

KALMUS PIANO SERIES

STEPHEN HELLER

Op. 82

Flower, Fruit, and Thorn Pieces
(Nuits Blanches)

Eighteen Characteristic Pieces
for Pianoforte

EDWIN F. KALMUS

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STEPHEN HELLER, the only son of well-to-do parents, was born on May 15, 1815, in Pesth. Music, which he took up as an ordinary accomplishment, like so many boys of his race, became a passion with him before he was ten years old. His father did not think favorably of the idea that he should adopt music as a vocation, but the enthusiasm of his friends when the little lad once played

a double concerto by Dussek with his teacher, F. Bräuer, overcame his objections, and he sent him to study at Vienna under Anton Helm, a much-respected professor of the first half of the century. The studies were begun in 1824 and lasted about five years, when the youthful artist, having returned to Pesth, and become inspired by the enthusiasm which followed his first public concert, set out upon his first, and, as it turned out, also his last concert tour. It was in 1829, and his itinerary took him to Cracow, Warsaw, Breslau, Brunswick, Hanover, Hamburg, and finally Augsburg. The last city became a sort of second home. At first he was bound to the place by an illness which forcibly interrupted his journey. Then there came other ties which proved to be stronger than those which went out from the parental roof. A group of friends encouraged him not only in his artistic strivings, but also in his efforts to broaden his intellectual culture. There are also intimations of an affair of the heart, which may have had a formative influence upon his character and future career. He remained several years at Augsburg before he returned to his home at Pesth, and the return proved to be only a temporary visit, for before a year had elapsed he was back again among his Augsburg friends, and in Augsburg he stayed until he went to Paris, where he lived out the rest of his days—a full half-century of them.

When the stirrings of the creative spirit were first felt within him, does not appear from the record. Doubtless in his study days in Vienna, for he carried a pianoforte concerto with him on his concert trip. Soon thereafter, like many another fiery young spirit of the period, he put himself unreservedly under the influence of Schumann. The young men had much in common. For one thing, the fantastic creations of Jean Paul Friedrich Richter had laid hold of his imagination as they had already seized upon that of the unselfish and impassioned champion of Romanticism. The world has had much to say about the famous and prophetic essay, *Neue Bahnen*, with which Schumann sent the youthful Brahms into the world; but Brahms's case was only one of many. It has a close counterpart in Chopin's, and the apostolic benediction fell also upon Heller. Schumann recognized a kindred soul in the man whose forms were "new, fantastic, and free," and who was "not afraid to make an end, a proof in itself that there is a good deal in a composition." In his first review of one of Heller's compositions (variations on a theme from Hérold's "Zampa"), Schumann nailed him as a born musician, and chronicling the fact that a composition had been dedicated to one of Jean Paul's brain-children, he said: "We have, indeed, much in common, we two, but let no one misinterpret this confession." To that community of spirit we owe the "Flower-, Fruit- and Thorn-Pieces," for which, in Paris, no better name could be found than "Restless Nights" (*Nuits blanches*).

Heller went to Paris in 1838, and Schumann deplored the fact in his journal, fearing the influence of French manners upon his young compatriot. But Heller, though fifty years among the French, was never of the French.

Devoted to the smaller lyric forms, he never became a *salon* composer. He wished to extend his literary and historical studies, and found the place propitious. Nervousness prevented him from pursuing his career as a virtuoso. He taught, wrote essays for the *Gazette Musicale*, and composed. Chopin, Berlioz and the best men in contemporary music were his friends. Though a foreigner, a professorship in the Conservatoire, where his studies have long been held in the highest esteem, was offered to him, but he rejected it. He published his works by preference in England and the provinces. He could not bow down to conventionality. The world voted him a unique genius, but a hopelessly impracticable man. "He was beloved by the Graces rather than their follower," said Schumann, referring to the persistency with which he went his own way at the outset of his career. His music won great vogue, but fortune refused to smile on her erratic son, and his life ended in penury and suffering. Toward the end he became blind, and his condition grew to be so distressful that Robert Browning, Sir Frederick Leighton, and Charles Hallé associated themselves together in London and issued a public call for a fund to be expended for his relief. He died on January 15, 1888.

The music which Stephen Heller composed was as original and unconventional as the life that he lived for half a century in Paris. Though he made the French capital his home, going to Switzerland rather than Germany for his summer vacations, so far as his artistic thoughts and aspirations were concerned he was never a Parisian. He remained true to his original nature amid all the temptations to hollowness and frivolity which had disturbed the mind of his well-wisher, Schumann, living the life that was his, thinking his own thoughts, plunging occasionally into books to the forgetting of music, following his own ideals, pursuing his own style. Fickle taste has dallied with many an idol since his first lyrics and studies came to charm, but he has remained the admiration of musicians. Time has not staled nor fashion impaired his aristocracy. Chopin's waltzes appeal to that society of which Heller said that the higher you went in it the denser was the ignorance which you found. Heller's are reflective, introspective, "physiognomical" as Louis Köhler wrote of them in 1879. They may not be waltzes to be danced, but they are, at least, dances to be felt and brooded over. His studies are less for the fingers than for the heart and mind. They inculcate music in its ethereal essence rather than its mechanical manifestations. Like the *Blumen-, Frucht- und Dornenstücke*, they are proclamations of moods—moods dreamy, fantastic, aerial, riant, defiant, inert, leaden, perverse, like those which possessed the creatures of Jean Paul's fancy. They are loved by teachers because they are poetical beyond their technical purpose; they are loved by pupils because they are stimulating, not killing, to the soul. Heller was a musician of rare elegance and distinction, a veritable *Tondichter*—tone poet—as contradistinguished from a mere *Tonsetzer*—tone composer. Beethoven knew the distinction, and exemplified it like none of his fellows before or after; and it was he who said, "A musician is also a poet." In his own individual, egoistic, even idiosyncratic way, Heller embodied the essence of pure Romanticism in music—that is, a Romanticism which essays to say all that music can say for or to the composer without attempting to be anything else than music. Bach was in him and he built on Bach, because he knew, even as Schumann (his more immediate inspiration) knew, that Bach provided foundation and cornerstone for modern Romanticism; but Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, and Chopin gave form and life to his ideals. Yet while their voices are joined in the chorus of his music, the dominating voice is that of his own individuality.

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Flower-Fruit and Thorn-Pieces

Nuits Blanches.

La Naiade.

STEPHEN HELLER. Op. 82.

Vivace. (♩ = 176.)

1. *p*

Red.

cresc.

f *dim.* *p poco ritenuto*

Red. *mf* *ritard.*