

FRANZ BEHR THE FIRST VIOLET, FROM 29 SMALL PIECES OP 575

Demure and understated, this miniature will benefit from a *cantabile* melodic line with a calm, even accompaniment, says **Melanie Spanswick**



Franz Behr (1837-1898) was a prolific German composer of songs and salon piano pieces. Largely forgotten today, he is known for one piece, *Lichtäubchen* (*Scherzpolka*). Its melody forms the basis of the virtuoso work *Polka de W. R.* by Sergei Rachmaninov. The *Lichtäubchen* tune was a favourite of Rachmaninov's father, Vassily (or Wassily, in German), so Sergei included his father's initials, 'W.R.', within his *Polka*.

The First Violet is a beautifully understated little miniature. It appears as No 8 within a set of 29 short pieces published in 1886. The melody sits firmly in the RH part whilst the LH provides the accompaniment. A suggested tempo marking of a dotted crotchet equals 66-69 beats per minute moves the music along nicely without feeling too rushed. The opening melody is stated twice in F major. It is then developed from bar 15, modulating to the key of A minor at bar 17. Between bars 18 to 21, the melody moves through several harmonically chromatic passages until arriving at the 'apex' (or climax) of the piece at bar 22. The tonic key returns in the last few bars, with the music ending as elegantly as it began.

Separate hand practice is paramount. The LH part consists of three-note chords or triads, and an easy way to learn the note patterns thoroughly is by using the technique known as 'blocking out' or chunking. To 'chunk' efficiently, play all three notes within each dotted crotchet beat together using the suggested fingering. Go through the entire piece playing each beat as one chord; this will help assimilate patterns swiftly as well as solidify fingering. When playing as written, make sure you can play the LH fluently without errors from beginning to end before adding the RH.

The tune demands a rich *cantabile* sound. Play the RH part with a smooth legato touch and with a deeper tonal colour which, if powered by arm-weight, will add the necessary 'singing' quality. As a general rule, dotted crotchets and crotchets

ABILITY RATING

Elementary

KEY

F major

TEMPO

Andantino

STYLE

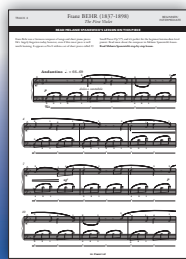
Romantic

WILL IMPROVE

- ✓ Cantabile
- ✓ Melodic and harmonic shaping
- ✓ Balance between the hands

LEARNING TIP

The sustain pedal adds resonance: **Make sure the pedal changes are quick and clear to avoid any smudges of sound**



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are effective with a fuller sound and the quavers can be slightly lighter. Tonally-speaking, the most important note within each phrase is usually the top note. An example of this can be found on the second beat of bar 2 (C) and the second beat of bar 6 (F). By contrast, the end of each phrase should be soft with a 'phrasing off' (helped sometimes with some tasteful rubato). An example of this is the first beat of bar 3 where a more strident crotchet F should be followed by a softer E.

Hand balance needs much consideration. When working hands together, the LH should act as a rhythmical background 'murmur' whilst the RH takes control of the all-important melody. Keep LH fingers close to the keys using a flatter finger touch, softly skimming the notes. By contrast, the RH theme is best controlled using your fingertips for a more direct, robust sonority. Solid hand coordination will come from slow practice with the addition of a metronome.

Part of the appeal of *The First Violet* is the use of chromatic harmony, typically found in Romantic music. 'Accidentals' (or notes not in the key of the piece) abound, such as in the RH on the first beat of bar 5 (G#) and in the LH on the first beat of bar 7 (Bb). It might help to highlight these notes on the score before learning begins at the keyboard.

Behr increases the tension by employing a rich harmonic palate. Between bars 17 to 22, he uses sequences to build intensity – that is, the same passage repeated at a different pitch. For example, the phrase between bars 17-19 is repeated a note higher in the phrase that follows. The acciaccatura at bar 17 should be played on the beat. To increase the dramatic 'yearning' character, aim to crescendo through each phrase before the *con passione* climax at bar 22. Observe the hairpin markings in the final three bars – the decrescendo bringing the piece to a calm and tender close. ■

www.melaniespanswick.com