



Walter NIEMANN

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by William Melton

The Niemanns of the North Sea coast of west Holstein were a family crowded with musical talent. The patriarch was Johann Claussen Niemann (1806–76), *Stadtmusicus* and organist in Wesselburen. His son Gustav (1843–81) became a violinist and composer, establishing himself in Helsingfors (Helsinki), where Robert Kajanus was one of his students. Gustav's elder brother Rudolph (1838–98) went from initial keyboard lessons with his father to studies with many of the major musicians of his age. When Rudolph reported to the Leipzig Conservatoire at the age of fifteen, his curriculum (1853–56) was guided by the master pianist Ignaz Moscheles and a faculty that Felix Mendelssohn had installed: Louis Plaidy (piano), Ferdinand David and Raimund Dreyschock (violin), Franz Brendel (music history) and Moritz Hauptmann, Ernst Richter and Julius Rietz (theory and composition). In 1857 Rudolph travelled to Paris, where he attended another famous Conservatoire, taking lessons from Antoine-François Marmontel (piano), Lambert Massart (violin) and Fromental Halévy (theory and composition). Private contacts also aided his future career, such as one made with the older, established composer-pianist Stephen Heller during many piano four-hands rehearsals. In 1858 Rudolph won the *Premier Prix* for piano, and after a further two years he returned to Germany. Still not finished with his studies, he spent time in Berlin taking lessons from Friedrich Kiel (composition), Theodor Kullak and Hans von Bülow (piano). The last of these men introduced Rudolph to his father-in-law, Franz Liszt, who added a final polish to the young man's pianism.

In the meantime, Rudolph had married his cousin Emilie, *née* Peers. Their home towns were only eleven miles apart, but the modest trip involved crossing a marked regional border: Rudolph came from the more settled Holstein dairy farms

of Dithmarschen to the south, whereas Emilie was from Tönnig on the wild Eiderstedt peninsula of North Frisia, with its ever-changing North Sea coast, the salt marshes constantly encroaching on the polders. The pair left their birthplaces behind to establish a home in the city of Hamburg, where over the next twenty years life was a mixture of teaching, concerts and parenthood.

Rudolph and Emilie produced four children, of whom only two lived into adulthood. Elisabeth was the elder of these by ten years, and the younger, born on 10 October 1876 in Hamburg, was Walter, who was spoiled for musical attention by his father, but exposed to noisy competition on frequent visits to his older cousins in the Warnke family, five of whom would become professional musicians.¹ Rudolph became a concert partner of the eminent violinist August Wilhelmj, beginning in 1873, and the next decade would bring an even closer collaboration.² The pianist moved his family to the Rhineland to be close to Wilhelmj for rehearsals, in 1885 landing in the sophisticated spa city of Wiesbaden. Over the next years the two musicians made concert tours across Germany, England, Scandinavia, Russia, Austria-Hungary and the Balkans, with a visit to the Sultan's Court in Constantinople. Bülow commented: 'The judgement of art aficionados is uniform in awarding Herr Rudolph Niemann a high place among the younger generation of piano virtuosos'.³

Between concerts, and particularly after Wilhelmj moved to London in 1894 to teach at the Guildhall School of Music, Rudolph struggled to keep family finances above water, enduring 'a series of anxious years in Wiesbaden, though they were also filled with creative work and teaching'.⁴ His son Walter spent his teens in the sunny,

¹ Walter's aunt Margaretha Warnke, *née* Niemann, bore Christoph, Rudolph and Carl, who became Kapellmeisters and keyboardists on the island of Helgoland, in Wesselburen and in Kiel, respectively, and also Heinrich and Johannes, both cellists, the former with the Metropolitan Opera, the latter with the Boston Symphony.

² The prodigious playing of August Wilhelmj (1845–1908) at age sixteen made a believer of Franz Liszt, and the young man went to Ferdinand David for further violin study in Leipzig. He would be leader of the violins at the first performance of Wagner's *Ring* in Bayreuth in 1876, and toured the world in solo recitals as far as Australia. The Stradivarius that was his instrument is now called the 'Wilhelmj'.

³ Walter Niemann, 'Meister der Klaviermusik: Rudolph Niemann', *Neue Musik-Zeitung*, Vol. 30, No. 13, 1909, p. 275.

⁴ Walter Niemann, 'Charakterköpfe norddeutscher Schumannianer in der Klaviermusik', *Musik und Kultur. Festschrift zum 50. Geburtstag Artur Seidl's*, ed. Bruno Schuhmann, Bosse, Regensburg, 1913, p. 216.

relaxed atmosphere of the Rheingau, where wealthy aristocratic guests guaranteed that the musical programmes on offer were of a very high quality. One such was a *Liederabend* given after the death of Johannes Brahms on 3 April 1897, when the tenor Ludwig Wüllner sang a memorable programme of Brahms songs at the Hotel Viktoria, accompanied by Rudolph Niemann, with son Walter turning the pages of the score. The father was then casting about for a suitable composition teacher for his son, and he decided on Engelbert Humperdinck.

After the phenomenal success of his first opera, *Hänsel und Gretel*, Humperdinck had moved to Boppard, a quiet village perched between the Rhine and steep hills with extensive Riesling vines. In spite of a lengthy commute – a train to Rüdesheim, a ferry to Bingen, and another train to Boppard – Walter Niemann thoroughly enjoyed his journeys up the Rhine Gorge to Humperdinck’s ‘little castle’. The proper young Holsteiner and the informal Rhenish master got along from the start. ‘So little was theoretical’, Niemann remembered, ‘and so much was down-to-earth; for him it was all about what worked, and the few words that sufficed to show why it needed to be so and not otherwise were indicative of the master who had trained in the living school of Bayreuth.’⁵ Lessons were not confined to the scheduled late-morning hour, but in casual fashion might sprawl into the afternoon.

I often stayed for lunch, and here, in the small family circle, the happiness of secret German domesticity, in the most beautiful sense of the word, peeked out from every corner. [...] After the meal, until the departure of my train, we walked around with the children in the autumn-coloured garden of his little villa on the slope of the mountain, and Humperdinck would gradually relax; I felt in many a word how much warm, even fatherly, interest he took in me and my artistic development.⁶

Instruction came to an abrupt end when Rudolph Niemann died in 1898. His widow and children decided on a move to Leipzig, where it was hoped that after earning

⁵ ‘Engelbert Humperdinck† Gedanken und Erinnerungen’, *Zeitschrift für Musik*, Vol. 88, No. 21, 29 October 1921, pp. 533–34. Humperdinck had apprenticed with Richard Wagner in Bayreuth (1881–82), serving as his copyist during the preparations for the premiere of *Parsifal*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 534.



Niemann's teacher Engelbert Humperdinck, in a postcard from the 1890s, and the 'Little Castle' at Boppard where Niemann went for his lessons

a music degree Walter could support his mother and sister. Humperdinck suppressed his grave doubts about the benefits of academic training, instead contacting Hugo Riemann to recommend his young pupil. Walter wrote that Humperdinck told him:

‘Go to Leipzig; Riemann is a much better teacher than I am’, when my mother and I paid him our farewell visit after father’s death before moving to Leipzig. He probably saw the professional and ‘social’ usefulness of an academic course of study leading to a philosophical doctorate, but he quietly considered it a grave injustice and a threat to my predominant creative talent. With all his deep respect for the great musicologists Hugo Riemann and Hermann Kretzschmar, he did not think much of music treated as a science and anticipated the long, difficult years in Leipzig, the external inhibitions and inner conflicts that would prevent his young pupil from creation, which was always his first priority, because of musicology, the dissertation and newspaper criticism until he liberated himself. He was only too right!⁷

Niemann’s first impressions of the renowned Leipzig Conservatoire were discouraging:

After the first lesson at the ‘Con’, I left the beautiful new building in the Grassstrasse for home, nearly sobbing with disappointment and anger. I had expected something completely different from the most famous conservatoire in Germany, but was utterly disillusioned. I feared that I would echo and fulfil Edvard Grieg’s angry words, that ‘At my departure from the Leipzig Conservatoire, I was duller than I had arrived’.⁸

The large classes of the institution compared badly with Niemann’s private instruction with Humperdinck. Still, the young man adapted to academic realities, even gradually recognising worthy attributes in his professors, who included Carl Reinecke (composition), Salomon Jadassohn (whom Nicolas Slonimsky dubbed ‘the Rock of Gibraltar of conservatism in musical teaching’⁹), Fritz von Bose (a piano protégé of Reinecke and Bülow) and Alfred Riesenauer (a Liszt pupil). Decades previously,

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 534.

