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The Forgotten Swedish Master: Franz Berwald's Contribution to the Clarinet Repertoire

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Denmark has Carl Nielsen, Finland has Jean Sibelius, Norway has Edvard Grieg and Sweden has [Franz Berwald](#). A man who has been called one of the most neglected composers in music history. So obscure was he that in 1946 the Swedish postal service, given the choice between putting Franz Berwald or the Swedish Agricultural Show on a [postage stamp](#), went with the farmers. Yet he is known as Sweden's best romantic composer and he wrote three chamber works with clarinet. They are a septet, a quartet and a serenade.

How is it that a composer who is now finally beginning to collect some acclaim was overlooked for so long? Recognition of Franz Berwald is increasing with notable recordings by conductors such as Esa Pekka Solonen and Herbert Blomstedt as well as scholars devoting a full symposium to him in 1996 and, certainly, he is not the only composer to be essentially lost in music history. However, to be considered Sweden's "best Romantic composer," leads one to question the factors that have contributed to his obscurity.

The Berwald family was a large musical family and quite active in 18th and 19th century European orchestras in Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Russia. The family can be traced back to Franz Berwald's great grandfather Johan Daniel Berwald, said to have held the monopoly of music for weddings and funerals in the town of Königsberg in eastern part of Germany.¹ Given the 18th century practice of having a plethora of children the family grew quickly. Franz's father, a violinist, brought the Berwalds to Stockholm in 1773 when he joined the newly formed Opera Orchestra of the Swedish monarch [Gustav III](#).

French educated Gustav III, king of Sweden from 1771 – 1792, was a generous patron of the arts and is largely responsible for furthering the cultural atmosphere in Stockholm. In fact, many consider him to be "the founder of Swedish culture..."² He had grown up with love for the opera instilled in him by his mother Lovisa Ulrika, sister of Frederick the Great. She had brought French and Italian opera composers and singers to Sweden in the 1750's. Gustav III, in fact, was sitting at the Paris Opera when he received the news that he had ascended the Swedish throne. 1771, the first year of his reign, saw the founding of the Swedish Royal Academy of Music, later to become the Stockholm Conservatory, and the Royal Opera was inaugurated in 1773.

1782 brought the opening of the [Royal Opera House](#) in Stockholm, a state of the art theater that contained some of the most advanced machinery in all of Europe for that time. As well, Gustav III brought composers, many with Italian and French influences, to Sweden. These included J.G. Naumann, J.M. Kraus and [Abbé Georg Joseph Vogler](#), who would teach Crusell and later become Franz Berwald's godfather. These musicians were paid handsomely for their service and given much latitude for travel to the main continent.

Gustav III was assassinated in 1792, immortalized in Verdi's opera *Un ballo in maschera*, and though his successors were not nearly as enthusiastic funding the arts, Stockholm would benefit from the cultural advances seen during his reign for years to come.

Franz Berwald's life (1796 – 1868) spanned the 19th century as he was born a year before Schubert and died a year after Berlioz. His quest for individuality and independence as a composer embodied the "romantic artist." As well, he lived in a time of great social change in Europe. He saw the "French" style court of Gustav III as gaudy³ and viewed the court musicians of the era before him unfavorably.

Of Crusell, upon hearing of his death, Berwald, in 1839, wrote: "Had he lived in another time and under different circumstances, he might have reached further than the bottom stair to the muse at song's temple. Courtesy... had already in his youth lured him into social relationships that made any serious pursuit of art impossible. The graceful wife had to be lulled to sleep, the young lady needed some tender notes for her melancholy, the ensign in the guard needed a trill by which to perform his pirouette, and finally the man of the house himself demanded a score of variations – and the clarinet was to imbue all these wonderworks with its own compositions.... There is no harm greater than the harm done by having so much talent so poorly employed."⁴ One can deduce that Berwald felt the court musicians of the past were merely pawns of the royal court and forfeited their individuality as composers and performers.

Berwald, himself, had little formal education. He briefly attended a private school, which ended when he threw an unspecified object at the teacher. The rest of his training came as music studies with his father, his godfather Abbé Vogler as well as formal violin lessons Eduard Du Puy, conductor of the opera orchestra. Franz's father and uncle also had a music copying business, where Franz was undoubtedly enlisted to assist.

