

Emil von Sauer
(b. Hamburg, 8. October 1862 – d. Vienna, 29. April 1942)
First Piano Concerto e-minor

Emil Georg Konrad Sauer, to whose family name the aristocratic “von” would eventually be added in recognition of his artistic merits, was born in Hamburg on October 8th, 1862. He was given his first musical education by his mother, the Scottish-born Julia Gordon. She was a distinguished pianist, who had studied under Ludwig Deppe (1828-1890), and whose father had been a famous painter. Young Emil was undoubtedly a gifted child, but it was not until his twelfth year that he showed the unmistakable signs of a musical talent. He himself recalls the episode in his Autobiography: during a musical evening, he was asked to play Weber’s “Polacca”; and, rather unexplainably, the presence of a distinguished audience brought to light the young pianist’s personality, and gave him an electrifying feeling. Suddenly, he discovered himself capable of mastering technically difficult passages against which he had struggled for hours without being able to play them neatly, and he found an expressive vein that no teacher could have taught him. “Suddenly”, he recalls, “a passionate love of music fired me”: and it was to be his life’s faithful companion.

Three years later, another climactic event was to happen in Sauer’s musical life: in 1877, Sauer listened to Anton Rubinstein’s playing, and it came as a revelation for the young musician. “To describe the effect his playing had on me is impossible”, he wrote. Although he had recently heard Clara Wieck playing Schumann’s Piano Concerto and Hans von Bülow’s performance of Beethoven’s last five Sonatas, the impression they made on him was by no means comparable to Rubinstein’s: “Scarcely daring to breathe, I listened to this revelation. [...] It all seemed as if a new light had broken over the world, a new voice to interpret a hitherto

unintelligible world. [...] Something seemed to break within me; [...] the bonds of my soul were loosened”.

Thus, the fifteen-year-old Sauer asked his mother to write to Rubinstein: soon an audition was organised, during which Sauer performed Bach’s Italian Concerto, Beethoven’s Appassionata, and some Romantic works (Liszt and Chopin). In spite of his admiration for Rubinstein, Sauer found himself not panicked in the least by the great master’s presence: “It was no constraint”, he recalls, “it was an inspiration. [...] After a few minutes, Rubinstein’s face brightened; [...] as I finished, Rubinstein came forward and kissed me on the forehead”. This touching gesture of the famous soloist was to become an everlasting memory for Sauer, almost as a sign of consecration to music. Thus, many years later, when a sixteen-year-old (and at that time a very depressed) Andór Foldes came to Sauer for an audition, Sauer was to repeat the same gesture with the same meaning with him: and it would give Foldes the necessary encouragement for his musical activity.

So impressed was Anton Rubinstein by Sauer’s talent, that he recommended him to his brother, Nikolaj, who at that time taught piano at the Conservatory of Moscow, of which he was also the director: Anton had even provided Sauer with free tuition for two years, thus enabling him to study in the Russian capital city. Sauer’s time in Moscow was rather difficult, both for financial straits and for Nikolaj Rubinstein’s famously difficult nature: nevertheless, Sauer could state later in his life: “Without [...] blind hero worship, I can say that Nicholas Rubinstein never had an equal as a teacher”. Among Sauer’s fellow students there was Siloti, whose friendship Sauer would cherish during his whole life, and with whom he shared the title of best student at the end of their course in Moscow.

This was determined by their teacher's death, after which Sauer moved West and attempted a professional solo career in England (1882). However, his plans were not crowned by success at first, and the young musician had to earn his life by teaching and giving private concerts; his fortune was to come in the person of Hercules Brabazon (1821-1906). This famous painter, whose works are shown at Tate Gallery, British Museum and Metropolitan Museum of New York, was also a music lover and an amateur pianist himself. When he heard the young pianist playing on an old Broadwood piano at a private party in London, he immediately tried and did his best to help him: it was through Brabazon's mediation that Sauer was introduced to Countess Carolin von Sayn-Wittgenstein, who in turn gave him a letter of presentation for Franz Liszt. The legendary musician was deeply impressed by Sauer, in spite of Sauer's not being at the top of his technical prowess, and immediately invited him to participate in his master classes in Weimar. In 1884, thus, Sauer attended Liszt's courses, together with Arthur Friedheim, Moritz Rosenthal, Alfred Reisenauer, and Siloti, his former fellow student in Moscow. Admittedly, Sauer profited very much from Liszt's teaching, and was thought by many to be Liszt's true heir; however, the young musician did not idolise the master, whom he found too showy (to the detriment of his piano playing). Moreover, Sauer maintained that too many of Liszt's students were devoid of talent, and that what they learnt there was not more than what they could have learnt at any good music college or university; at the same time, this artistic promiscuity did not help the truly gifted musicians to emerge.

This was not Sauer's own case: after a successful debut before the Imperial family and court in Berlin (1885), he undertook an international career with tours throughout Europe and the US. Among the highlights of his activity, there was an extraordinary performance of Cajkovskij's three Piano Concertos under the

composer's baton; an amazing witness of Sauer's pianism has been preserved in the form of a recording (made at almost 80, in 1942) of Schumann's Piano Concerto conducted by Hans Knappertsbusch at the Vienna Philharmonic; a video recording of the same Concerto (directed by Mengelberg and with the Concertgebouw orchestra) realised only two years previously shows us an extraordinary technical and musical accomplishment.

