

Chapter 5

Pre-Wagnerian Piano Works

*I favor any skepsis to which I may reply: 'Let us try it!'*¹

It was the same nationalist romantic literary sources that spurred Nietzsche to write out his earliest surviving solo piano works. His interest in Frithiof's Saga led to a familiarity with the *Edda*—one of the foremost collections of Norse mythology. His notebooks indicate that he had access to Pinder's copy of the *Edda*, translated by von Simrock's in two volume since November 1858.² From this collection that included such characters as Siegfried, Brunhilde, Wotan and the Nibelungen, Nietzsche developed an attachment to a character named Ermanarich. The *Edda* is awash with actual historical figures who have been woven creatively into the tapestry of Norse mythology through the centuries, and Ermanarich seems to be one of these. Most scholars agree that this was actually Jörmunrek,³ a fourth century Ostrogoth king, who ruled in what is now the Ukraine. Like Attila the Hun - who also makes frequent appearances in the sagas - the historical figure Jörmunrek should be regarded only as a starting point from which a purely fictional adventure departs. Nietzsche's first mention of the character appears in his notebooks from March 1861.⁴ For the next two years, Ermanarich would become a frequent subject of his letters, essays, and comparisons. The examples show a structured study of the character and include: a Latin assignment from several weeks later including

¹ GS, 115: I, 51.

² HK I, 27.

³ "Jörmunrek" is the German spelling of the Hungarian king and differs somewhat from the Hungarian or English spellings. Since it here appears in the context of its influence on Nietzsche, the German spelling seems most appropriate.

⁴ HK I, 244.

references to “Ermanaricus,”⁵ notes detailing the evolution of the character through other sagas,⁶ a list of texts to set to music,⁷ a thirty page “historische Skizze” of “Ermanarich, Ostgothenkönig,”⁸ a poem relating Ermanarich’s love for Swanhilde,⁹ the libretto for an envisioned Ermanarich opera, and letters to his mother, sister, aunt, and even a classmate who was interested in studying Nietzsche’s Ermanarich research.¹⁰ Because his interest in Ermanarich led directly to two completed musical compositions, and indirectly influenced several others, an understanding of the specific Ermanarich story is necessary.

The story begins with the beautiful Swanhild living in Denmark after her mother, Guthrun,¹¹ married King Jonakr following the death of her earlier husband, Atli or Attila the Hun. King Jörmunrek the Great hears of Swanhild's great beauty and decides he must marry her. He sends his son Randver to Denmark on his behalf to ask for her hand, and entrusts him to bring the young woman to him. Bikki, counselor to Jörmunrek, accompanies Randver and encourages him to consider marrying Swanhild himself rather than give her to his elderly father. Randver and Swanhild agree. Bikki then betrays Randver by telling the king that his son and Swanhild are in love, at which time Jörmunrek has his son arrested and taken to the gallows. Just before the execution, Randver plucks the feathers from his father’s hawk and asks that the bird be sent to his father. When King Jörmunrek sees the naked hawk, he realizes (amazingly enough) that just as the hawk was now unable to fly, he had dishonored his own kingdom by

⁵ Ibid., 257.

⁶ Ibid., 258.

⁷ Ibid., 259.

⁸ HK II, 280-313.

⁹ HK I, 300.

¹⁰ HKB I, 186, 232, 234, 274.

¹¹ Guthrun is also closely related to the events portrayed in Wagner’s *Die Ring der Nibelungen*.

condemning his only heir. He tries to call off the hanging, but he is too late. The tragedy continues as King Jörmunrek blames the innocent Swanhild for his misfortunes. In one version, he rides in from the forest after hunting with his men, and as Swanhild is sitting bleaching her hair, has them ride over her, trampling her to death. In another version, she is bound to the castle gate and the king's men are instructed to ride their horses over her. But because of her great beauty, when she looked at the horses, they refused to move any further. The treacherous (but ever-helpful) Bikki then has a sack put over Swanhild's head, ending her enchantment of the horses and leading to her death under their hooves.

