and some may surf the net only to look at articles about Stojowski.

What does this experiment between Chopin and Stojowski tell us?

It raises the perennial question. Why is music of poorer quality preferred to much finer music?

Zygmunt Denis Antoni de Stojowski was born near Kiecle in southern Poland on 4 May 1870. His first teacher was his mother and he then studied with Zelenski in Cracow. At the age of 17, he performed Beethoven's magnificent Piano Concerto no 3. The following year, he moved to Paris and studied piano with Louis Diemer and composition with Leo Delibes.

By the time Stojowski was 23, he was embarking on the composition of his Piano Concerto no 1 in F sharp minor Op 3 which was published in 1894. It is set in three movements

Andante poco mosso – allegro un poco maestoso

Andante sostenuto e molto cantabile

Allegro con fuoco – presto – piu presto.

Now there are many fine piano concertos about and some really awful ones as well. This concerto is a work of great mastery, contrast, beauty and virtuosity but not simply for virtuosity's sake but as the natural progression of the music.

The music has form and coherence. The piano writing is quite superb and the orchestration cannot be faulted. There is melody, and gorgeous melody at that, and the work thrills and excites as well as producing exquisite beauty. It is a complete piece and it is not just music but music that gives a superlative satisfaction which is a rare thing.

The performance with the excellent Jonathan Plowright and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra under the brilliant and reliable Martyn Brabbins is a tremendous experience.

If this work were made known and, for example, had a Proms performance it would be a enormous success and people would be straining at the leash to buy it.

Again, I pose the question, Why is this work not universally known whereas other works of poor quality are?

The Piano Concerto no 2 is entitled Prologue, Scherzo and Variations. It is opus 32 and is rooted in A flat. It contains some amazing music. I have a minor problem with this, however. The first two movements lasts about 12 -13 minutes and the finale is a set of variations lasting about 21 minutes. I am not convinced that a set of variations makes a good movement let alone a finale. It can become episodic music but I think the composer succeeds here because the piano writing is always of great interest and the orchestration is choice.

There is also the superb Symphonic Rhapsody for piano and orchestra which deserves to be known. The Symphony in D minor Op 21 is a very good piece although the performances I have heard failed to do it justice. It does not quite have the bite of Glazunov or Rachmaninov nor the polish of Myaskovsky. Anyhow, Stojowski's Symphony won the 1898 Paderewski prize of a thousand roubles. It was conducted by Emil Mlynarski.

In January 1902, Stojowski was the soloist in Saint Saens Piano Concerto no 4, arguably the Frenchman's finest concerto. Having made his name in Poland and central Europe, Stojowski wanted an international career.

Frank Damrosch, who had founded the Institute of Musical Art in New York, invited Stojowski to the USA. Damrosch was German born and his dates are 1859 - 1937. He had been chorus master at the Metropolitan Opera and conducted the Mendelssohn Glee club. Stojowski had been recommended by the pianist Harold Bauer (1873-1951), who had been a pupil of Paderewski, and the Spanish cellist Pablo Casals (1876-1973).

Stojowski set sail in October 1905 and New York was his home for the rest of his life.

America loved him. He was acclaimed to be a very great pianist and a superb composer. He was a sought-after teacher and continued to teach after the Institute merged with the Julliard School in 1924 but he had previously headed the piano department at the Von Ende School of Music until 1917 following his first years at the Music Institute.

Because of the amount of students he had and the 'waiting list', he opened the Stojowski School of Music at his four storey house in Manhattan.

He had married the Peruvian pianist Luisa Morales-Macedo in New York in 1918. She was also a composer. They had three sons, Alfred born 1919, Henry born 1921 and Ignace, who lived from 1923 to 1984. Stojowski said that his sons were his finest compositions. He also taught himself the Spanish language which his wife spoke.

Stojowski retired from teaching in the late 1930s and died on 5 November 1946. He was 76.

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