

Rediscovering Great Keyboard Repertoire for One Piano, Four Hands

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2020 MTNA Virtual National Conference

Why “rediscovering”? Sometimes the profile of a composer, however august, does not protect particular pieces in their output – even excellent ones – from suffering neglect. More to the point, the repertoire for one piano, four-hands (also called piano duet) offers many practical benefits for piano teachers and their studios. Every aspect of piano technique in pieces for two hands is present by definition in music for four hands, only now with the added important dimension of collaborative music-making. We also have observed that students often become more motivated when they play with their peers!

Among the invaluable benefits of assigning four-hand pieces within the studio, piano duets:

- acquaint students to music by great composers;
- reinforce healthy keyboard technique;
- train ensemble and collaborative skills;
- offer teachers new pedagogical opportunities.

Incorporating duet literature will prompt plenty of teachable moments for such topics as phrasing, cueing, pedaling, color, articulation, tone, rhythmic exactitude or elasticity, and dynamic shaping, particularly as relevant to discerning which musical material appears in the foreground, middleground, or background. Students will learn to listen and adjust to one another in real time rehearsal and performance. Piano duets provide a splendid gateway to accompanying (vocal or instrumental) and chamber music.

Another advantage to assigning piano duets is that many of these pieces are *short*! Their addition to a comprehensive solo program should not detract from preparing students for recitals, competitions, or auditions. Furthermore, many duets offer useful models for the aspiring composers in piano studios: often these pieces have a simple binary or ternary form, yet within each section a wealth of invention applies to the handling of melodic material, harmony, rhythm, and phrase relationships.

It is important to note that much of the piano duet repertoire consists of arrangements of overtures, symphonies, choruses, large chamber works, and so forth. For the better part of the 19th and early 20th centuries these arrangements provided music-lovers with the most immediate access to the experiences they would have enjoyed from the opera or concert hall. For this presentation, however, we have focused on pieces directly conceived for the medium.

Pieces referenced in this presentation:

Franz Schubert Allegro in A minor, D. 947, Op. 144, “*Lebensstürme*” Henle, Dover, Schirmer, Alfred
imslp.org

Out of all the great Viennese Classic Era composers, it is Schubert more than Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven who composed the most music for piano duet. His four-hand output consists of fourteen marches, six polonaises, six independent works (including the *Lebensstürme* and the *Fantasy in F Minor, D. 940*), four sets of variations, three rondos, two sonatas (including the “*Gran Duo*” in C major), and a set of dances. Next to Schubert, it is Mozart whose nine works make up the most significant body of Classic Era music for one piano four hands, particularly the Sonatas in F major, K. 497 and C major, K. 521.

It is no accident that piano duets begin to emerge in the latter half of the 18th century. Baroque Era keyboards only had five octaves; it was only as keyboard evolution resulted in larger, stronger instruments with six or seven octaves that composers saw potential in writing for two performers at one keyboard.

Further Reading:

John Gillespie, *Five Centuries of Keyboard Music* (New York: Dover, 1965)

Peter Neubold, *Franz Schubert: the Music and the Man* (Los Angeles: Univ. of California, 1997)

Dallas Weekley & Nancy Arganbright, *Schubert’s Music for Piano Four-hands* (New York: Kjos, 1990)

Johannes Brahms Waltzes, Op. 39
No. 14 in A minor
No. 15 in A major

Henle, Dover, Schirmer, Alfred
imslp.org

As the piano found its way into more bourgeois homes throughout the 19th century, composers and publishers supplied an ever-growing demand for what was known as *Hausmusik*. Typically this took the form of collections of short pieces of mostly intermediate-level difficulty: characteristic pieces like dances or marches, or pieces inspired by national and ethnic styles.

Robert Schumann contributed a total of 33 such works. Johannes Brahms produced some of the most enduring pieces in the entire duet literature with his *Variations on a Theme of Schumann*, Op. 23; *Waltzes*, Op. 39; *Liebeslieder* and *Neue Liebeslieder*, Opp. 52 and 65 (both with chorus); and *21 Hungarian Dances*. So popular were these pieces, they helped make Brahms financially independent. Tellingly, Brahms gave no opus numbers to his Hungarian Dances: only three are completely original; the rest are his wonderfully crafted settings of Central Eastern European melodies – some traditional, others contemporary.

Further Reading:

Michael Musgrave, *The Music of Brahms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985)
Jan Swafford, *Johannes Brahms: a Biography* (New York: Vintage, 1997)

Antonín Dvořák Slavonic Dances, Opp. 46 and 72
Op. 46, No. 8 in G minor
Op. 72, No. 2 in E minor

Henle, Dover, Schirmer
imslp.org

In contrast to the majority of Brahms' *Hungarian Dances*, all sixteen *Slavonic Dances*, Opp. 46 & 72, by Antonín Dvořák are entirely original. Brahms connected the young Dvořák with publisher Fritz Simrock, whose publication of Op. 46 catapulted Dvořák to international fame. These pieces are more substantial and feature characteristic Slavic idioms among their variety of traditional dances of Bohemian, Moravian, or Czech origin. The pair of pieces given here both share a triple meter but could not be more different in character. Op. 72, No. 2 in E minor is a *starodávny*, an older-generation dance, whereas Op. 46, No. 8 in G minor is a presto *furiant* full of hemiolas, major/minor modal shifts, and breathless energy.