When Gudrun (Swanhild's mother) learns of this, she incites her sons, Hamdir (Hamthir), Sorli, and Erp, to vengeance. She tells them to attack the old king in his sleep, and gives them chain mail and helmets so strong that iron cannot pierce them. They come up with a plan whereby Hamdir and Sorli were to cut off Jörmunrek's arms and legs, while Erp would cut off his head. The three brothers get in a fight on the way, however, and Hamdir (Hamthir) and Sorli killed Erp. As the two surviving brothers attack the king and cut off his arms and legs, the king wakes up and calls out to his men. They quickly realize that if they had not killed Erp, the king would have died before he could alert the guards to their deed. Jörmunrek's men, on the king's last command, stone Hamdir and Sorli to death. The story then ends with Ermanarich, Swanhild, Randver, Hamdir, Sorli and Erp all dead, driving Guthrun to kill herself and pursue her enemies in the afterlife.

The idea for the first of Nietzsche's projects on the Ermanarich theme - *Heldenklage* - began at the latest in the summer of 1861. At that time Nietzsche listed it as one of several creative works he would pursue based on the *Edda* material, but had probably begun several months earlier when he wrote a school paper describing several

Serbian folksongs. Throughout his interest in the story, he closely associated it with Serbia, and even considered naming his “symphonische Dichtung”¹² after the region instead of the hero. In the paper, he writes of the Serbian “Heldengedichte” and their inspirational capacities and natural qualities.¹³ Although Nietzsche was mistaken in conflating the Edda with Serbian folklore, the connection stayed with him throughout the period in which he wrote these works.

Although begun in mid-1861, there is no record of the completed piece until Easter 1862, at which time he submitted it to Germania. Formally, it closely resembles the lieder, and its early date (before first encountering *Tristan*) suggests that the formal developments were unrelated to any Wagnerian influence. The piece opens in f# minor with an extended eight-bar phrase cadencing on the tonic (ex. 17). The second phrase begins in the relative major (A) and is twelve measures in length, cadencing on the tonic. A return to the opening material follows, with the characteristic embellishments associated with the “recapitulations.” In this case the embellishment is an arpeggio figure spread between the two hands and a transposed and edited version of the opening melody. The second half of the B material (the section in the tonic) begins the coda, which then descends through both registers and tonalities, ending the piece in d minor.

Several characteristics first appearing in this piece can be seen in his later works, including his unusual phrase extensions. The opening phrase closely follows standard rules of composition, returning to the tonic after four measures and then exploring the dominant shortly before returning to the tonic. Its uniqueness stems from the two bar

¹² The subtitle for his later work, “Ermanarich.”

¹³ Ibid., 266.

extension tacked to the end of the eight measure phrase. Nietzsche apparently felt it necessary to devote an additional two measures to reaffirming the tonic harmony. In fact, he felt it was so important to the phrase structure, that the embellished return to the opening material preserves the ten-measure length, including the two measures of tonic harmony. A similar harmonic extension and repetition is found in the opening phrase of *Da geht ein Bach*, as well, and less structured but very similar constructions can be found in *Ermanarich*.

The reason behind this structure's inclusion is hardly clear. Nietzsche was a great lover of poetry, and a gifted poet himself. Even at a young age, his notebooks are full of fine examples of his poetic abilities. His belief in the deep connection between speech and music has been addressed above, and in later works he repeatedly compares poetic meter to musical rhythm.¹⁴ Therefore proportion and balance in regard to phrase structure would seem to be a foregone conclusion in Nietzsche's music. Like many of Nietzsche's solo piano works, *Heldenklage* also seems to be a song without words, resembling his lieder not only structurally but also melodically. These extensions, however, feel out of place and strain the proportion of the phrase—draining the piece of momentum and creating a sense of becoming “bogged down.” Such extensions are, of course, not unheard of, and its application in creating echo effects can be found in both the works of Schubert and Schumann (ex. 18). A search for possible rhetorical implications comes back empty however, and we are left with a distinctive, although not

¹⁴ See esp. GS, 138-140: II, 84; “Thus one tried to *compel* the gods by using rhythm and to force their hand: poetry was thrown at them like a magical snare.” And later, “...it (poetry) appears as a philosophical doctrine and an artifice in education; but long before there were any philosophers, music was credited.”

altogether successful sound. Unfortunately, Nietzsche does not achieve the same success with this technique as that of his predecessors.