⁸ Walter Niemann, *Mein Leben fürs Klavier. Rückblicke und Ausblicke*, ed. Gerhard Helzel, Staccato-Verlag, Düsseldorf, 2008, p. 90.

⁹ *Baker’s Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, Schirmer, New York, 1984, p. 1100.

Reinecke had been a friend of Mendelssohn and Schumann, he had been the music director of the Gewandhaus Orchestra until recently, and he was the director of the Conservatoire during Niemann's years of attendance. Niemann recognised in Reinecke a living representative of a bygone era, of whom

One must honour the rigid fidelity to his original convictions that allowed him to find his formally classical ideals early on, with an addition of moderate Romanticism, and to hold on to them unwaveringly. Wagner, Liszt, Berlioz and all that followed them were contrary to his disposition, his inclinations. But he was too fine and discerning a gentleman to denounce them openly: he simply ignored their presence in his world.¹⁰

In addition to his detailed preparation in piano and composition, Niemann was also becoming a scholar. He attended lectures by the eminent University of Leipzig music professors Hermann Kretschmar and Arthur Prüfer, the art historian Karl Lamprecht, the philosopher Wilhelm Wundt, and Niemann's dissertation sponsor, the aforementioned Hugo Riemann, perhaps the most iconic musicologist in imperial Germany. Riemann would record with pride that Niemann 'received his doctorate in 1901 with the dissertation *Die abweichende Bedeutung der Ligaturen in der Mensuraltheorie der Zeit vor Johannes de Garlandia* ['The Divergent Meaning of Ligatures in the Theory of the Scale before Johannes de Garlandia'¹¹] and quickly developed into a renowned writer on music.¹²

After graduation Niemann taught at the Bernhuth Conservatoire in Hamburg (1906–7) before being drawn inexorably back to Leipzig by the largest music-publishing market in Germany (and the world). He was briefly editor of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, but afterwards settled in as music critic for the *Leipziger neueste Nachrichten* (1907–17). Niemann typically expressed admiration for composers who drew inspiration from their own cultures, praising the likes of Debussy, Ravel, Grieg, Kjerulf,

¹⁰ Walter Niemann, 'Karl Reinecke', *Neue Musik-Zeitung*, Vol. 31, No. 13, 1910, p. 277.

¹¹ French music-theorist (*fl.* c. 1270–1320), who for centuries was accredited as the author of *De Mensurabili Musica*, the first known treatise to examine the notation of rhythm. Modern scholarship tends to the view that he acted as editor of an existing volume.

¹² *Musik-Lexikon*, ed. Hugo Riemann and Alfred Einstein, Hesse, Berlin, 1919, p. 823.

Nielsen, Sibelius, MacDowell, Coleridge-Taylor, Delius, Elgar, Holbrooke, Holst, Ireland, Cyril Scott, Albéniz, Falla, Granados, Rebikov and Skryabin, ‘while denouncing the “pathological” and “sensuous” music of Richard Strauss, Mahler and Schoenberg’.¹³ He waged unpopular public battles, even attacking the particular favourite in Leipzig, Max Reger (‘He does not play Bach, but Reger with Bach’s notes’¹⁴), who responded by threatening a libel suit. Understandably, Niemann would never be embraced by the Leipzig musical establishment.

In 1914 Niemann received a letter from Humperdinck, and quickly responded:

I had come to believe, in the absence of any new opportunity, that I would end up as a full-time writer. Then, in your letter about the Fehrs Variations, you opened my eyes and told me openly what was still missing, above all the colour! I saw that I could still catch up, and now I’ve heard from you that it was a pity that I was only doing composition as a side-line. My self-confidence and courage have returned, and you have saved my talent, which, though certainly small, limited and unfashionable, is perhaps genuine! Today I feel that I am an artist at heart, and not a man of letters.¹⁵

Niemann’s compositions, which by 1914 had grown to Opus 29, slowly began to reap success. Of the theme and variations, Op. 20, that Niemann had sent to Humperdinck, *Die Musik* commented:

The variations may emphasise different aspects of the theme, but are always closely related to it, and may even be described as ‘ideal outpourings of the theme’, as Moscheles once put it. The work is always interesting, the harmonies distinctive and the rhythms lively. Especially valuable seems to me that each individual variation, regardless of its

¹³ Rose Mauro, ‘Niemann, Walter’, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell, Vol. 17, Macmillan, London, 2001, p. 900. Modern German composers whom Niemann came to appreciate included Walter Braunsfels, Hugo Kaun, Günther Raphael and Heinz Tiessen.

¹⁴ *Leipziger Neueste Nachrichten*, 22 May 1911, quoted in Christopher Anderson, “‘Er spielt nicht Bach, sondern Reger in Bachschen Noten”. Einiges über Max Regers Bach-Spiel, *Annäherungen an Max Reger*, ed. Martina Sichardt, Olms, Hildesheim, 2014, p. 135.

¹⁵ Letter to Humperdinck, 29 March 1914, quoted in Anke Stupnik, *Das Klavierschaffen Walter Niemanns*, D.Phil. dissertation, Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst Graz, 2008, pp. 29–30. The ‘Fehrs Variations’ were the *Thema und Variationen in G nach J. H. Fehrs’ Krieg und Hütte*, Op. 20, for piano (F. E. C. Leuckart, Leipzig, 1911).

subject, displays an individual temperament. The fact that the musical intensity of the variations increases steadily should be of great benefit to virtuosic performance. [...] All in all, a beautifully crafted as well as genuinely musical work, which will hopefully soon find its way into concert halls.¹⁶

Niemann gradually abandoned music criticism, a daily and often exhausting use of his time, in favour of writing articles and books on larger musical subjects that interested him especially – and gave him more control of his own deadlines. Subjects on which he concentrated included, naturally, the piano (*Das Klavierbuch. Kurze Geschichte der Klaviermusik und ihrer Meister*, 1910; *Klavier-Lexikon*, 1918; *Meister des Klaviers*, 1919; *Die Ästhetik des Klavierspiels*, with Theodor Kullak, 1922; and a critical edition of C. P. E. Bach's *Versuch über die wahre Art das Klavier zu spielen*, 1906) but also Nordic music (*Die Musik Skandinaviens*, 1906; *Edvard Grieg*, 1908; *Das Nordlandbuch, Eine Einführung in die gesamte Nordische Natur und Kultur*, 1909; *Jean Sibelius*, 1917; *Die nordische Klaviermusik*, 1918) and historical surveys (*Die Virginalmusik*, 1919; *Musik und Musiker des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zu Gegenwart*, 1905; *Die Musik seit Richard Wagner*, 1913; *Die Musik der Gegenwart*, 1913). The most successful was a much-loved biography of *Brahms* (1920), which went through fifteen editions in its first thirteen years; an English translation by Catherine Phillips (1929) was also reissued multiple times, the last as recently as 1969.¹⁷ During the years 1921–24, Niemann edited almost the entire repertoire of Phonola music rolls for the firm Hupfeld in Leipzig (with Welte-Mignon and Pianola, Phonola was one of the leading makers of self-playing pianos). Hupfeld would run into economic difficulties as shellac recordings made continual improvements, but the remarkable Hupfeld house pianist, Walter Gieseking, became a friend and would be an important early performer of Niemann's works.

