

Franz Berwald (1796–1868)

The Symphonies

Franz Adolf Berwald was born in Stockholm in 1796 – one year after the death of that ‘Anacreon’ of Swedish parody song-writers Carl Michael Bellman and one year before the birth of Franz Schubert. Berwald’s father, Christian, who had studied the violin with Benda in Berlin, settled in the Swedish capital as a member of the Royal Opera Orchestra in 1773 (several years before Joseph Kraus) and married the daughter of a Stockholm brewer in 1789. Franz followed in his footsteps and made rapid progress on the violin – performing concertos by Pleyel and Viotti in Uppsala at the age of eleven and joining the Royal Opera Orchestra five years later. His earliest compositions date from 1817 – two lost works (an orchestral Fantasia and a Septet) and a rather naive concerto for two violins. Three years later he composed a more substantial Violin Concerto (in C sharp minor!) and wrote his first symphony. Considering his training and background, it is not surprising that Berwald composed some wonderful chamber music – the two late String Quartets (1849) and the surviving Septet in particular. It is strange, however, that Berwald’s writing for violin is not particularly idiomatic and is often extremely difficult (as can be seen in the taxing first violin part of the early symphonic fragment).

Symphony in A major (1820) (fragment completed by Duncan Druce)

All that remains of the first Symphony (in A, 1820) is an autograph manuscript score of the first movement from which the ending has been torn off. Since the musical argument of this fragment is so strong (and even substantially longer than the first movements of any of the four existing symphonies) I approached my friend and colleague Duncan Druce to make a completion for me. His task was not helped by the abrupt ending of the torso just as Berwald was introducing some new violin figuration. Nevertheless the final sixty-six bars he has added (to the 425 or so of Berwald) make subtle and appropriate use of the composer’s previous material and provide a satisfying whole for our consideration.

The Symphony in A received its first (and presumably complete?) performance together with the Violin Concerto on 3 March 1821. The commentator in the *Argus* gave a damning account of the concert and chastized Berwald in the strongest terms for his misplaced originality. (In fact Berwald suffered the same fate in the *Nya Dagligt Allehanda* on 6 December 1843 after the first performance of the *Sinfonie sérieuse* and there were no further performances of any of his symphonies during his lifetime.) Berwald was clearly incensed by the earlier review, yet he was in no way deterred and wrote a challenging reply. Nevertheless it must have contributed to his growing disenchantment with the conservative Stockholm musical establishment and might explain why he left Sweden for two substantial periods (1828–1842 and 1846–1849), travelling to Berlin as well as Paris and Vienna.

The eleven bars of *Adagio* introduction to the A major fragment set the harmonic germ of this sonata-form movement – a tritone between A and D sharp, which also initializes the *Allegro moderato* first theme and becomes a clever enharmonic pivot which we would more closely associate with Wagner. This is put to good effect in the tutti which precedes the closing third idea of the exposition (and consequently again towards the end of Duncan Druce’s completion) and even more surprisingly in three sustained pianissimo woodwind chords near the close of the development section. The introduction of the folk-like (and eminently whistle-able!) third idea is certainly original – clarinet and bassoon in octaves and then with flute entertainingly in canon. It is derived from a repeated Beethovenian dotted motif and reappears just before the recapitulation and in the completion. (Berwald does something rather similar in the first movement of the E flat symphony where a third

idea is also introduced at the end of the exposition.) At bar 65 there is a brief passage which one could only describe as strikingly evocative of Mendelssohn were it not the case that the latter was still a child of eleven. Furthermore the real second subject (cellos, bar 93) strongly anticipates the parallel cello second subject from Schubert's 'Unfinished' Symphony which was written just two years later! Time after time again in Berwald's music we will encounter these condensed prophecies of things to come.

Despite his own defence of the A major Symphony, Berwald wrote to his sisters in December 1829 from Berlin making clear that of the music he left behind in Sweden only the Septet (revised or composed the previous year) and a Serenade (1825, but only a fragment remains) should be performed. Clearly Berwald destroyed some of his compositions made in the 1820s but fortunately a *Konzertstück* for bassoon (1827) has survived intact and deserves revival. Berwald spent over ten years in Berlin – he met Mendelssohn who disliked him (although he was praised by Liszt) – and in 1835 opened an orthopaedic institute which flourished for six years. Apart from some minor stage works he composed very little, especially in comparison with the early 1840s. At this point a parallel might well be made with Schumann. In 1841, having completed his opera *Estrella de Soria* in Vienna, Berwald married Mathilde Scherer (one of his employees from Berlin) which clearly sparked his creative imagination. He was inspired to compose four symphonies in as many years, in addition to five orchestral tone poems.