Aside from the proportional glitches, the piece does possess a certain amount of charm, and creates the heroic impression its name implies.¹⁵ It is also a credit to Nietzsche that *Heldenklage* presents an un-romanticized perspective on heroism. True to his philosophical writings, the hero is praised, but tragedies and setbacks are not minimized or misrepresented. The piece simultaneously implies royalty and majesty (through the dotted rhythms and the sweeping arpeggios)¹⁶ while also creating an aura of sadness and sacrifice as implied in the repeated questioning motif in the phrase extensions. Despite some awkward constructions, this piece has become a favorite in the small community of Nietzsche-aware pianists, finding its way onto almost every recording of Nietzsche's music.¹⁷ Its positive qualities outweigh the negative ones, and—due to its short length and moderate technical challenges—could be used as an effective teaching piece and deserves addition to recital programs.

The other solo piano works from this time are less effective, but still contain intriguing aspects. His *Ungarischer Marsch* displays a rhythmic complexity that his simpler lieder lack. It also displays developmental abilities not implied by his other works. These include an accompanimental figure that evolves from a simple ragtime pattern to later presentation in dotted and double dotted rhythms, and an effective and varied use of dynamics and register placement. Its harmonic structure is a bit awkward

¹⁵ Or perhaps more accurately, a *snapshot* of heroism; its short length and lieder-form hardly mesh with typical ideas of heroic music.

¹⁶ See Example 14, mm. 1-3 and 23-26.

¹⁷ See discography for a listing of Nietzsche recordings.

however, and the four-measure phrase (upon which the whole piece is based) is forced to end too soon. *Édes titok* represents Nietzsche's experimentation with larger, freer forms. Originally entitled "Süßes Geheimnis," then "Still und ergeben," and later "Sei still mein Herz," it is Hungarian for "secret sweetness." It is the first of Nietzsche's music to fully emerge from the vocal genre, exhibiting neither the clear, accompaniment/melody division nor the strictly contrapuntal texture of his oratorio works. It can best be described as a fantasy, a distinction further suggested by the tempo marking, "Rhapsodisch—mit viel Gefühl vortragen." (Rhapsodic, to be performed with much emotion). Nietzsche's inexperience with the new format is reflected in the vague nature of the piece. It exhibits little sense of closure or development because of metric inconsistencies and an overabundance of harmonic surprises. For example, the strange metric placement fails to establish a sense of meter until the closing of the first theme, at which time an unusual pause again disrupts the meter (ex. 19). The second half of the piece is more successful, combining the free phrase structure Nietzsche was exploring with an adequate metric foundation to allow the listener to enjoy the "secret sweetness," undisturbed.

Nietzsche's obsession with the Ermanarich character culminated in the "symphonic poem" of the same name.¹⁸ In a letter to his mother, Nietzsche wrote of his research and of his need to do justice to the story.¹⁹ Originally intending to express the tale through poetry, he found that he was "too moved" and "not distanced enough" to present an objective account. He explained that "...from music comes the essence of my

¹⁸ His piece, "Ermanarich" is subtitled "Symphonische Dichtung," see MN, 17.

¹⁹ HK II, 101-103.

mood, through this the Ermanarich saga has been fully incarnated.” The objectivity he sought was also aided by finding a story in a foreign land. He described the piece as depicting “...not Goths, not Germans... I dare say they are Hungarians.” He went on to describe Franz Liszt’s *Hungaria* as a model for his work, and that it was, in fact, because of *Hungaria* that he had originally thought of entitling the piece, “Serbia,” in the tradition of nationalist epics. Modern-day ethnomusicologists will most likely disagree with Nietzsche’s claims of it being “wholly Hungarian,” but for that matter, the same criticism can be ascribed to Liszt’s work as well.

This piece is noteworthy for its programmatic differences from all Nietzsche’s earlier works. Whereas his lieder and songs without words sought to capture the moment of existence, *Ermanarich* was designed to portray a whole series of events—a complete narrative. In fact, the narrative comprises the whole of the formal content as well, replete with captions indicating narrative progress at certain points in the music. Nietzsche placed letters at specific points throughout the music, each of which was linked to a short synopsis listed in a legend at the end. For example, an “A” is written above the first measure, and the legend following the piece indicates:

A—The first section—heroic and gloomy—the old Ermanarich is presented to us, a serious, wildly heroic personality, with a hint of mildness and sweetness, who coldly looks from above on his faded life experiences.²⁰

The piece is comprised of fourteen of these sections, each indicated with a letter. They range from the musically specific - “In the distance one hears the sounds of a national march as the procession comes nearer;” to the more abstract - “...Randwe perceives the discrepancy of the relations of strength and passion, the discrepancy between his love and

²⁰ MN, 17.

his father's love; so embittered by life's pain that his love destroys." These captions summarize only a section of the entire Ermanarich saga, beginning at Ermanarich and Swanhild's wedding procession, detailing Randwe's interruption and attempt to claim Swanhild for himself, and ending after Ermanarich kills his son with a dagger and collapses to the floor in grief.