In the latter 1920s, when Niemann's compositions were better known but often characterised as gentle pastels for the inexperienced pianist, the composer turned to performing them himself:

¹⁶ Friedrich Adolf Geissler, 'Walter Niemann: Thema und Variationen für Pianoforte, Op. 20', *Die Musik*, Vol. 11, No. 17, 1 June 1912, p. 306.

¹⁷ Cooper Square Publishers, New York.

Niemann was already in his fifties when he appeared on the concert stages of a number of large cities to promote his own works. It then became apparent that the brilliant player also lent such pieces a tone of powerful strength and austerity, which until then had generally been treated with greater softness.¹⁸

He also grasped the opportunity that radio offered, creating programmes to educate listeners, often infused with the poetry that inspired the compositions. His central location in Leipzig meant easy contact with broadcasting management and talent, and explained his continuous domicile in that city for 46 years. Still, Niemann developed a distaste for what he felt was Leipzig middle-class smugness – his home town of Hamburg, with a busy harbour and a large Jewish minority that dated from the end of the sixteenth century, was traditionally more cosmopolitan. In fact, he stubbornly continued to identify himself in Linnaean terms as ‘a *Hamburgensis Holsatus* by descent and character, a Hamburger of Holstein blood and will remain so to the end of my life’.¹⁹

Very quickly Niemann’s activities made him a household name. He lent his renown to many groups. In the year 1929 alone Niemann was a working member of the *Gesellschaft zur Herausgeber der Denkmäler der Tonkunst in Österreich*, the *Bund deutscher Komponisten* (he was also on the steering committee), the *Reichsverband deutscher Tonkünstler und Musiklehrer*,²⁰ *Hebbelgemeinde* and the *Gesellschaft der Freunde Wilhelm Raabes*, and he was named an honorary member of the Beethoven Club of Appleton, Wisconsin, USA. In his autobiography he recalled:

What one wishes for in youth one is given in old age. As a native of Hamburg, I was always a travel enthusiast. But it was not until I was in my fifties that my ‘life of travel’ truly began, with piano recitals, radio broadcasts and sound recordings of my own piano works. My basically shy, pensive and dreamy ‘Nordic’ nature – in my boyhood I was

¹⁸ Max Steinitzer, ‘Walter Niemann und die Exotik’, *Simrock Jahrbuch I*, ed. Erich Müller, Simrock, Berlin, 1928, p. 115.

¹⁹ Niemann, *Mein Leben fürs Klavier*, op. cit., p. 20.

²⁰ *Reich* can mean ‘kingdom’ or ‘empire’, but also means simply ‘realm’. The *Reichsverband deutscher Tonkünstler und Musiklehrer* replaced the *Zentralverband deutscher Tonkünstler und Musiklehrer* in 1922. After the Nazi ascendance in 1933, the *Reichsverband* was disbanded and absorbed into the new *Reichsmusikkammer*.

wary of people and, as a Low German, completely introverted – was genuinely opposed to appearing in public. I still do not understand how I overcame this aversion to the limelight from the very first evening (and in my circle of friends, the amazement was widespread). [...] My piano music really seemed to give people something. This in spite of the fact that the professional critics, who in Germany tended to disregard the personal, individual qualities of a creative artist, almost never putting these qualities in the foreground, while analytically exposing the foreign ‘influences’, ‘echoes’ and ‘models’.²¹

His popularity, however, was to be reckoned with, and if a Niemann jubilee year occurred, the press responded: his 50th birthday in 1926 (‘We hear that England and both of the Americas have societies dedicated to Niemann’s art’²²) and his 60th in 1936 (‘We wish the genial master of warm and intimate art of the homeland, and of a German impressionism rich in dazzling colours, that his lively imagination and joy of creation may remain with him for a long time to come’²³). The accent on ‘art of the homeland’ was an indication of the new regime that had taken power in Niemann’s 57th year.²⁴

Though not without ingrained regional and nationalist loyalties, Niemann had long been a citizen of the world, a multilingual correspondent with many international contacts. He condemned the rising National Socialists in a letter to Ludwig Bisschopinck of 31 July 1932: ‘I am repelled by their fist-fighting rather than using verbal weapons, their defiant, noisy hooliganism that confuses German with Teutonic. Woe betide us if German art, and German artists, are delivered up to the mercies of their limited “racial psychosis”!’²⁵ But such thoughts were only shared in private. The Nazi seizure of the entire German music industry resulted in bans on what was deemed modern,

²¹ Niemann, *Mein Leben fürs Klavier*, op. cit., p. 110.

²² Anna Roner, ‘Ein deutscher Klaviermeister. Walter Niemann zum 50. Geburtstag, 10. Oktober 1926’, *Neue Musik-Zeitung*, Vol. 48, No. 2, 1927, p. 42.

²³ Adolf Diesterweg, ‘Walter Niemann, der Sechzigjährige’, *Allgemeine Musikzeitung*, Vol. 63, 10 October 1936, p. 626.

²⁴ The National Socialist movement had made rapid progress across Germany in the early 1930s, even in Niemann’s beloved Hamburg, where the Lord Mayor, Carl Wilhelm Petersen of the German Democratic Party, resigned from office on 4 March 1933, unwilling to execute the new NS government orders that he considered illegal.

²⁵ Quoted in Karl Dreimüller, ‘Musikerbriefe an einen rheinischen Musikliebhaber’, *Anthony van Hoboken: Festschrift zum 75. Geburtstag*, ed. Joseph Schmidt-Görg, Schott, Mainz, 1962, p. 42.

‘degenerate’, foreign or Jewish. Though Niemann had never been a friend of atonality, he was appalled at the sudden disappearance from concert programmes of the music of Jewish composers such as Darius Milhaud, Ernst Toch and Samuel Feinberg, as well as that of many other French, Polish, Russian-Soviet and jazz-influenced composers whom he valued highly.²⁶ Though he recognised a large chasm between jazz and classical pianists, ‘I also recognise in jazz a “new art form”. I give it full justification as a life and dance style of modern youth, I often find it highly amusing, and I am also pleased about its influence on the rhythmically often terribly stiff German symphonic music’.²⁷

He continued his habitual composing and performing unhindered by the authorities, and received the title of ‘professor’ in 1937. Though hardly one of the favoured composers of the *Reichsmusikkammer* – he had never been a member of the established musical order – Niemann was tolerated by the organs of the regime. His wartime reviews invariably reduce or simply ignore his past attraction to foreign composers and ‘degenerate’ musical styles like jazz, while emphasising his conservative Germanness. A 1941 retrospective in the *Zeitschrift für Musik* enthused that ‘Niemann’s music is a widely spread canopy that preserves its magical Neo-Romantic essence in true German fashion whether the heavens be cloudy or sunny. Even when Niemann talks about “foreign countries and people” he remains a real German, an astute and captivating storyteller’.²⁸

The German invasion of Poland and the subsequent declarations of war led to changes that at first restricted, then impoverished most city-dwellers. Niemann’s older sister, Elisabeth, died in 1942. Air-raid sirens announced the intrusion of war into civilian lives. On 20 February 1944, when sirens sent Niemann and many of his south Leipzig neighbours into bunkers, the spacious flat in the second floor of Kochstrasse 119 that he had called home since 1907 was destroyed by incendiary bombs. Niemann lost the collections, books and instruments of a lifetime, saving only a fraction

²⁶ Sergei Prokofiev was now a favourite of Niemann’s, as was Ralph Vaughan Williams.

