



WOELFL Sonata in c preceded by an Introduction and Fugue, WoO 113. Sonata in b, op. 38. Piano Sonata in F, op. 27/2 • Adalberto Marria Riva (pn) • TOCCATA 0383 (73:05)

The stated goal of this disc, volume one in a projected series of Joseph Woelfl's piano music, is to "rescue Woelfl's once starry reputation from the folds of history." History's folds are fairly unrelenting, but perhaps this project will help. There is music here that should be new to almost everyone. According to the notes, the two latter sonatas found here have never before been recorded, and I have not heard the first.

Woelfl was born in 1773 in Salzburg, a lucky place and time for a young musician. He took piano and violin lessons from Leopold Mozart, and, after the death of his mother, lived for a time with the Mozarts. He gave his first concert as a violinist when he was seven, and later studied piano with Nannerl Mozart and probably with Michael Haydn. He was also singing in the chorus of the Salzburg Cathedral, and composing by his teens. As a young adult, Woelfl worked in Vienna, then Warsaw and then Vienna again. In 1798, he famously played in what is described as a piano duel against Beethoven. Thayer's *Life of Beethoven* grandly proclaims the audience felt afterwards that "It was no longer the case that Beethoven was without a rival as pianoforte virtuoso." Every one whose commentary survives notes that Woelfl had an advantage in his huge hands. (Thayer also tells us that Woelfl's success in Warsaw as a virtuoso, teacher, and composer was "almost unexampled.") In 1805 Woelfl was in London, where he entered into a contract with Johann Peter Salomon of Haydn fame. Though separated from his unhappy wife and his unhappy marriage, he proclaimed himself pleased because of his income. "You can imagine that one doesn't have as much pleasure here as in Paris or Vienna, but there is money, which is always a good thing."

Riva plays a mellow Bösendorfer on these recordings, and he plays extremely well. One doesn't hear a rival to Beethoven in these sonatas, which have neither the emotional depth or spiritual qualities of that master, but many readers will want to hear this well-played recording of forgotten music.

So, in his youth virtually a Mozart family member, Woelfl rivaled Beethoven as a pianist and succeeded Haydn in London. He may have made Beethoven uneasy because of his virtuosity, but he also dedicated his sonatas, opus 7, to "M. L. van Beethoven." Evidently a charming, self-deprecating man known for his humor, he wrote 10 symphonies, six operas, 10 piano concertos, and much else: 630 known compositions in all. A smattering of these pieces has been recorded, but despite his evident skills and learnedness as a composer, Woelfl is now still relatively unknown. What one hears in these sonatas is a technically accomplished composer, well able to make a complicated fugue unfold naturally. He writes charmingly bouncy final movements to these sonatas that are neither dull nor deep. To my ears, he is at his best in the lyrical slow movements and in pieces such as the delightful Presto that ends the Sonata in B Minor on a cheery note. In other words, despite his technical skills, I am most taken by Woelfl's lighter and more lyrical moments, when his ease and grace are most in evidence. Then he has a distinctive charm. Riva plays a mellow Bösendorfer on these recordings, and he plays extremely well. One doesn't hear a rival to Beethoven in these sonatas, which have neither the emotional depth or spiritual qualities of that master, but many readers will want to hear this well-played recording of forgotten music.

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This article originally appeared in Issue 40:5 May/June 2017) of Fanfare Magazine.