As the piece progresses, a vocabulary of motifs is developed in a way that helps tie together the disparate sections. Although not strikingly original, and on occasion even predictable, they effectively tie narrative details to the music. An alternating triplet figure voiced in chords underneath the ascent of a fifth comprises the "wedding march" motif (ex. 20). Its repetitive nature supposedly recalls traditional Hungarian wedding music, and the use of triplets is likewise associated with Slavic music. As in the case of Nietzsche's earlier claim to a "wholly Hungarian" style, this association comes from equally dubious sources. Most likely influenced by the above-mentioned national romantic movement, Nietzsche would have been exposed to German-stylized "Hungarianism" à la Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsodies rather than more authentic folk traditions. In any case, the characteristic rhythmic qualities of the motif can be readily associated with a wedding march, and as such serve their purpose within Nietzsche's musical narrative. The B section introduces a new, passionate, melodic motif associated with Randwe and the hot-bloodedness of youth (ex. 21). This motif returns whenever Randwe enters or when Ermanarich thinks about him. The third and final motif appears whenever Swanhild is mentioned or gazed upon.²¹ According to its related caption, the

²¹ Despite the great number of intriguing female figures in Norse mythology, Nietzsche's many projects completely ignore the female characters, portraying them only as objects to be desired. Throughout his life

motif introduces Swanhild with "...harp sounds 'gently, like the sunbeam that shines in the halls' (from the *Edda*), but shot through with apprehension when she sees the old, gray, lightning-eyed Ermanarich."²² The harp effect is produced through right hand arpeggiations over long left-hand pedal points (Nietzsche specifically labels the left hand thusly, see ex. 22). The arpeggiations drift through several harmonies, recalling the gradual harmonic shifts found throughout the development sections of his lieder.

Yet any simple retelling of the story through musical devices would jeopardize the musical integrity that he had always prized. Nietzsche's solution to this problem was to portray *several* moments at key junctures throughout the story. In this way, he can maintain his ideal of musical integrity, and still use the fruit of narrative technique—before and after relationships—to add depth to his portrayal. For example, one section portrays Randwe seeing Swanhild and becoming overcome with love. That moment spawns a section of the overall piece, and includes a distinctive combination of motifs. Later, when Randwe decides to interrupt the wedding, the Swanhild motif returns to give depth and motivational insight into Randwe's decision-making process. The use of motifs is certainly not new—not even for Nietzsche,²³ but his mature use of them in *Ermanarich* represents a significant addition, for better or worse, to his compositional arsenal.

While experimenting formally in *Ermanarich*, he was simultaneously experimenting stylistically with his *Unserer Altvordern eingedenk*, also entitled *Zwei*

he found it difficult to relate to women, and many books have examined his strained relationships with his sister, his mother, Lou Salôme, Cosima von Bülow and others.

²² MN, 19.

²³ See the discussion of the Christmas Oratorio above.

polnische Tänze or “Two Polish Dances.” These two works were composed while Nietzsche was finishing his *Ermanarich* and were inspired by similar sources. The national romanticism that inspired renewed interest in Scandinavian sagas also led to the popularity of folk music in the mid and late nineteenth century. As with the sagas however, the rampant nationalism of the day anachronistically imposed distinctly nineteenth century notions of race upon the antediluvian folk song traditions. In fact, it is likely that the “Two Polish Dances” were intended as part of a larger suite of *Ungarische Skizzen*.²⁴ The Germania chronicles indicate Nietzsche’s submission of this set that included, *Heidenschenke*, *Wilde Träume*, *Ungarischer Marsch*, *Nachts auf der Haide*, *Heimweh*, and *Zigeunertanz*, of which only *Ungarischer Marsch* and *Zigeunertanz* survive. These works were submitted in two groups in January 1862 and May 1862.²⁵ Letters from the same period refer to Nietzsche’s enthusiasm for folk music and further substantiate the existence of these lost works. “There must be many wonderful folksongs in existence that have not even been collected yet. If I were lucky enough to raise up some of these treasures it would be the sweetest reward.”²⁶

That Nietzsche did find several folksongs and set them to music—with or without words—is almost certain. His research into the *Ermanarich* saga illustrates both his research abilities and tenacity. But because only piano solo works come down to us from this collection, we may never know which songs are represented. We are also left to wonder as to his choice of titles and groupings. Why, for example, would Nietzsche intend on grouping *Zwei polnische Tänze* with his *Ungarische Skizze*? This question, as

²⁴ MN, 331.