²⁷ Niemann, *Mein Leben fürs Klavier*, op. cit., p. 113.

²⁸ Grete Altstadt-Schütze, ‘Walter Niemann in der Klaviermusik der Jetztzeit’, *Zeitschrift für Musik*, Vol. 108, No. 3, March 1941, p. 167.

of his papers, some printed scores and a handful of family photographs. The barbarity of modern war on civilians, which Niemann well knew had been introduced by his own countrymen, left him deeply affected. With Germany's capitulation, the division of the country into zones administered by the victors made travel, and a last pilgrimage to Hamburg, impossible. Within this diminished world, the spiritually bereft composer reported himself, 'reasonably healthy – aside from the usual marks of old age – outside 73, inside 37'.²⁹

Niemann's 75th-birthday jubilee came in 1951. The *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* commemorated, 'Seventy-five years! An extensive chapter of music history from the first "Ring" performance in Bayreuth to [the present] opens up before us, a multifaceted artistic life full of industrious work of the master whom we gratefully commemorate today: Walter Niemann'.³⁰ He also found time to write one last book, his memoirs. Completed in the autumn of 1952, though not published until more than 50 years later, Niemann's final written thoughts included this 'Ausklang':

Are these memoirs to be ended then on a hopeless, gloomy minor chord? No! Now my homeland is bleeding from a thousand self-inflicted wounds. Especially now I must reiterate that I believe in my people – despite everything that was terrible and incomprehensible about the Hitler years. I love the people, despite their dreadful aberrations. I mourn deeply with them over the immense human sacrifice, the extermination of the best and noblest youth, the immeasurable and irreplaceable cultural values lost, terribly exacerbated by our own sins, to the dreadful, barbaric weaponry of the Anglo-American bombing raids. I mourn deeply over the moral and ethical decline, into which this, hopefully last, world war has descended as war inevitably does. I observe with pain that my people have become hard, materialistic, intolerant of other opinions and beliefs, disrespectful and uncaring of the elderly, and indifferent to intellectual creativity. They regard culture and art as something that is absolutely dispensable, superfluous and contemptible [...]. And yet, I am firmly convinced that they will one day overcome this

²⁹ Quoted in Niemann, *Mein Leben fürs Klavier, op. cit.*, p. 138.

³⁰ Hanns Schwarz, 'Ein Leben fürs Klavier: Walter Niemann zum 75. Geburtstag', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, Vol. 112, No. 10, 1951, p. 530.

most terrible trial in their history and once again be a Germany that is respected and regarded in the world, peaceful, united and indivisible.³¹

Niemann died on 17 June 1953 in Leipzig after suffering a stroke. His ashes were buried in the Leipzig Südfriedhof on 26 June, with a headstone designed by his friend, the Leipzig artist Fritz Zalisz.³² The *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* wrote:

With Walter Niemann, a great German artist and lovable Mensch has passed away. In his memoirs 'My Life for the Piano' he describes his life [...], divided into the three parts of Hamburg (born 1876), Wiesbaden and Leipzig: truly a 'life for the piano', the quiet, secluded life of a creative musician and writer.³³

Musica commented:

After the bombing of his home in Leipzig Niemann continued his work in all seclusion and modesty, especially honoured and loved by his closest friends. In his last days he yearned to visit the scenes of his youth (Wiesbaden, the Rhine and Hamburg), to which he felt closely connected. For his friends, he was always 'good old Cap'n Pott'. To the piano playing world he was a rich godsend. It is now up to us to make his legacy better known.³⁴

³¹ Niemann, *Mein Leben fürs Klavier*, op. cit., pp. 124–25.

³² Zalisz (1893–1971), who studied both art and zoology (the latter with Ernst Haeckel), was a leading expressionist painter and sculptor who was often attracted to composers as subjects (including Bach, Wagner, Bruckner, Richard Strauss and, of course, Niemann). In 1937 six of his works were seized from collections and destroyed as 'Entartete Kunst'. Niemann wrote, 'Zalisz is my most loyal friend, a highly intellectual, philosophically educated man of the most tender sensibility made more profound by much affliction and a self-effacing goodness of heart' (*ibid.*, p. 118).

³³ Georg Brieger, 'Ein Leben fürs Klavier: Am 17. Juni verstarb Walter Niemann', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, Vol. 114, No. 8, 1953, p. 469.

³⁴ Werner Klemund, 'In Memoriam Walter Niemann', *Musica*, Vol. 8, 1954, p. 31. Niemann famously went by a string of humorous nicknames, many derived from Hamburg dialect. 'Käppen Pott' was a favourite – others included 'Hamburger Janmaat', 'Obermandarin', 'Hamburgensis' and 'Klavierniemann' – and Niemann began many a phone call with 'Captain Pott, at your service!'. 'Pott' was created by the Hamburg-born novelist Hans Leip (who also wrote the lyrics of the song 'Lili Marleen') in *Die Klabauterflagge oder Atje Potts erste und höchst merkwürdige große Fahrt* ('The Klabauter Flag or Atje Pott's First and Most Remarkable Grand Voyage'; Insel-Verlag, Leipzig, 1933). Klabauter are fanciful water-creatures that rescue North Sea and Baltic sailors.

During Niemann's lifetime he was widely dismissed as a mere piano composer, and therefore of limited importance. Certain cognoscenti, however, recognised his uncommon talents quite early.

His piano works (more than a hundred have been published) are among the most frequently performed in Germany. Why? Niemann's music, which takes the form of an impressionistic Neo-Romanticism, is unproblematic, comfortable, Apollonian and cheerful, it demonstrates significant formal and technical skill, is always grateful to play, and thus well matches the taste of an educated, musical middle class. Niemann is to our time what Gade and Kirchner, or Jensen and Grieg were to an earlier generation. The 'contemporary' piano teacher will hardly be able to ignore his works, and our domestic music market counts them among its finest enrichments.³⁵

To those who insinuated that the piano works were mere miniatures that succeeded wholly due to their exoticism, Horst Büttner countered,

Niemann, like few others, is able to avoid the obvious and ever-present shortcomings of light music; for his fine natural sense for simple musical feeling, not dependent on fashion, prevents his writing from being 'too heavy', and his cultivated attitude, inherited from his background and education, prevents him from descending to the shallow, vulgar or trite.³⁶

Critical thought has been divided on the most important influences on Niemann's style, Detlef Schulz insisting that

He is in essence North German, [...] closely connected with the native piece of earth, sea and heath in Holstein. The roaring sea has sung its song countless times up there, where the barren, eerie moor, the boundless, monochrome heath, and the fairy-tale charm of misty country lakes command the imagination. It is quite natural that these fantastic native landscapes resonate most strongly in the poet Niemann's soul, though the purely idyllic genre outweighs the background of fantastic nature in his compositions.³⁷

³⁵ Robert Teichmüller and Kurt Herrmann, *Internationale moderne Klaviermusik*, Hug, Leipzig and Zürich, 1927, p. 106.

³⁶ 'Walter Niemann. Zu seinem 60. Geburtstag am 10. Oktober 1936', *Zeitschrift für Musik*, Vol. 103, No. 10, October 1936, p. 1208.

³⁷ Detlef Schulz, 'Ein neuer holsteinischer Tondichter', *Der Türmer*, Vol. 13, 1910, p. 786.

