

# Chopin's Student **CARL FILTSCH**

BY JOSEPH SMITH



**T**he story of Carl Filtsch has haunted Chopin enthusiasts to this day. By consensus Chopin's most gifted student, and one of the great piano prodigies of all time, Filtsch won the admiration of such musicians as Liszt, Moscheles, Wieck, Meyerbeer, the critics Rellstab and Davidson, and Anton Rubinstein (then a child prodigy himself), only to die in 1845 at the age of fifteen. But Filtsch has just reemerged—as composer of a remarkable concerto movement.

Carl Filtsch was born in Transylvania and trained by his father, a musical amateur. The father had gained entrée into aristocratic circles through his artistic accomplishments—and his chess playing! When Carl was eight, a music-loving princess sent him to Vienna to further his studies. His brother Joseph, seventeen years older than Carl and a talented pianist himself, gave up his work to accompany the boy. (His perspicacious observations of Chopin are included in a sidebar.) Following studies with Wieck (Clara Schumann's father and teacher) and Mittag (Thalberg's teacher), Carl had already become a celebrated performer in Vienna when he went to Paris to complete his studies with Chopin.

Chopin recognized him as a kindred spirit who instinctively understood his compositions. He even could endorse Carl's interpretation when, occasionally, it differed from his own. One of Carl's specialties was the C minor nocturne, suggesting he possessed not just musical but emotional maturity as well. His triumphs in Great Britain included appearances at the court of Queen Victoria. He composed a *Concert-Stück* during a period of rest in Wiesbaden. (Some object to this spelling of the title as macaronic, but Schumann, for instance, uses it for his Op. 92.) Just as Carl was to step on the stage to premiere the work in Vienna, he suffered the collapse that led to his death. Consider—if Filtsch had lived into his seventies, recording would have been advanced enough to preserve his playing, and we could have had a direct transmission of authentic Chopin tradition!

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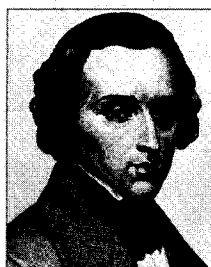
*Chopin recognized Filtsch as a kindred spirit who instinctively understood his compositions.*

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For the rediscovery of the *Concert-Stück*, we are indebted to Chopin scholar Ferdinand Gajewski. In his research, Gajewski had turned up several of Filtsch's short pieces, originally published in 1843. Frustrated in his attempts to interest publishers in reissuing these pieces, he made the idealistic decision to create a website (<http://www.freewebs.com/fjgajewski/>) and simply offer the music gratis to any interested party. (Gajewski described himself to me as a technophobe. I pointed out that he could hardly expect me to believe this, in view of his website. "Ah," he replied, "many of my students are teenage boys, and they do all the technical stuff for me!")

Long ago, Gajewski had begun a decades-long correspondence with the great-grandson of Joseph Filtsch, Sir Francis Loring, and gradually won his confidence. Eventually, Loring

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## **An excerpt from a letter about Chopin that Joseph Filtsch wrote to his parents in 1842**

(translated by Arthur Hedley)

What a difference between [Herz] and Chopin, whose fingers sing and bring tears to your eyes, making anyone who is sensitive tremble with emotion. His delicate and slender hands cover wide stretches and skips with a fabulous lightness, and his finger agility is so marvelous that I am ready to believe the amusing story that he has been seen to put his foot around his neck! Moreover, it is only thanks to this flexibility that he can play black notes with his thumb or whole series of notes with two fingers only, passing the longer finger over the shorter and sliding from one note to another. His *pianissimo* is so delicate that he can produce the greatest effects of crescendo without requiring the strength of the muscular virtuosi of the modern school, and he produces marvels of nuance by the use of the pedal, both pedals together and by his unique legato. To his pupils he says: "Let your left hand be your conductor and keep strict time." And so his right hand, now hesitant, now impatient, is nevertheless constrained to follow this great rule and never weakens the rhythm of the left hand.

Letters, continued from p. 5

### Gabriela's Talent

A letter to the Editor by Douglas Riva in the most recent *Piano Today* in regard to Gabriela Montero drew my attention. I'm sure that most people, myself included, would be dazzled by anyone being able to learn and perform a work such as Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* in only three days. "Required" would seem to be the key word. I can't imagine that Ms. Montero wanted to have to learn and perform the Rachmaninoff work within the space of three days! That she could do it is truly amazing. That said, I doubt that Ms. Montero would claim that she had given anything like a "definitive performance," or that she would disagree with Mr. Riva that a much longer time period is generally expected to gain the deepest insights into a given work and deliver the most eloquent performances. No doubt there have been some miraculous exceptions in history—we remember Grieg's astonishment at Liszt's reading of Grieg's own

piano concerto, with a kind of immediate and complete assimilation and with the fire of genius. So, presumably, a great performance of a large work after a mere day or two is not impossible theoretically, just unlikely. In any case, given Martha Argerich's rave reviews for Gabriela Montero, I'm looking forward to hearing Ms. Montero play—Rachmaninoff or not.