²⁵ HK II, 98, 121.

²⁶ HKB I, 88.

well as Nietzsche's earlier interpolation of Serbian and Hungarian descriptions, may be explained by examining Pan-Slavism. Advocated by various individuals from the seventeenth century on, it developed as an intellectual and cultural movement in the nineteenth century. It was stimulated by the rise of nationalist romanticism, and it grew with the awakening of the Slavs within the Austrian and Ottoman empires. Nineteenth century conceptions of the Slavic race had grown to include populations from Poland, Hungary, Bohemia, Romania, Serbia, and Croatia, and some larger conceptions even included those from White Russia and the Ukraine. Slavic historians, philologists, and anthropologists, influenced by Johann Gottfried von Herder, helped spread a national consciousness among the Slavs, and some dreamed of a unified Slavic culture to replace an allegedly declining Latin-German culture. The first Pan-Slav Congress was held at Prague in 1848 and presided over by Palacky, and was therefore contemporaneous with Nietzsche's own schooling. It must, therefore, be in light of this unusual racial paradigm that Nietzsche's ideas of national characteristics (and by extension, his attempts at ethnomusicology) be evaluated.

Even in such a permissive light however, certain stylistic abnormalities are highly unusual, most noticeably his version of the Polish mazurka. After Chopin's popularization of the dance, mazurkas could be heard in almost any middle-class home containing a piano. Nietzsche surely heard many mazurkas, both through his own studies and in social gatherings at the homes of his musical friends. He would have known, therefore, that a mazurka was characterized by a quick triple meter with frequent subdivisions of the first beat. Yet the piece he entitled, *Mazurka* is written in two/four time. Although the tempo, subdivided first beat and accompanimental figure are all

appropriate to the genre, the time signature presents a significant stumbling block. The possibility of a simple mislabeling is made unlikely by the carefully written manuscript; it was obviously re-copied with some care.²⁷ If Nietzsche intended this as a sort of challenge to traditional forms, no discussion comes down to us in his letters. As it was presented to Germania, surely Pinder and Krug would have had something to say about the first-ever 2/4 mazurka. Perhaps Nietzsche did write it to be provocative, in which case the provocation must not have extended past the Germania recital in which it was debuted.

Despite its misnomer, the mazurka and its companion piece, *Aus der Czarda*, are charming and their inclusion in piano recitals is warranted. Both contain regular phrase structures and employ a small-scale variation technique to build interest and tension throughout the work. The mazurka is more straightforward, employing an A-B-A' form. The A section is comprised of two eight-measure phrases beginning and ending on the tonic. The B section begins in the relative minor and contains a dramatic contrast to the light-hearted first section, culminating in a flurry of octaves leading to a sudden drop in register and intensity (ex. 23). The following twelve bars explore the dominant harmony and create a searching affect, as if casting about for the tonic after the sudden collapse in measures 20-21. The final section includes two repetitions of the A section with a clever move to the dominant linking the two tonic-centered phrases (ex. 24).

The companion dance, *Aus der Czarda*, actually *is* a mazurka according to the traditional definition of the term. It is in triple meter, has a subdivided first beat and a heavy peasant-dance feel. It also falls neatly into eight-bar phrases, but their relation to

²⁷ MN, 331.

each other is more complex than in the *Mazurka*. Beginning in F major, it can best be described formally as A-B-C-B-A'-B-A'.²⁸ Each section has unique tonal centers, allowing Nietzsche to create tonal development in conjunction with motivic development. An example of this combination can be found in the A' sections (ex. 25). The melodic material is derived from the embellished return of the B section while the tonal center is associated with the A section. The combination of the two allows the A' section (and the piece itself) to end in the sub-dominant, Bb. Remarkably, despite the relatively short length of the piece (sixty-one measures) the conclusion in Bb major does not sound like the sub-dominant. The gradual introduction of secondary alterations into the opening material gradually casts the tonic as a dominant, allowing Nietzsche to end the piece in Bb.

²⁸ The C section is significantly different enough from the surrounding material to preclude describing it as a simpler binary-related form.