As the composer himself explained of his early efforts, ‘Art is human, and this idea is helpful in characterising the nature of my piano music as a mixture of north and south: “nordic” in feeling, sensation and mood, but “southern” in colour and sound’.³⁸ Of further influences he wrote, ‘The piano writing in the later works [...] cannot entirely deny the tonal and pictorial inspirations of modern Neo-Romantic piano music, be it Russian-Polish or French-English’.³⁹

In 1961, Reinhold Sietz credited Niemann for absorbing the musical streams around him:

Niemann recognised early on that the ‘further development of Schumann’s and Brahms’ style of the piano did not lead to a fruitful and independent modernity of German piano music’, and the recognition of the superiority of foreign, especially French and Spanish, piano music, enlarged his expressive range. He also expanded his range of expression through the extensive inclusion of impressionistic and exotic elements. Predominantly a lyricist, bound more by the programme (apart from occasional, mostly humorous and obvious individual features), Niemann has been seen as a creator of nature, a designer of graceful, lightly moving pieces, a preserver and perpetuator of old and new folk and song traditions, a master of contemporary instructional works and the best light music. Without having gone in absolutely new directions, he exerted a thoughtful influence on home and piano music of this century, and not only in Germany.⁴⁰

From the vantage point of 1993, Klaus Wolters concluded that Niemann’s ‘numerous piano pieces, mostly with poetic titles, were popular and appreciated seventy years ago but are largely forgotten today. Perhaps not entirely justifiably! Niemann is adept at impeccable, mellifluous, piano-adept composition, with an impressionist touch in the more demanding works’.⁴¹

³⁸ Walter Niemann, ‘Wie ich zum Klavier kam’, *Neue Musik-Zeitung*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 1920, p. 51.

³⁹ ‘Schleswig-Holsteinische Tondichter der Gegenwart’, *Schleswig-Holsteinischer Kunstkalender 1917*, ed. Ernst Saueremann, Stiftungsverlag, Potsdam, 1916, p. 71.

⁴⁰ ‘Niemann, Gustav Adolph, [...] dessen Bruder Rudolph, [...] dessen Sohn Walter’, *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Friedrich Blume, Vol. 9, Bärenreiter, Kassel, 1961, pp. 1520–21.

⁴¹ *Handbuch der Klavierliteratur. Klaviermusik zu zwei Händen*, Atlantis, Zurich, 1993, p. 435.

Though Niemann wrote a handful of works in different genres (including a smattering of early songs, the *Rheinische Nachtmusik für Streichorchester und 2 Hörner*, Op. 35, and the *Deutsches Waldidyll für kleines Orchester*, Op. 40), his output was dominated by the ca. 1,000 pieces for piano that made up most of his 189 opus numbers. The scholar Anke Stupnik sorted them into three main categories: adaptations of Baroque and Classical forms, lyrical piano pieces and literature for the young.⁴² *Der Rubin: Gestalten und Bilder aus dem Orient nach Friedrich Hebbels gleichnamiger Novelle* ('The Ruby: Figures and Images from the Orient based on Friedrich Hebbel's novella of the same name'), Niemann's 161st work to carry an opus number, was issued by Fr. Portius of Leipzig in 1944. Hebbel's original tale, which dated from 1837, had also been expanded into a more detailed version for the stage in 1849. The story follows a young Turk, Assad, a newcomer to Baghdad, who frees a princess from the influence of an enchanted ruby, the latter described by Anke Stupnik, 'as a fantastic, marvellous, and unapproachable secret'.⁴³ Niemann, a sometime Impressionist who routinely mined eastern cultures for inspiration, made no attempt to recreate Arabian musical colours. Instead, he concentrated on depicting five main characters from the novella, setting them in an antiquated but heroic tone which is often mingled with an Impressionist palette. The first number illustrates the protagonist, and is marked *Moderato marcato*, 'With boyish impetuosity' [1]. 'Assad' is set in C major, $\frac{4}{4}$, and 'is characterised by full-bodied, powerful chord progressions, striking octave lines and rapid [demisemi]quaver], lively dotted melodic runs'.⁴⁴ The second movement introduces 'Fatime' [2], the Sultan's daughter, and bears the directions *Amorosamente con moto, quasi un poco Allegretto* and 'With a free, sensitive presentation'. The princess is portrayed, in $\frac{4}{4}$, as 'sensitive, tender, melancholy and undecided: the music is characterised by hesitation, constant key changes, extended minor passages, and diminished chords. The melody strives convulsively to break this tension – but it is only at the end that the main motif is heard [in a simple A flat major], radiantly warm and soft – its redemption has come'.⁴⁵

⁴² Stupnik, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

The heart of the suite is, of course, the ruby of the title, which is on display in the third movement, 'Soliman der Juwelier' ('Soliman the Jeweller'). The piece begins 'Comfortably, but with dignity' [3], in G major and $\frac{3}{2}$.

In an introduction, Niemann programmatically draws the 'jeweller's motif' as a strikingly delineated melodic line. The middle section [*Meno mosso, misterioso* in E major] is marked by several layers of sound in which trills, echo fifths and parallel shifted triads create a dazzling, colourful picture. It sparkles and shines and you can literally see the gold jewellery, precious stones, and jewels in front of you. At the end, however, the jeweller [the opening theme in G major] again has the floor.⁴⁶

'Der Kadi' ('The Cadi or Judge') [4], begins *Moderato con moto* in G major, $\frac{3}{4}$.

The Cadi confronts the situation 'dryly and sternly' (the instruction in bar 1); a staccato melody with equally crisp accompanying chords is juxtaposed with organ point-like octave repetition expressing the judge's perseverance. Hesitant moments (slowly building, sometimes chromatically progressing staccato lines) alternate with quiet, harmonically indistinct, low chords. At the end, the judgement [delivered by three *ff* staccato-accented chords in G minor] is strict and harsh.⁴⁷

'Der Sultan' (*Maestoso con gravità (Poco Andantino mosso)* [5]) is designated 'With noble dignity, a little pained'. Anke Stupnik describes the F minor piece, in $\frac{3}{4}$, as having 'dignified homophonic movement, which is then replaced by a sarabande-like section that has a quite melancholy and contemplative effect. The emotional development of the Sultan within the story – the grief, the mistrust of Assad, the anger, and finally the joyful surprise and redemption – is musically traced in the individual sections.'⁴⁸

The *Ballade aus vergangenen Tagen* ('Ballad from Days gone by') [6], Op. 49, was issued in 1918 by C. F. Kahnt of Leipzig, and dedicated to the fine pianist Celeste Chop-Groenevelt.⁴⁹ Styled *Poco Adagio e sempre molto sostenuto*, it begins in $\frac{12}{8}$ with

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 391–92.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

⁴⁹ Born in New Orleans in 1875, to a mother who had studied piano in Leipzig with Ignaz Moscheles, Groenevelt began her concert career at the age of five. She subsequently studied with Xaver Scharwenka in New York, Theodor Leschetitzky in Vienna, Moritz

demisemiquavers erupting upwards in a veiled A minor. Contrast is embodied by ordered chordal quavers in solid E major, and the return of the opening ends in an exalted A major. 'Rather short at 55 bars,' Stupnik writes,

Niemann's first work in the ballad genre [...] reveals certain narrative elements: the individual sections are reminiscent of chapters or phases of a story. Beginning in the low register, the piece builds slowly and steadily, with varied repetitions following the respective short sections, leading to a brilliant climax shortly after the halfway point before the opening section is reprised. An A-B-A form is clearly recognisable. Often there is no real melodic line, but rather scraps of melody, which makes the whole work seem opaque, floating, but also dark and mysterious.⁵⁰

The four movements of the *Suite nach Worten von J. P. Jacobsen*, Op. 43, published by F. E. C. Leuckart of Leipzig in 1917, progress like a cadential formula: B flat minor, E flat major, F minor and B flat minor, or i-IV-v-i. Adolf Ruthardt, professor at the Leipzig Conservatoire, wrote of them: 'Even without reference to the texts, they are beautiful, warmly felt and modern piano music in the best sense of the word.'⁵¹ The writer Max Chop concurred, positing that 'Opus 43 is perhaps the best work from Niemann's middle and early period.'⁵² The initial 'Präludium, Der alte Springbrunnen' ('The Old Fountain') [7], is subtitled with a quotation from the naturalist Danish writer-poet, Jens Peter Jacobson: 'And in the centre is an old, gentle fountain.' Also dedicated to Celeste Chop-Groenevelt, the piece is marked *Largo elegiaco – Quasi Andantino amabile e con tenerezza*; it is in common time and B flat minor. Max Chop explained:

Of the four movements, the first, the Prelude, 'The Old Fountain,' stands out as by far the most beautiful and cohesive with its dreamlike mood, the quietly flowing water in the centre of the courtyard, over whose gentle rippling a yearning, indulgent melody rises,

Moszkowski in Paris and Eugenio di Pirani in Berlin. She was well known in Europe and America as an interpreter of Beethoven, Schumann, Liszt, Tchaikovsky and Grieg. In 1900 she married the musical writer Max Chop, and at his death she took over the management of *Signale für die musikalische Welt*. Groenevelt died in Berlin-Schöneberg in 1958.