He gave his debut violin recital at age 6 and by 16 was a member of the Opera Orchestra. His earliest known composition was a set of variations for violin and orchestra dated 1816 and his first premier concert came in 1818, which included his Grand Septet for Winds and Strings. The review of this first concert would be indicative of the criticism he would encounter often in his career, especially in Sweden. This review and subsequent critiques can be viewed as a clash of musical values: the "Classical" critic meets the "Romantic" artist. Of Berwald the anonymous critic wrote: "...a young man of some promise... the septet modulates often and sometimes in a manner that leaves one wishing that this young and undoubtedly talented composer would acquaint himself more thoroughly with the rules of harmony and composition..."⁵

Berwald would have another encounter with a much harsher critic in 1821 when his Quartet for Piano and Winds was premiered. This time he did not take the criticism lightly. What ensued was a four part literary argument that highlighted the dichotomies of the "classical" and "romantic" perspectives of art in the early 19th century. Those who looked back and saw music in the traditions of the past and those who pushed forward and strove for their own voice. Though a mere 25 years of age, Franz Berwald publicly exhibited a brash confidence in his own abilities. This attitude would propel him through life, but undoubtedly made it more difficult for him to enter the inner circles of Stockholm's music establishment and find support, both musically and financially.

These articles are a tremendous primary source on how artistic arguments fit this time of change from the classical to the romantic periods. Specific quotes have been pulled from these editorials and will be viewed in the context of Berwald's Quartet for Piano and Winds. The concert took place on March 3, 1821 and the initial review was published in Argus on March 24, 1821.

The review begins with the following statement: "Franz Berwald, who with his earlier appearances, first as violinist and later as composer, raised great expectations among the public that through diligence and continued studies he would become an excellent artist, seems inclined to counter this hope by getting lost on detours."

It is not disputed that Franz Berwald had an innovative musical style dictated mainly in his use of modulation, melodic material, and orchestration. His work also has a rhythmic vitality, which is, at times, more like the music of Brahms than Crusell. Franz Berwald did have a clear understanding of was classical form, however. In the Quartet, movements one and three are in sonata-allegro form and movement two is in ternary form.

Using movement one as the example, the sonata form lays out as this:

Introduction	Exposition	Development	Recapitulation	Coda
mm. 1 – 7	mm. 8 – 157	mm. 157 – 233	mm. 234 – 340	mm. 341 – 346
7 measures	149 measures	77 measures	107 measures	6 measures
Eb	Eb – Bb - Bb	Bb ~ Bb	Eb – Bb - Eb	Eb

Are the elements within the form less rigid? Yes, most definitely, but this is not at all unusual for a Romantic composer.

A point of contention with the critic is Berwald's melodic style. He writes: "It appears that Mr. Berwald, in chasing after originality and striving to impress with grand effects, has diligently exiled everything melodic from his compositions."

As well, he writes: "...these most recent pieces seemed nothing more than constant summersaults from one isolated thought to another...." This is very true, Berwald's music does have a fragmented melodic style. His sonata form consists of thematic areas rather than three distinct themes.

The critic was likely perplexed by the beginning of the quartet, when the beautiful bassoon melody is

interrupted by seemingly unrelated thought. It comes too soon to be the secondary theme. Though there is no question when the secondary theme does finally arrive as we will hear in this example. The aural examples for this presentation are taken from a Hyperion CD and is performed by the Gaudier Ensemble. The clarinetist is Richard Hosford. [\[AURAL EX1\]](#) Sound clip courtesy of (Sound clip courtesy of [Hyperion Records](#)) Can't hear this sound clip? Click on the Free RealPlayer link on [this page](#).

The critic's "summersaults" can be heard in the closing section of the first movement exposition. In all, movement one has 8 themes in movement one and we find 6 of them in the closing section. [\[AURAL EX2\]](#) (Sound clip courtesy of [Hyperion Records](#))

The critic also finds fault in Berwald's treatment of the wind instruments: "Most incomprehensible of all was the quartet, in which the wind instruments are utilized completely contrary to their nature; instead of singing, they are forced to do odd runs, and so on." We have already heard some of the "odd runs" in the clarinet part, which by the way, fall very naturally. Berwald tends to divide the instruments into two groups: the piano versus the three wind instruments who are often treated as one instrument with shared melodic material as heard in this example from movement three: [\[AURAL EX3\]](#) (Sound clip courtesy of [Hyperion Records](#))

Now, we come to Berwald's response to the review. Needless to say, he was not pleased and published a retort in *Almänna Journalen*. He writes: "I was dumbfounded to read the review Argus has offered the public of my recent compositions." He goes on to acknowledge that he "anticipated that these works, composed in my own unique style, would leave a less than favorable impression." He then goes on to defend himself with this statement: "...the reviewer should keep in mind that all experiments based on an unusual system, with innovative instrumentation and innovative use of instruments, will always in the beginning run into widespread difficulty." As a romantic artist Berwald is declaring his independence and his realization that he has a unique voice, which he refused to compromise.

