

Franz Berwald (1796–1868)

The 4 Symphonies

Franz Berwald is the most commanding composer Sweden has thus far produced, and the leading Scandinavian symphonist before Sibelius. Yet he remained in relative obscurity in his own lifetime and only found recognition during the first decade or so of the present century, thanks largely to the championship of such important Swedish figures as the conductor-composers Tor Aulin and Wilhelm Stenhammar.

Why did Berwald's music make so little headway either in his native country or anywhere else in Europe, and why was he given the cold shoulder by the Swedish musical establishment of his day? First, there is the fact that he absented himself from Stockholm during crucial periods of his career (from 1828 to 1842, and from 1846 to 1849); secondly, it is worth recalling that the Berwald his countrymen encountered was the composer of operettas such as *Modehandlerskan* (The Modiste) and *Jag går i kloster* (I Take the Veil) and cantatas including *Konung Carl XII's seger vid Narva* (Charles XII's Victory at Narva), all heard during his return to Stockholm between 1843 and 1846. These works give a very different picture of the composer than that formed by posterity from the four symphonies on which his reputation now chiefly rests. Moreover, in the 1840s and '50s, there was no really first-class symphony orchestra in Sweden to play the symphonies, indeed no permanent orchestra at all apart from that of the Royal Opera, Stockholm, and no effort to put symphony concerts on a regular footing until the 1870s. Small wonder that Berwald strove so hard to gain acceptance as an opera composer, particularly in view of his youthful experience in the Royal Opera Orchestra: he composed (or planned) at least twelve works for the stage. And (as seen in Erling Lomnäs's documentary biography published in 1979) in his dealings with others, Berwald did not always serve his own best interests: Mendelssohn met him in Berlin in the early 1830s and mentions his arrogance in a letter to the Swedish composer Adolf Fredrik Lindblad.

Berwald was born in Stockholm the year before Schubert's birth, and died in the same year as Rossini; thus his career encompassed those of Chopin, Bellini, Schumann, Mendelssohn and, save for one year, Berlioz. The family was of German stock and has been traced back to Bärwalde in der Neumark, south of Stettin. Berwald's father, Christian Friedrich Georg (1740-1825) studied with Franz Benda in Berlin and during the 1770s settled in Stockholm, where he played in the Royal Opera Orchestra. In his youth Franz also joined the Royal Opera as a violinist; but his gifts were multi-faceted and, possessing a fertile and resourceful mind, he spent many of his productive years on non-musical projects. He founded an enterprising and successful orthopaedic institute in Berlin (1835-41), based on the most advanced techniques of the time – some of the apparatus that he himself devised for the treatment of patients was, in all practical essentials, still in use as a basis for therapy until the present century. (It is worth noting that Berwald had no scientific training and, indeed, precious little formal education of any kind.)

All four symphonies, as well as the five orchestral tone-poems including *Elfenspiel* (Play of the Elves) and *Ernste und heitere Grillen* (Serious and Joyful Fancies), are from just after this period (1842-45). Following his years at the orthopaedic institute and his marriage to Mathilde Scherer, one of his employees there, Berwald seemed to take on a new lease of life. He went to Vienna, where success – albeit short-lived – released a burst of creative energy. There his symphonic poems, and in particular *Elfenspiel*, were heard with appreciation and admiration. He went back to Vienna again in the latter half of the decade with Jenny Lind, who sang his stage cantata *Ein ländliches Verlobungsfest*

in Schweden (A Rustic Betrothal Feast in Sweden) at the Theater an der Wien. The esteem in which he was held in Austria is evident in his election to honorary membership of the Salzburg Mozarteum.

After his return to Sweden in 1849, Berwald was passed over for two important posts to which he felt himself entitled, conductor of the Royal Opera in Stockholm and director of music in Uppsala. He had recourse again to making his living outside music, and during most of the 1850s was manager of a glass-works and a saw-mill in Sandö, Ångermanland, in the north of Sweden; he even briefly ran a brick factory. He was also active as a polemicist on a wide variety of social issues showing his progressive vision and sympathies. His hostility to the conservative Swedish musical establishment (and theirs to him) was such that when, in the very last year of his life, he was appointed to the chair of composition at the Royal Music Academy in Stockholm, the opposition turned out in sufficient strength to unseat him briefly on a second vote!