⁵⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 309.

⁵¹ *Wegweiser durch die Klavierliteratur*, Hug, Leipzig and Zurich, 1918, p. 195.

⁵² 'Walter Niemann (Fortsetzung)', *Signale für die Musikalische Welt*, Vol. 82, No. 11, 12 March 1924, p. 329.

swelling gently from pianissimo to piano and mezzo forte, only to die away again in the murmur of the water.⁵³

The technical palette that Niemann employed to conjure the fountain starts with continuous, sparkling semiquavers in the right hand which are varied with *rallentandi* and *animandi*, *crescendi* and *diminuendo* to mimic perpetual changes in the play of the water. 'Best of all', wrote Robert Teichmüller and Kurt Herrmann, 'is "The Old Fountain", a delicately impressionistic sound piece.'⁵⁴ The Suite progresses with a Romanze, 'Rosenzeit' ('Season of Roses') [8], subtitled 'Roses should have blossomed here' and dedicated to Ella Rafelson. The Romanze begins *Andante poco tenuto e tranquillo* in $\frac{3}{4}$ and E flat major, its languid, serene theme underpinned by *legato* semiquaver arpeggios. The melodic material persists through a modulatory interlude with brief tinges of minor (each time marked *più largamente*), which soon returns to the opening E flat major, now in denser rhythms. Max Chop found that 'The Romance "Rosenzeit" reveals Nordic-Impressionist colouring – less in the broadly developed melody than in the transitions with the sequences in the third-fifth-sixth harmonies.'⁵⁵

The *Barkarole. Im Kahn* ('In the Punt') [9] is subtitled with the phrase 'And it seemed as if the boat was sailing on a mirror of gold'. Dedicated to Ellen Andersson, it begins *Moderato e cantabile* in F minor with a delicate $\frac{6}{8}$ theme. A middle section, *Un Pochettino più mosso* in C major, is more energetic before a return of the graceful first theme leads to a coda trimmed to fragments of the opening, now ending in F major. Chop felt the piece was 'conceived with extraordinary playful grace. Niemann is fond of water with its ripples, its waves, and the reflection of its surroundings; he has a hundred possibilities at his disposal for its depiction, and he makes use of them.'⁵⁶ The 'Ballade – Finale' [10], dedicated to Professor Laura Rappoldi-Kahrer,⁵⁷ is also entitled 'Phantom im Nebel' ('Phantom in the Mist'). The movement bears the overtly programmatic

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

⁵⁴ *Internationale moderne Klaviermusik*, Hug, Leipzig and Zurich, 1927, p. 108.

⁵⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 329.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Austro-Hungarian pianist and prodigy composer (1853–1925), *née* Kahrer; she numbered Bruckner, von Bülow, Otto Dessoff, Henselt and Liszt among her teachers. She toured widely in Europe, often performing with her husband, the violinist Eduard

quote 'And out of the mist it came, formless and yet recognisable [...]. He tried to stand when it grabbed him by the throat with ice-cold, white fingers.'⁵⁸ The playing instruction is 'Flitting shadily and menacingly', with the piece beginning in $\frac{3}{8}$, as *ppp* octave semiquavers in the left-hand rumble chromatically, quickly obscuring the B flat minor start. The semiquaver movement continues in the right hand as the contrasting theme in threatening bass octaves and E flat minor emerges, marked *Poco più animato*. The opening returns with the added instruction 'eerily', and after a *misterioso* interlude, continues with the semiquaver motif in the left hand and chordal *Marcia funebre* rhythms in the right. Four *secco* octaves then usher in a final fermata-held B flat, *ppp*. 'A shadowy, threatening piece of music', commented Chop, 'similar in character to the finale of Chopin's Sonata in B flat minor, with an intense effect.'⁵⁹

Antike Idyllen: 6 Idyllen nach Dichtungen von Else Bergmann ('Antique Idylls: 6 Idylls after poems by Else Bergmann'), Op. 99, was published by N. Simrock of Berlin in 1934. Max Chop felt that 'all six pieces resemble sharply cut antique gems',⁶⁰ and Anke Stupnik finds other echoes:

At the beginning of the 20th century, foreign folklore, particularly the folk music of southern Europe (Spain and Italy) and antique subjects were among those 'exotic cultures' that exerted a strong attraction on the decadent *fin de siècle* society. Impressionistic music in particular found the longed-for sensual and spiritual stimuli in the foreign local colour of lost cultures [...]. With his adaptation of antique subjects, Niemann's intentions corresponded to the Impressionists' endeavour to view antiquity as something foreign and exotic, the particular attractions of which lay in 'the sensual pleasure of pleasure, [in] the search for emotional (mostly sensual) sensations', but also in the dark, the mysterious, the veiled and the unknown. Debussy's reception of ancient subjects (*Danseuses de Delphes*

Rappoldi (1839–1903), also a prodigy composer. They settled in Dresden. The violinist Adrian Rappoldi (1876–1948) was one of their five children.

⁵⁸ Jens Peter Jacobson, 'Ein Schuss in den Nebel', in *Jens Peter Jacobsens sämtliche Werke*, transl. Mathilde Mann, Insel-Verlag, Leipzig, 1919, p. 661.

⁵⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 329.

⁶⁰ 'Ein Impressionistischer deutscher Romantiker', *Signale für die Musikalische Welt*, Vol. 84, No. 24, 16 June 1926, p. 969.

from Preludes I, the *Six Epigraphes antiques* based on poems about Etruscan art by Pierre Louys or the *Chansons de Bilitis*, also based on poems by Louys) had an impact on Niemann's [...] *Antique Idylls*, Op. 99. Niemann pursues the same intentions that he also pursues in his reception of East Asia – empathising with and dreaming of a distant culture with its peculiarities, its mystical magic, its exotic local colour and its lost grandeur. [...] The main component of the 'antique exoticisms' is largely based on gradually descending melodic lines, accompaniments in fourths, fifths, and octaves, parallel harmonies, echo effects, extended arpeggios in quasi-cadenza sections, rhythmic *ostinato* formulas, and suspensions and their resolution.⁶¹

The *Antique Idylls* open with 'Pompeja' ('Pompeii' [11]), the ancient Roman city destroyed by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79AD. Else Bergmann, the dedicatee of the work, was the Swiss-born wife of a wealthy drapery manufacturer, Fritz Bergmann. Niemann was a welcome guest in the family mansion in Glogau (now Głogów, on the River Oder in western Poland), and Else contributed poems to three of Niemann's works (Opp. 99, 109 and 112), the very first of which was 'Pompeii':

Your dream is a flowering poppy.
The red mosaic of the walls overflows
And blazes at the youngest slave's ear:
'Numa! Open the long lashes!
Bright midday sunshine consumes the raging flame of the hearth.
Pan sleeps at the edge of the basin,
A ripe grape boils embers upon his brow.
The fairest wants to embrace you!
The lava mountain murmurs in the distance.