'Sinfonie sérieuse' Symphony No 1 in G minor (1842)

1. *Allegro con energia*

2. *Adagio maestoso*

3. *Stretto*

4. *Finale Adagio – Allegro molto*

In March 1842 Berwald returned with his wife to his native Stockholm and on 2 December 1843 his cousin Johan Frederik conducted a benefit concert for the composer at the Royal Opera which included the premiere of his *Sinfonie sérieuse*. This highly original work, which he now called his First Symphony, is bursting with fresh and innovative ideas. Although the autograph score is headed 'Vienna 1842', tests have shown that these words were added later, and the discrepancies with a manuscript second horn part indicate that the last movement was later revised and that this fair score was actually made after the first performance. Having finally enjoyed a more favourable press in Vienna (for his tone poems, and especially *Elfenspiel*) and having been made an honorary member of the Salzburg Mozarteum, Berwald probably hoped that the new work would be well received in his home city. Sadly the performance was badly prepared and it received the most appalling notices. With hindsight we can see why, since in many ways Berwald was ahead of his time. His public would have been more at home with the Mannheim School rather than this 'old musician-of-the-future' (as an astonished Hans von Bülow described him). Berwald was after all a fine craftsman – he wrote an interesting textbook on composition – and was not primarily concerned with being popular. In reality he had many gifts outside music, as is evident by the lasting success of his orthopaedic techniques, and from his versatility as manager in the 1850s of a sawmill and glass works in northern Sweden, in addition to his being an active pamphleteer on social issues.

All of the significant characteristics of Berwald's style can be found in the *Sinfonie sérieuse*. The opening two-note figure (which he uses often) is unexpected and Berwald capitalizes on this Haydn-esque shock at the reprise and the start of the recapitulation. This two-note motif reappears in the *Adagio* and in the *Finale*, but there are other thematic links throughout the work. All four movements begin with a scalic theme which rises to the sixth note and then generally falls away, encouraging diminished harmonies and sinister overtones. Berwald tends to make excessive use of

sequential repetition: we find short melodic motifs and rhythmic patterns from which an entire movement is developed. In contrast we find occasional melodies with a timeless sweep – like the second subject group in this first movement (as also in the ‘Golconda’ overture) clearly conceived directly in orchestral sound. The dangers of repetitive squareness are sometimes evident (noticeably in the *Sinfonie capricieuse* and *Sinfonie singulière Finale*) but generally relieved by frequent use of three-bar phrases, syncopation in all manner of contexts, a developed chromaticism and unusual harmonic juxtaposition. The orchestration is innovative (especially the use of the brass and timpani) extending to melodic and even solo use of the trombones. There are numerous fleeting allusions to the sound-world of other composers: the surprise and daring of C P E Bach and Haydn, the ‘hammer’ motifs of Beethoven, a tremendous tension and irregularity which we associate with Berlioz, an *Adagio* with a hint of Bruckner, a classic Mendelssohnian scherzo and a *Finale* (introduced by material from the slow movement) with episodic touches of Brahms, Dvořák and Tchaikovsky!

'Sinfonie capricieuse' Symphony No 2 in D major (1842)

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

The background to the *Sinfonie capricieuse* is surrounded in mystery. A sketch survives of a symphonic short score in D and dated ‘Nyköping 18 June 1842’ and this is confirmed in Mathilde’s diary one week later. The apparent full score of this work went missing at Berwald’s death and, despite a reward offered in 1910, it has never been found. There is absolutely no clear evidence to link the surviving short score with the missing full score, but in 1914 the first performance was given in Stockholm from orchestral material prepared by Ernst Ellberg. A more stylish re-working of the symphony was made in 1968 by the noted Berwald scholar Nils Castegren, and it is his edition (published with the facsimile short score in 1970) which we perform on these discs.

Although there is no scherzo, the usual characteristics are all present. The opening *Allegro* is virtually monothematic and based on short motifs often in three- or five-bar phrase lengths. Further use of syncopations and hemiolas, chromaticism and unexpected harmonic progressions help to sustain the momentum. There is an eloquent slow movement with a developed contrasting middle section followed directly by a lengthy tarantella-like *Finale*. The latter movement is in grave danger of outstaying its welcome, but somehow it keeps afloat, thanks to Berwald’s freshness and spontaneity.