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Only one of Berwald's symphonies, the *Sinfonie sérieuse* (1842) was performed in his own lifetime: his masterpiece, the *Sinfonie singulière* (1845), had to wait 60 years to be heard. However, the *Sérieuse* was not his earliest effort at symphonic composition. A Symphony in A, composed in 1820, was performed in Stockholm on 3 March 1821 in the same programme as his Violin Concerto in C sharp minor, but survives only in fragmentary form. In a letter from Berlin in 1829, Berwald disowned all his previous works save for the Serenade for tenor and chamber ensemble (1825) and the Septet in B flat (1828), so that to all intents and purposes we must regard the *Sérieuse* as his first symphony. It is clear that Berwald himself did so, since the autograph score of the Symphony in E flat bears the number 4, not 5.

Sinfonie sérieuse (No 1) in G minor

1. *Allegro con energia*

2. *Adagio maestoso*

3. *Stretto*

4. *Finale: Adagio – Allegro molto*

There are Beethovenian touches in the 1820 symphony, and in the *Sinfonie sérieuse* echoes of the “Eroica” surface in the second thematic group of the Finale. Yet, as so often in Berwald, what one at first takes for resonances of earlier composers turns out on closer examination to be prophecies of things to come – in the *Sérieuse* a suggestion of Bruckner in the slow movement, and Dvořák in the main idea of the Finale's G minor section. Nevertheless, much of this music sounds like no-one else. The symphony plunges in directly, without any introductory preamble – a procedure Berwald would follow again in the *Sinfonie singulière*. The title *Sérieuse* need not be taken too literally: there is nothing particularly solemn or grave about the work, although it does tap a deeper vein of feeling than the *Capricieuse* or E flat symphonies. It also has greater contrapuntal interest than its companions, as the opening movement's first subject shows. This movement has an unusual tonal plan: its home key is G minor, and the bridge subject which plays an important role in the development appears in the subdominant before modulating to the relative major, B flat, where the second group begins. At the reprise the first group is restated in A minor, and the tonic major is established only with the second group. The slow movement, like those of Berwald's other symphonies, follows a more or less ternary outline; and the scherzo, too, again like those of the other works (except the *Sinfonie capricieuse*, where there is none) is laid out along traditional lines. At the start of the Finale, the material of the slow movement returns, and, though the movement proper is in sonata form, the beginning of the reprise telescopes the first subject.

The autograph of the *Sinfonie sérieuse* contains the inscription “Vienna, 1842”, so it was presumably finished before mid-March when Berwald returned to Sweden. Although the work was played only a year after its composition, under the baton of Berwald’s cousin Johan Fredrik Berwald (1787-1861), the under-rehearsed performance did nothing to advance his cause.

Sinfonie capricieuse (No 2) in D major

1. *Allegro*
2. *Andante*
3. *Finale: Allegro assai*

The *Sinfonie capricieuse* in D major has a more complex history than the others. The bound volume of the autograph disappeared at the time of Berwald’s death, but a short score survives whose title-page bears the titles “Sinfonie singulière”, “Sinfonie pathétique” (both crossed through) and finally “Sinfonie capricieuse”. Its date (“Nyköping, 18 June 1842”) corresponds with an entry in Mathilde Berwald’s diary referring to its completion. The *Capricieuse* was the last of Berwald’s symphonies to reach the public: a performing edition prepared by Ernst Ellberg was played in Stockholm on 9 January 1914, conducted by Armas Järnefelt, Sibelius’s brother-in-law. A subsequent edition by the doyen of Berwald scholars, Nils Castegren, was prepared for Berwald centenary celebrations in 1968, and it is this text that is now in general currency.