'Pompeii' begins *Larghetto languido e sostenuto*, with ponderous chords in the bass in D flat major ($\frac{3}{4}$), contrasted with short *ppp* interjections in the treble. In spite of a high instance of chromaticism, D flat major remains the tonic for the duration of the piece – through a *quasi Cadenza* of harp-like arpeggios, a middle interlude ('passionate' *con*

⁶¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 364–65.

gran' espressione), and a reprise of the opening that shifts the chordal movement to the treble and the interjections to the bass. The latter, undeniably the voice of Vesuvius, are marked 'muffled rumbling,' their ominous presence lasting through the third to last bar, when a *pp* fermata-held chord in the treble, D flat major with an enigmatic added E flat, is given the last say. For Anke Stupnik, 'Pompeii appears as a mysterious, mystical sound structure thanks to the extensive use of parallel harmonies and echo effects.'⁶² The second *Idyll* is 'Lalage' [12], a Greek name common among courtesans – the Roman poet Horace professed his love for Lalage in the poem 'Integer vitae' from *Carminum liber primus*. Bergmann wrote:

In the atrium, heaps of myrtle-herb Lalage
Black – purple roses around the herm of Petronius.
Their stone god smiles mockingly:
A brown boy pales from longing – there –
On a tired rose petal he hums the everlasting song
Of Lalage.

Niemann's treatment begins *Lento molto sostenuto e elegiaco* in F minor and $\frac{3}{4}$; and the opening *piano* motif of quavers moving upward a fourth followed by chromatically descending crotchets is repeated listlessly throughout. There is a climax, a *ff* explosion of semiquavers marked *largamente* 'passionate' before *più lento* and three bars of held-out chords end in a fermata, *pp lunga*. Then the slow march of the opening resumes, until four bars of the solo melody ('humming to self'), are hushed *morendo e perdendosi* before the final cadence, a pedal-held F major layered with a cryptic D minor seventh in third inversion, *pppp*.

'Telemachos' [13] is Bergmann's portrait, taken from Homer's *Odyssey*, of the son of Odysseus and Penelope, who left Ithaca in search of his wandering father.

The brown, round-eyed cattle graze by the temple of Aphrodite.
Yellow flowers play around prickly agaves.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 366.

Pine dust spreads temptation over the paths.
I secretly draw my bow as I drive the buffalo cart.
My young arrow shoots regally aloft into immortality.

Setting off in a stable C major, *Moderato, ma molto marcato e con brio* ($\frac{2}{4}$), Telemachus is depicted confidently moving through a 'sequence of constantly changing chordal harmonies with pronounced staccato chordal passages'.⁶³ An additional direction reads 'with a youthful freshness and violent impetuosity', and the pace is slowed only by a *Largamente trionfale* near the end, when an upward *glissando* mimics the arrow being loosed, before the piece closes *fff* on two *staccato* A minor seventh chords in first inversion, *impetuoso*. 'The son of the Lord of Ithaca', Max Chop writes, 'is a royal offspring in the urge of youthful vigour, with a whirling arrow, and a conquering sublimity'.⁶⁴ Odysseus himself [14] then makes an appearance in the *Idylls*:

A red sail glides towards a sunny bay.
Narrow islands lie in the bow of the sea.
A wild bird's cry comes flying overhead.
The grey cliff stacks up out of the gorge and ravine.
Here the sea's hatred rests. May I also rest?
Now bend the wild laurel to a wreath
And waves are smiling, my mast and goal are shattered.

Marked *Quasi senza a fantasia*, Odysseus' slow theme in descending thirds mimics a rustic shawm (*dolce espresso, In modo sereno e molto tranquillo*, and 'in blessed peace'), progressing in E major and $\frac{6}{8}$. Chromaticism grows to include seventh chords before a related theme is presented, *un poco più largamente*, 'in weary longing', revealing Odysseus' mood as he nears the end of his journeys. A return to the earlier falling thirds, now *sempre ppp*, precedes a reprise of the shawm theme and the conclusion in C major, *pppp* and *dolcissimo*. Max Chop was persuaded by the portrayal:

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 365–66.

⁶⁴ 'Ein Impressionistischer deutscher Romantiker', *loc. cit.*, p. 969.

Here is the hero before Troy, the wanderer of the earth who fled from the wrath of Poseidon for ten years, gazing out to sea from a felicitous calm and contemplating the red sails of the sunlit bay. I look on, lost in a dream, while a nearby shepherd's shawm with its lilting melody drifts in and out.⁶⁵

'Paesta' ('Paestum') [15], was an ancient Greek city on the Tyrrhenian Sea below modern Naples; its prominence as a trading centre was undone by flooding that left it surrounded by marshland.

The swamp boils with fever –
A whirr of treachery buzzes around fallen columns –
Dreadful sun stares
And drought spreads its hot, dead hands.
Here stood a temple –
Whose god died slowly.
Salt waves hiss his name, craving other seas.

'Paestum', traced in a plodding *Lento assai* in B flat minor and common time, begins each bar with the dissonance of a minor second. Two bars of syncopation at *Pochissimo più moto* are countered with two bars of parallel block chords that begin in major at *dolce ritenendo*. The latter four bars are repeated before a dispirited return of dissonance and minor at *Lamentoso largamente*, as the opening is reprised, *dolce triste*. 'Large and unwieldy' is the direction as the theme trudges on, ever slower (*molto largamente*), to its end in the bass on whole-note B flat minor chords, *pppp*.

The last of the *Idylls* was granted to 'Erinna' [16], the Greek poet (*fl.* c. sixth century BC) best known for 'The Distaff', a lament for her childhood friend Baucis, who had died shortly after marrying.

The coolness of the night slowly draws out of the broad leaves.
The sea blows freshness –
Milky froth floats.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Flat pebbles smoothly support my bare soles.
I walk – an Attic amphora,
Hymettus' snow,
The sun-golden band around a narrow forehead.

'Erinna' begins *Lento assai* – *Pochissimo più moto*, with a sombre descending bass line answered by upward chordal movement in E minor and common time (the direction is 'Wholly transfixed, in dreamlike peace and tranquil contemplation'). At *Pochissimo più moto* a lyrical, treble version of the earlier bass line begins in G major, underpinned by soft semiquavers and soon veering off in different tonal directions. Chordal movement returns at *Un poco solenne in tempo moderato* in E major, and is joined with a lively, double-dotted motif which Niemann allows to take a more contemporary style than seen in the earlier *Idylls*. The engaging, buoyant theme persists through the bulk of 'Erinna', slowing towards the ending to a *ff Largamente trionfale* ('with radiant lustre'). Then the descending bass line gives way to widely spaced semibreve E major triads with an additional piquant F sharp, and the final, accented quaver omits the third of the chord (G sharp) altogether, *sforzando* and *fff*. The close seems consciously opaque, but Max Chop sensed 'a solemn wisdom that runs through the entire piece'.⁶⁶

Drei Moderne Klavierstücke ('Three Modern Piano Pieces'), Op. 68, were issued by C. F. Kahnt of Leipzig in 1920, and dedicated to the pianist Walter Gieseking, who often performed Niemann's music. The set begins with the 'Romantischer Walzer (Valse lente)' [17], in A major ($\frac{3}{4}$). As the bass emphasises the first beat of each bar, the elegant crotchet melody (marked *with delicate poetry*), inhabits beats two and three. The syncopated *poco rubato* B theme in E major provides rhythmic contrast before a return of the opening, this time in C major. The two themes exchange places throughout, building the eventual form ABABABA, whereby the third appearance of the opening, once again in A major, is varied with triplet quavers in the left hand. The last eight bars (*Con brio*), present the opening theme *ff molto marcato* and close on *sforzando*, fermata-held A octaves. The next piece, 'Delphi, Solemn Hymn' [18], bears the tempo direction *Adagio maestoso* –

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 969. Thanks to Annemarie and Christoph Kirchhöfer, who helped decipher Else Bergmann's sometimes unique vocabulary.

