



# CHARLES VILLIERS STANFORD

## *Minuet, No 3 from Six Sketches*

For her first How to Play lesson, teacher and author **Melanie Spanswick** explains how being able to summon up a rich, warm sound and a steady pulse will bring this beautiful dance to life

**Ability rating** Beginner/Elementary

**Info**

**Key:** F major  
**Tempo:** Allegretto  
**Style:** Late Romantic

**Will improve your**

- ✓ Finger legato
- ✓ Sense of rhythm
- ✓ Articulation

**Dublin-born composer Charles Villiers Stanford (1852-1924) wrote many works for the piano.** By all

accounts he was an excellent pianist who gave his first public recital aged just seven and who once played for Sigismond Thalberg. Though he became a composition professor at both Cambridge University and the Royal College of Music, he remained an ardent fan of the piano. His pieces are seldom performed, yet they offer a wealth of ingenuity and variety, with some having treacherous technical demands.

**This Minuet in F major is the third piece in a charming group entitled *Six Sketches*.** Stanford, like many composers of the post-war period, realised the need for worthwhile educational piano music and wrote several sets of little pieces purely for this purpose. [No 1 from *Six Sketches* appeared in *Pianist* No 72.]

**This beautiful little dance illustrates Stanford's love of melody.** Before you start to learn it, listen to the performance on this issue's CD, so you get an overview of the general tempo and character. The general feel is light, elegant and typical of a simple dance movement. The key of F major is warm and vibrant; a suitable tempo would be a swift one-in-the-bar feel, which will keep the dance character alive as the Allegretto tempo marking suggests (perhaps a crotchet pulse of around 176 beats per minute, as indicated).

**When tackling any piece for the first time, you should work hands**

### Melanie's Top Tips

- Warm up with an F major scale and arpeggio before you start your practice session.
- Always sink into the keybed in order to produce a really beautiful singing tone.
- When practising the LH chords make sure you use total legato, and play them sotto voce ('under the voice').
- Silently count a full bar at the intended tempo before beginning in order to establish a reliable pulse.



Melanie Spanswick is a classical pianist, teacher, adjudicator, author and presenter. She regularly conducts workshops and masterclasses in the UK and Germany as well as for EPTA (European Piano Teachers Association). Forthcoming events include lectures at Ulverston Festival and performances of *MELodramas* at Steinway Hall in London and the Radcliffe Centre at Buckingham University with pianist Anthony Hewitt. Melanie's book, *So You Want To Play The Piano?*, has been critically acclaimed and featured in the News in *Pianist* No 77. Find out more at [www.melaniespanswick.com](http://www.melaniespanswick.com) and [www.soyouwanttoplaythepiano.com](http://www.soyouwanttoplaythepiano.com)

**separately before playing together.** Experiment with different fingering until you find the most comfortable, and one that will allow for a completely legato or smooth touch (I have suggested some fingerings on the score).

**Stanford is specific about phrasing, often contrasting one- or two-bar phrases with those of four bars.**

While it's necessary to be aware of these markings, each musical line requires a rich, warm sound and an unbroken legato approach, which can be achieved by keeping the sound going without any short breaks or abrupt pauses, even at the end of phrases. Keep a completely fluid yet even tone, while marking the climactic points within each phrase. In the first four bars, for example, the notes that will require the most sound in the right hand (RH) melody are the third note of bar 1 (the F, an octave and a half above middle C) and a D at the end of the third bar (an octave and a note above middle C). Your sound level should rise and fall away from these notes (a crescendo followed by a decrescendo in each case). This will add colour and musical interest to your performance.

**A notable swelling of sound (or crescendo) occurs at the end of the first page, where the music briefly modulates to D minor (bar 16).** This adds a more sombre, reflective nuance. The staccato markings are vital here, acknowledging the change of mood, so you'll want to work on neat articulation.

**The linear passagework, particularly in the left hand (LH) (bars 12-16), would benefit from slow rhythmic practice, perhaps with a metronome.** Complete rhythmic accuracy is paramount. Sub-divide the crotchet beats into quavers (or even semiquavers) and count every beat aloud while playing, just to make sure the pulse is steady

and balanced at all times. This can be very helpful in sections such as bars 17-22, where counterpoint becomes a focal point. Always observe the rests too, particularly at bar 8 where there are two complete crotchet rests; it's all too easy to rush onto the next section, rhythmically distorting the character.

**The work's climax (bars 22-24) can be transformed by an exquisite singing top line.** The prevailing thirds in the RH will require a careful layering of sound. If you follow the suggested fingering, you should be able to achieve a continuous legato line; the fourth and fifth fingers will need slightly more pressure, a flexible wrist and some basic arm weight, in order to create the essential expressive singing tone in the top voice.

**The climax could be even more effective with a slight pause or fermata before continuing.** (Fermata means 'hold' or 'pause'.) Contrast this immediately with very soft playing, weaving around the chromaticisms before finally returning to the main theme. Make sure the RH melodic material is correctly balanced with the LH accompaniment here (bars 25-29). The melody should be predominant at all times. The reprise could be played *fortissimo*, with plenty of gusto and élan before dying away completely at the end, observing the short phrases and staccato markings that close the work.

**Stanford disliked the use of too much pedal, possibly due to his love of the organ.** So pedal judiciously at the very ends of phrases, if at all. Minimum use of pedal will ensure you really listen to your playing, free from any muddy sustaining pedal distractions, encouraging clean articulation and fingerwork resulting in precise piano playing. Your legato playing will improve too. ■