The opening *Allegro*, like the first movement of Schumann’s Piano Concerto (first performed publicly in 1845), is virtually monothematic: its two main ideas are so closely related rhythmically that they can hardly be regarded as independent. The slow movement, though it may at first seem to belong to the world of Mendelssohn, has a distinctive eloquence, its chromaticism producing a specifically Scandinavian flavour; and the *Finale* contains some powerful and individual writing.

Sinfonie singulière (No 3) in C major

1. *Allegro fuocoso*
2. *Adagio – Scherzo: Allegro assai – Adagio*
3. *Finale: Presto*

The autograph of the *Sinfonie singulière* is dated March 1845, though, as we have seen, this was not the first time Berwald toyed with the idea of using this title. However the designation here is no misnomer: the opening of the symphony is quite unlike any other music of its time – or, for that matter, of any other. The harmonies may not be in advance of Mendelssohn or Schumann, but their use reveals a fresh and novel sensibility. And it is not too fanciful, I think, to attribute the transparent textures to the quality of light in the northern latitudes. There is no doubt as to Berwald’s keen classical instincts: the influence of Beethoven can still be discerned in the transitional passages where he hammers away insistently at a short pregnant motive. Berwald enfolds the light and mercurial Scherzo within the body of the slow movement, an experiment that he first tried in the Septet (1828) and then developed still further in his String Quartet in E flat (1849), where both the slow movement and scherzo are embedded in the first movement. The *Finale* has tremendous fire, and its robust, spirited main theme makes a splendid contrast to the languid poetry of the *Adagio*. There is a refreshing vigour that is far removed from the pale atmosphere of the Swedish musical world of the 1840s and from the more academic, German orientation of such Scandinavian contemporaries as Niels Gade. Tor Aulin gave the first performance of the *Singulière* in Stockholm on 10 January 1905.

Sinfonie “No 4” in E flat major

1. *Allegro risoluto*

2. *Adagio*

3. *Scherzo: Allegro molto*

4. *Finale: Allegro vivace*

Berwald completed the *Symphony in E flat major*, his last, only a month after the *Singulière*, in April 1845. It is the only one without a title; though he did at one point consider calling it “Sinfonie naïve”, the autograph is inscribed “Symphony no. 4 in E flat”. Berwald tried to interest Auber in the score through the Swedish embassy in Paris, but it remained unperformed until the composer Ludvig Norman, a loyal champion of Berwald’s music, conducted it in Stockholm on 9 April 1878.

The Symphony in E flat is one of the sunniest of Berwald’s scores, and its invention is both fertile and subtle. The opening *Allegro risoluto* is spirited and brilliantly scored. It begins with stuttering B flats, and the first subject is a succession of rising thirds followed by a gentle chromatic descent – all typical of Berwald. The delicately witty second subject exemplifies Berwald’s fondness for syncopation. The *Adagio* is based on a theme from an unpublished keyboard work of 1844, *En landtlig bröllopsfest* (A Rustic Wedding). Its symmetrical phrases reflect something of the well-regulated emotional climate in which Berwald’s inspiration was conceived, yet at the same time radiating great warmth and humanity. The *Scherzo* reveals his sympathy for the Viennese classics and has a Haydnesque lightness of touch and textural clarity unusual at that time. There is a stroke of considerable novelty in the finale. At the beginning of the recapitulation, when one expects the first group to be restated, Berwald surprises us with an entirely new theme. Although the formal innovations of Berlioz, Chopin and others often occur just at this structural point, the first subject being telescoped or the order of the two main themes reversed, this particular device of Berwald’s has few, if any, precedents.

However interesting his departures from convention may be, it is the quality of Berwald’s thematic invention, his transparent textures and expert orchestration that engage us as listeners. His musical world is not one in which the heroic or epic play a major part; not for him the white heat produced by Berlioz’s *Romeo* or *Harold* symphonies – his emotional orbit is more carefully circumscribed. Yet his was an original voice and a thorough and compelling technical mastery, and any history of the symphony in the nineteenth century would be incomplete without him.

Robert Layton