With a broad, warm and saturated tone. In $\frac{3}{4}$, the tonally fluid theme of mixed crotchets and quavers reaches its erstwhile tonic of E flat major only fleetingly in the second bar. Thereafter bars in common time and $\frac{2}{4}$ are sporadically injected before a B theme appears at *Un poco più mosso*, its broken chords marked *quasi Arpa*. *Tempo I* brings a return of the opening, the next reprise of B is curtailed, and the coda *Più lento e largamente* finally brings six bars of stable E flat major before the *ff* quaver ending. The third and last piece is 'In the Far East, Exotic Grotesque' [19], which begins *Vivo e con brio*. In common time and G major, marked 'with a fiery and fantastic presentation', a bustling opening with recurrent sextuplet semiquavers ('with a bright, naïve tone') is accompanied by crotchets in triplets in the bass. The gentler B contrast that follows in D major, *Più tranquillo*, quickly gives way to a reprise of the G major opening theme. The contrasting section, now in B minor, and the A section in G major each make one more appearance (the overall form is ABABA). Then a climax at *Vivacissimo con molto fuoco e crescendo* precedes a coda at *Più largamente e feroce* which finishes in five *forte* E minor seventh chords in third inversion, delivered with the instructions *risoluto, marcatissimo, allargando, crescendo* and, finally, *sforzando*. 'In the Far East' and 'Delphi' eschew obvious Asian or antique tropes, and the three pieces offer a homogeneous, light modern style that is easily recognisable as Niemann's own. The 'Waltz' and 'Far East' were hailed as particularly recommended repertoire by Robert Teichmüller and Kurt Herrmann.⁶⁷

Bad Salzellen, southeast of Magdeburg in Saxony-Anhalt, has been mined for salt since the twelfth century, and popular healing baths were developed at the end of the eighteenth. In the mid-1930s a brief piano piece by Niemann – now in his fifties and a confirmed hot-springs visitor – was published by the local Bad Salzellen firm of Göbel & Grabner. A sly dig at a ubiquitous spa pastime, *Die beiden Klatschmälchen* ('The Two Gossip-Mongers') [20], begins *Vivo, jenach Temperament und Zungenfertigkeit* ('depending on the temperament and tongue agility' of the gossipers). In A minor and $\frac{4}{4}$, spiky *staccatissimo marcato* semiquavers in the right hand dominate the fourteen bars of the piece. The *ff* conclusion is an F major seventh chord in first inversion with *sforzando* – the lack of an A minor close implying that the gossip may not yet be at an end.

⁶⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 109.

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Tomasz Kamieniak is a pianist and composer who enjoys playing the works of not only of familiar figures like Franz Liszt but also Charles-Valentin Alkan and other less well-known composers.

He graduated from the Karol Szymanowski Academy of Music in Katowice after attending the piano class of Joanna Domańska, further developing his playing under Rolf-Dieter Arens at the Franz Liszt University of Music in Weimar, with Konstantin Scherbakov in master-classes, Zbigniew Raubo through postgraduate studies in Katowice and Leslie Howard in London.

He was awarded the special prize at the Fourth International Franz Liszt Piano Competition in Weimar and recorded works by Józef Wieniawski as the winner of the Grand Prix at the Fourth Competition for a recording project 'Forgotten Polish Music', organised by the label Acte Préalable. A recipient of scholarships, from both the Marshall's Office in Katowice and the Wagner Society in Bayreuth, he also received a prize presented by the Mayor of Tarnowskie Góry in recognition of his cultural achievements.

His solo performances include the Alkan *Concerto for Solo Piano* at the 'Indian Summer in Levoča' music festival in Slovakia, the 'Piano Extravaganza' festival in Sofia and during recitals given in Kyiv, Weimar, London, Bayreuth and the Świętokrzyska Philharmonic in Kielce, as well as the Alkan *Symphony for Solo Piano* in the Academy of Music in Katowice, as well as in Bielsko-Biała and Zakopane. He has given recitals in Bayreuth and Venice under the auspices of the Wagner Society. In 2008, during a three-part recital at the Steingraeber Haus in Bayreuth, he performed all of Liszt's Wagner transcriptions on Liszt's own 1876 piano. He also performed Liszt's two-piano arrangement of the *Faust Symphony* with Leslie Howard in



London. In 2021 he performed at the American Liszt Society Festival via recorded videos since the pandemic precluded travel. In 2023 he made a series of successful debuts in the national recital halls in Taiwan, performed again at the Levoča festival and debuted at the festival 'Les Nuits Romantiques' in Verbania in northern Italy. His appearances as a concerto soloist in Poland include one with at the Polish Youth Symphony Orchestra under Andrzej Affeltowicz in the Liszt Second Piano Concerto; the Józef Wieniawski Piano Concerto with the Koszalin Philharmonic Orchestra under Monika Wolińska during the 'Swego nie Znacie' festival of Polish music and with the Świętokrzyska Philharmonic Orchestra under Alexander Walker during the 'Świętokrzyskie Days of Music' festival; the Górecki Concerto and Philip Glass *Tirol Concerto* with the Nomos String Orchestra under Mieczysław Unger during the 'New Music Festival' in Bytom; and the Kilar Second Piano Concerto and Górecki Concerto with the Archetti String Orchestra under Maciej Tomaszewicz in Jaworzno.

In 2024 he performed as the opening soloist for Polish Radio Chopin Festival in Antonin and as the musical guest for the reunion of the Harvard Law School Association of Europe at Lobkowicz Castle in Prague. He made his American debut in San Francisco, and again performed at national recital halls in Taiwan, premiering his own *Berlin Piano Works*, Op. 67, alongside works by Liszt, Alkan and Thalberg.

His considerable output as a composer has earned recognition from performers and audiences. He has written for piano and harpsichord and composed chamber, vocal and film music, as well as producing piano transcriptions of music by Queen, Glass, Górecki, Gounod, Kilar, Korngold, Liszt, Preisner, Prokofiev and others. In 2022 his Concerto for Harpsichord and String Orchestra, Op. 78, was premiered at the Podlasie Philharmonic in Białystok and later at the Concert Studio Lutosławski in Warsaw, and again in 2023 in Jaworzno with the Archetti String Orchestra. Also in 2023, his most recent composition, *Sceny filmowe* ('Film Scenes') for cello and piano, Op. 81, was premiered at the Świętokrzyska Philharmonic in Kielce. His works are performed by such esteemed Polish musicians as Hanna Balcerzak, Aleksandra Gajecka-Antosiewicz, Anna Górecka, Gabriela Szendzielorz-Jungiewicz and Przemysław Wierzbka. In 2023 and 2024, harpsichordists Anna Krzysztofik-Buczynska and Lilianna Stawarz performed his *Wandermusik für zwei Cembali*, Op. 83, in Białystok and in Warsaw at the Drama per Musica Festival, with the conductor Maciej Tomaszewicz and the Chamber Orchestra Archetti giving the premiere of his *Landschaften nach Caspar David Friedrich für Streichorchester*, Op. 84, in April 2025. His compositions and transcriptions are published by MusePress of Japan and Ars Musica of Poland.

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—Henry Fogel, *Fanfare Magazine*, July/August 2024

'Niemann does not deserve the obscurity into which he has descended, and this disc ought to help gain him an appreciative audience. Pianist Tomasz Kamieniak does a most creditable job in bringing these works to life. [...] William Melton's superb notes are up to the usual high standard one has come to expect from Toccata. In short, solidly recommended.'

—David DeBoor Canfield, *Fanfare Magazine*, September/October 2024



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Tomasz Kamieniak

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