By the way, in case *Piano Today* readers are not familiar with the work of pianist Douglas Riva, I must say that his Naxos CDs of various works of Granados are truly rewarding—I particularly admire his magnificent account of Granados's *Allegro de concierto*. And to *Piano Today*, my hearty thanks for including Andy LaVerne's *Crystal Night* and Noreen Lienhard's *Dança Verao*, both of which I'm having fun with at my Yamaha Clavinova. I hope that Noreen's new book, *Easing Into Jazz* will be similar to *Jazz Pieces To Grow On*, a fantastic volume I've really enjoyed a lot! Regardless, I have to thank everyone at *Piano Today*

for all the great music! It's really a never-ending pleasure!

Mark Porter  
Yokosuka, Japan

Both *Easing Into Jazz* and *Jazz Piano Pieces To Grow On* are available from Music Books Now, at [musicbooksnow.com](http://musicbooksnow.com) or by phoning, toll free, 1-800-527-6300.



### Montparker Workshop

*Piano Today* contributor Carol Montparker will be offering a piano interpretation workshop on June 23 and 24 at her home in Huntington, NY, including individual coaching, group discussions, and a garden-party luncheon. For more information, please visit [www.montparker.com](http://www.montparker.com), or e-mail her at [cmontparker@yahoo.com](mailto:cmontparker@yahoo.com).

### Rare Finds, continued from p. 9

agreed to share copies of Filtsch's unpublished works, including the *Concert-Stück*. Gajewski has published this on his website both in full score, and with a piano reduction of the orchestra part. As a result, more than one hundred and thirty years after its composition, the work finally received its world premiere on May, 5, 2006, by the Summerville (South Carolina) Symphony under Alexander Agrest with the fine young virtuoso Matthew Cameron as soloist.

The title might lead one to anticipate a piece in free form, but in fact it is in traditional first-movement form—perhaps Filtsch would have eventually completed it as a full concerto. The time signature, the minor key, and the character of the respective themes all recall the first movement of Chopin's E minor concerto—the performance of which brought Filtsch the highest praise from its composer. All of my friends and colleagues who have familiarized themselves with it find some of the piano writing disappointing—in long passages, the hands simply play in octave unison. However, it cannot be said that these passages sound bad—just that they lack pianistic interest, and that they are ungrateful to play. (As mirror images, our hands seem to have been designed for contrary, rather than parallel motion. It is the extensive use of octave unison that makes the primo parts of Schubert's four-hand music so difficult.)

Unlike Chopin, Filtsch provides a cadenza at the traditional point toward the end. In this Chopinesque context, the fugal writing is totally unexpected, but in fact Carl had studied in Vienna with Simon Sechter, counterpoint teacher to many notables, including Bruckner. (Sechter said that in teaching Carl, he began with him where he generally finished with others.)

Now, the big question: While the value of the *Concert-Stück* as a token of Filtsch's precocious talent is unquestionable, what is its purely esthetic merit? I think readers will agree that while the *Concert-Stück* lacks anything particularly novel or individual, the charm of the melodic materials and its many engaging harmonic finesses justify performance.

Great precocity does not guarantee great achievement. We should avoid the facile assumption that Carl "would have become a great composer" if he had lived. Clara Schumann, for example, composed a remarkably interesting and mature concerto at age fifteen, but her later compositions, while well made, tend to the conventional. Saint-Saëns's great musical gifts made him an amazing prodigy and a remarkable overall musician, but his music lacked emotional depth. Nevertheless, the sudden appearance of the *Concert-Stück* insists on at least raising the question: Might a great composer have been lost to us?

See music by Carl Filtsch on pages 10-14.

# ADIEU

CARL FILTSCH  
(1830-1845)

EDITED BY FERDINAND GAJEWSKI

**Andante**

*p una corda*

*con pedale*

**Più mosso**

*p marcato il canto  $\text{qp}$*

*dolce*

*con dolore*

10

*più f*

13

*triste* *fz*

16

*f*

19

*f*

22

*f*

25

5 5

4

2 5

3

1 4

5

4 5

2 1 2 1

*f*

2

28

5

3

4

3

4

5

5

4

3

3

1

1

2

3

1

2

3

2

31

5 4 5 5 4

3 2

1 2 2 1

1 1

*f*

34

*cresc.* ..... *dim.*

*p*

[illegible]

40

rit. ....

43

46

rit.

*p [a tempo]*

49

*p*

*pp*

52

*dolce*

55

*pp una corda*

58

*cresc. e accel. sempre*

61

*più f* *ff* *fff*

64

**Andante**

*una corda*