'Sinfonie singulière' Symphony No 3 in C major (1845)

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

It is precisely these qualities which imbue the *Sinfonie singulière* with such life and beauty, and it is Berwald’s individual treatment of otherwise simple harmonies which makes the opening *Allegro fuocososo* so remarkable. The autograph is dated March 1845, although it was not performed until 1905. After the optimistic vision of the first movement, a more sombre *Adagio* follows which itself encloses a mercurial scherzo. The syncopated opening of the *Finale* heralds an unusually extended movement, mostly in the tonic minor (except for a reprise of the *Adagio* material in the dominant) but concludes in a whirlwind of C major.

Symphony No 4 in E flat major ('Sinfonie naïve') (1845)

1. *Allegro risoluto*

2. *Adagio*

3. *Scherzo Allegro molto*

4. *Finale Allegro vivace*

Only one month later Berwald completed his Fourth Symphony (originally titled 'Sinfonie naïve') in E flat. A call to attention from trumpets and horns introduces a magical phrase of rising thirds in cellos that gently descends chromatically – any hint of 'Eroica' being transformed into *Symphonie fantastique*! This movement has great propulsion (perhaps helped by the lack of exposition repeat and strongly hemiolic second-subject group) but most unusually closes with quiet reminiscences of a lyrical dotted melody, which also reappeared above a twenty-four-bar A flat pedal in an astonishing harmonic transformation just before the recapitulation. After each movement of his symphonies Berwald wrote an approximate timing in the score. Initially this would appear helpful when deciding upon a suitable tempo (for example, the common time *Allegro* movements should generally be taken *alla breve*) but since they do not represent an accurate timing of an actual performance they should not be taken too literally. The *Adagio* of this symphony is a particularly unreliable example – a proposed nine-and-a-half minutes would produce an unbearably slow tempo. The choice of D major for this movement makes a wonderful contrast and not surprisingly the theme (based on an unpublished tone poem, *A Rustic Wedding* for organ) has taken on the status of a national song.

The *Scherzo* is Haydnesque and the *Finale* too is full of humour and the ending unexpected, bringing to a close a work which finally earned the composer real critical acclaim at its first performance (albeit ten years after his death).

The overtures

Overture to 'Estrella de Soria' (1841)

On 9 April 1862 Berwald finally saw his opera *Estrella de Soria* performed at the Royal Opera. It was quite well received and played five times before disappearing without trace from the repertoire. The brief introduction to this tragic overture gives a foretaste of Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* but there is no official concert version and the overture runs directly into the first scene. Several proposals have been written for a loud concert ending but I have opted for one which concludes with the reflective music from the end of the whole opera: the love-stricken Estrella, Countess of Soria, stabs herself as her lover Salvaterra sails away with her rival, the beautiful Moorish princess Zulma.

Overture to 'The Queen of Golconda' (1864)

The attractive overture to *The Queen of Golconda* (his last opera) was completed in 1864 although it was not performed on the stage until the centenary of Berwald's death in April 1968. The overture however has become quite a repertoire piece and it contains an interesting passage for four solo cellos (not dissimilar to Rossini's *William Tell*) as well as eight bars where the first trumpet is required to 'flutter-tongue'.

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Clearly, the 1946 and 1968 celebrations have brought Berwald's music to a wider public and his name was adopted for the concert hall built for the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra in the 1970s. There is no doubting his status as an extremely interesting historical figure and the 'sérieuse', 'singulière' and 'naïve' symphonies deserve to be much more popular. I personally find the A major fragment

quite an extraordinary apprentice work. As Robert Layton has written (in his superb *Guide to the Symphony*): ‘It is the quality of Berwald’s thematic invention, his transparent textures and expert orchestration, and the generosity of spirit that informs his musical personality that make his music engage both our sympathies and our affection.’

During the past few years I have had the pleasure of conducting several orchestras in Sweden and have been surprised by a certain lack of pride displayed by some Swedish people towards their own culture. I have even been told that ‘typically Swedish’ might imply something rather dull and boring and the word ‘Osvensk’ (meaning ‘un-Swedish’) may be used as a compliment for something foreign and therefore by definition more interesting! Whatever the reason, it seems strange to me that Norway, Denmark and Finland have managed to capitalize on the popularity of Grieg, Nielsen and Sibelius whilst Sweden at the moment seems to promote Danish and Finnish music more than its own. This applies as much to contemporary music as to music of the past – from Roman and Kraus to Alfvén, Stenhammar and beyond. Since the advent of the CD this situation is being steadily rectified and I hope the present recordings will further that cause. I shall never forget my astonishment when I first heard the opening bars of the *Sinfonie singulière* as a student some twenty-five years ago! Little did I realize then that the composer’s two-hundredth anniversary might be such a cause for celebration.

Roy Goodman