His playing was extremely refined, with stupendous nuances: his fellow student and Liszt pupil Felix Weingartner stated in 1936 that "Liszt's own style was beautiful beyond words. In my opinion, his quality was later approached only by two of his students: Alfred Reisenauer and Emil von Sauer". Even Busoni, whose pianist taste was very exacting, counted Sauer among the only three pianists he admired unreservedly (together with d'Albert and Reisenauer again); and a critic reviewing one of Sauer's performances in Berlin (1911) reported that the audience's enthusiasm and bereavement were absolutely incredible. Even Eduard Hanslick, who had undoubtedly certain prejudices against the Lisztean party, defined Sauer as "a genuine troubadour of the piano".

In 1901, Sauer was called to Vienna, where he was appointed Head of the Master Class for Piano Playing at the Konservatorium der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde. The success of his teaching activity (which lasted from 1901 to 1907, and from 1914 to 1922) is witnessed by the level of his students, among which there were Paul Weingarten, Lubka Kolessa, Elly Ney, Stefan Askenase, Helene Morsztyn and Angelica Morales (who was to become Sauer's second wife); the famous conductor Artur Rodzinski studied piano with Sauer, and it is reported that Sauer's performances acted on a five-year-old Gina Bachauer in the same way as Rubinstein's had acted on him – i.e. showing her the musical path as her vocation in life.

We can get a glimpse of Sauer's extraordinary teaching by reading some of his statements about music education: "The child who is designed to become a concert pianist should have the broadest possible culture. He must live in the world of art and letters and become a naturalized citizen. The wider the range of his information, experience and sympathies, the larger will be the audience he will reach when he comes to talk to them from the concert platform".

In the meanwhile, Sauer was very active both as a concert pianist and as a composer: during his life-time, his works were recorded on piano-rolls by no less than twenty-five pianists, and his Piano Concertos, Sonatas, Concert Etudes, as well as his Lieder and piano works were highly appreciated and rather often performed by his contemporaries. It is significant of Sauer's status as a composer that he was asked to write the music for the Royal Anthem of Hungary (1908-1944). He also edited works by Chopin, Liszt, Schumann, Brahms and Scarlatti: his editions enjoyed an uninterrupted success from the time of their publication to our days. He was also appreciated as an improviser: he was one of the last great classical pianists who publicly improvised transitions and preludes within the framework of his piano recitals.

His literary activity includes his Autobiography (written at the age of 38 only, in 1900), and evidence of his success is provided by the numerous international recognitions he was awarded (the peerage in 1917, the Legion of Honour, the Gold Medal of the Royal Philharmonic Society in London to name but few).

His First Piano Concerto, reproduced in this MPH volume, dates from Sauer's youth, when he performed it extensively and when it represented a sample of his technical, musical and compositional accomplishments and achievements. This work, dedicated to "the memory of my great master, Nicholas

Rubinstein”, was premiered on May 27th, 1900, in Bremen (at the festival of the Allgemeiner Deutscher Musikverein); two years later (23.3.1902), it was performed in St. Petersburg under Gustav Mahler’s baton (in turn, the premiere of Sauer’s Second Concerto was conducted by none less than Richard Strauss in Berlin). At the time of its US premiere (Boston, October 16th, 1908), Sauer’s Piano Concerto had reached its eighth European reprint. The US tour when Sauer performed his two Piano Concertos was extremely successful: we may mention the acclaim with which they were greeted at Carnegie Hall, with Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Carl Pohlig.

This majestic, demanding and gorgeous Piano Concerto is a living testimony of Sauer’s peculiarity, i.e. the reconciliation of Liszt’s virtuoso style and pianistic writing with the deeper inspiration and more intimate character of Brahms’ lineage. From the very beginning, indeed, the solo piano’s cadenza, after the opening orchestral gestures, is marked by a heroic breadth, with technical formulas inspired by the Lisztean traditions, but with a Brahmsian flavour. The solo piano interweaves long chains of arpeggios to embellish the orchestra’s themes, or it takes the lead with expressive solos in the purest Romantic tradition. A variety of atmospheres is evoked in the first movement, whose triple time can suggest in turn a dance-like inspiration, a *scherzando* lightness, a *grandioso* width. The orchestration is lavish and luxurious, with a great variety of colours which testify of Sauer’s stature not only as a piano composer but as a truly accomplished artist.

The extremely lively and quick Scherzo (II movement) is clearly inspired by Mendelssohnian atmospheres, with an almost supernatural lightness alternated with powerful moments and majestic octave passages. The Trio is calmer, with a sweet tenderness and a dancing style, suddenly followed by a thunderstorm of *ff* arpeggios, giving way in turn to light garlands

of transparent sextuplets. After the Scherzo's reprise, the third movement (Cavatina) is the expressive core of the Concerto: here the Brahmsian echoes are particularly clear and fascinating, although some harmonies betray their Mahlerian derivation. The melodic breadth is impressive, as is Sauer's mastery in the formal design; the section with the solo piano's broken arpeggios on the orchestra's theme is deeply touching and truly beautiful.

The final Rondo (IV movement), in an *Alla Breve* tempo, manages to give unity and accomplishment to the preceding movements: it is tight and well-connected, with an ever increasing energy and a lively pulse. The virtuoso passages are numerous – as in the entire concerto, indeed – but never is brilliancy an end to itself. A wide expressive palette is employed, giving full scope to the soloist's qualities: power, fantasy, brightness of touch, cantabile expression, humour: the *grandioso* ending, with its shining octaves, constitutes a solemn ending, worth of this splendid work.