Further Reading:

Michael Beckerman (ed.), *Dvořák and his World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993)

Cécile Chaminade *Pièces Romantiques*, Op. 55
No. 1 in F major, *Primavera*
No. 6 in C major, *Rigaudon*

Paris, Enoch, Freres & Costallat
imslp.org

No survey of four-hand music is complete without mentioning Gabriel Fauré's *Dolly Suite*, Georges Bizet's *Jeux d'enfants*, or Maurice Ravel's *Ma mère l'oye*. Cécile Chaminade's six *Pièces romantiques*, Op. 55, make a lovely addition to the aforementioned suites. Chaminade was the first female composer to be awarded France's *Légion d'honneur*. Nowadays her *Concertino for Flute and Orchestra in D Major* is her most performed work; in her lifetime, however, she was popular on both sides of the Atlantic. Equally at home in the concert hall and salon, Chaminade wrote over 350 compositions including many short lyric pieces for piano that display elegance, clarity, and melodic beauty.

Further Reading:

Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women, and Pianos: a Social History* (New York: Dover, 1954)
Calum Macdonald, "Cécile Chaminade: Piano Music, vols. 1-3; Peter Jacobs, piano," Hyperion, 1996
Jonathan Summers, "Cécile Chaminade," *A-Z of Pianists*, Naxos.com, 2008

Mélanie (Mel) Bonis (1858-1937) *Suite en forme de Valses*, Op. 35
No. 1 in C-sharp minor, *Ballabile*

Furore

Bonis was born in Paris to a petit bourgeois Catholic family. Cesar Franck recommended the self-taught 16-year-old Mélanie for admission to the Paris Conservatoire, where she was a classmate of Debussy. Unfortunately for her career, her parents arranged her marriage to a wealthy industrialist twenty-five years her senior who did not share her musical or spiritual passions. Bonis became fully occupied with raising her husband's children from his previous marriages and then later more of their own. Throughout her life she suffered from the interior struggle between her love of music and the domestic role society expected her to play. She adopted the ambiguous pseudonym "Mel" to help mitigate the pervasive chauvinism of her time.

Despite her family's total lack of support for her work, Mel managed to compose an impressive catalogue of over 300 well-crafted, confident and expressive works for nearly every vocal and instrumental genre. Around sixty of these are concert or pedagogic pieces for solo piano.

The *Suite en Forme de Valses* is a set of six contrasting pieces for a teacher and a student perfectly suited to the salon. Interestingly, Bonis often assigns the student an ostinato while the teacher gets to play the melody! She also published these pieces in versions for solo piano and for symphony orchestra.

Further Reading:

Christine Geliot, *Mel Bonis: Femme et Compositeur, 2e* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009)

Ibid., trans. Florence Launay and Michael Cook, mel-bonis.com/melboanglais

Leopold Godowsky 46 Miniatures for Piano

Carl Fischer

"Irish Jig" in F major, Vol. 2, No. 7

"Polonaise" in G-flat major, Vol. 3, No. 7

Pianist-composer Leopold Godowsky bequeathed a magnanimous if underappreciated gift to piano teachers everywhere with his remarkable 46 *Miniatures* for piano duet. The *Miniatures* amply demonstrate craft, variety, and creativity. Percy Grainger, Sergei Rachmaninoff, and Josef Hofmann among others praised these pieces for their charm and particularly their innovative pedagogical approach. What makes Godowsky's 46 *Miniatures* distinctive from other pedagogic pieces is that the student part (always the primo) *always* has a strict five-finger compass. This establishes hand position and enhances equalization of the fingers. The passing under of the thumb does not take place. Advanced players can engage the intricate secondo parts.

For primo and secondo alike, Godowsky meticulously indicates *every* detail: fingering, pedaling, phrasing, tempo, expression, and dynamics. Godowsky declared: "I have tried my best to make the pieces as simple and as easy as was compatible with intrinsic value of the inspiration and idea....I wish to inaugurate a new era in pedagogy particularly as regards the earliest and early grades."

Further Reading:

Millan Sachania (ed.), *The Godowsky Collection, Vol. 5: 46 Miniatures for Piano-Four Hands* (New York: Carl Fischer, 2004)

György Kurtág (b. 1926) *Átiratok*: Transcriptions from Machaut to J. S. Bach
"O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig"

Editio Musica Budapest

The distinguished composer György Kurtág has written nine volumes of *Játékok* (literally "Games") inspired by the sheer pleasure and joy in movement that young children bring to the piano. The *Játékok* are not a piano method but rather a profound exploration of sound and its notation. Volumes IV and VIII are for piano duet, as are a separate volume of transcriptions from Machaut to J.S. Bach. As much as we would like to play some of the four-hand *Játékok*, we feel these are better demonstrated live in the same physical space. Instead we will play the Bach-Kurtág transcription of the chorale *O Lamm Gottes, Unschuldig* ("O Spotless Lamb of God"), one of several transcriptions in which Kurtág deftly evokes organ stops by having the primo right hand softly parallel the left as it plays the chorale melody at a higher partial, here a perfect twelfth.

Further Reading:

Tom Service, "A Guide to György Kurtág's Music," theguardian.com (12 Mar 2013)