What is most striking about this retort, however, is Berwald's brusque and often condescending tone with the critic. He writes: "He should at least not try to impress us with inaccurate representations, and certainly not presume to detail the special attributes of an art form that he clearly does not understand." As well, Berwald includes: "...if he has the ability to read sheet music, which I seriously doubt..." Biographers of Berwald often describe him as having a difficult personality. Felix Mendelsohn, after spending Christmas with Berwald in 1829, found him arrogant. These social difficulties most likely affected his stature in Stockholm and prevented him from attaining respect and positions in the musical community. Case in point was when the conductorship of the court orchestra was awarded to his "less-talented" cousin with whom he, incidentally, had strained relations. This certainly made it more difficult to have his new works performed by the best orchestra in town!

Following Berwald's response, the anonymous critic takes offense to Berwald's tone. He writes: "It is not without some bewilderment that I have read Herr Franz Berwald's reply.... [I] find it hard to believe that the aforementioned review would have engendered such a rigid tone." The article goes on to reiterate the reviewer's concern with the lack of melody, harmony, and general musical understanding. He also questions whether Berwald's newly conceived style is worthy of praise with: "However, what must and indeed does engender bewilderment, is the explanation that his compositions are rooted in a new system that he himself has invented.... The question is whether this music is grounded in any system at all." He also goes on to show his general lack of acceptance of anything new with the statement: "It is true that experimental systems are rarely met with great confidence, and even more rarely do they deserve it."

Franz Berwald gets the last word with his final retort where he continues his condescending manner. "If one had reason to believe from earlier comments made by the reviewer, that he is passing judgment on an art form for which he has little understanding, then one can be fully convinced of it by his later reflections." Berwald also challenges the reviewer's notion that he is attempting to invent a new system with "Does he really believe that the difference between a system change, based simply on alterations to certain finite parts (modulations and the relationship between resolution and harmony) and a total paradigm shift is so trivial that the former might as well be called the latter?" To Berwald, his innovations are a result of adapting the musical practices of the past to invent his own style.

Berwald also makes a good point with how much credence an artist should give those critical of their work. "Moreover, when the reviewer announces his intention that, upon the receipt of the sheet music to the above-mentioned works, he would promise a comprehensive assessment of the music (which in his estimation violates all established rules) then he begs the question whether art or artists should submit to these frightening standards, where every innovation is condemned and where all is subordinate to what has come before." He is really questioning the ability to set artistic standards for what is correct and what should be accepted. Of music he writes: "Music is an art form whose boundaries exist only in time. – To appoint oneself as exclusive judge of it is an absolute absurdity."

Undoubtedly, Franz Berwald did not make a friend of this critic and at 25 years of age he might have gained more from showing a bit of restraint. Perhaps, he would have benefited from the book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. He, certainly, was a composer not afraid to stand up for himself and his music has stood the

test of time.

Of Berwald, Carl Nielsen wrote in 1911: "neither the media, money nor power can damage or benefit good Art. It will always find some simple, decent artists who forge ahead and produce and stand up for their works. In Sweden you have the finest example of this: Berwald"⁶

Today, [Franz Berwald's](#) works can be heard on classical stations and in concert halls thanks to conductors such as Paavo Jarvi, Esa Pekka Solonen, Herbert Blomstedt and groups such as the Gaudier Ensemble. As clarinetists we have three chamber works from an unrepresented period in our repertoire and Bärenreiter has just added the parts for the uniquely orchestrated Serenade to the Berwald collected edition. Franz Berwald spent his life staunchly committed to his unique musical talent and is now beginning to receive the praise and respect that comes with being "Sweden's Best Romantic Composer." And yes, he did finally make it on to a [postage stamp](#).

1 Robert Layton, Franz Berwald, London: Anthony Blond Ltd., 1959, pp. ???.

2 Toyne, S.M., The Scandinavians in History, London" Edward Arnold & Co., 1948, pp. 225.

3 Schegel letter 1839, aug. 21

4 ibid

5 Robert Layton, Franz Berwald, London: Anthony Blond Ltd., 1959, pp. 30.

6 Grove Dictionary, "Franz Berwald" Daniel M. Grimley vol. 3 pp.480