

Music of John Powell

Roy Hamlin Johnson, piano

Sonate Psychologique, Op. 15 (1905)

Variations and Double-Fugue on a Theme of F. C. Hahr, Op. 20 (1907)

JOHN POWELL (b. 1882, Richmond, Va., d. 1963, Charlottesville) was a concert pianist, composer, and eloquent advocate of an American national music based on the folk music of his native South. Most important among his works derived from that source are the *Rhapsodie Nègre* (1918)—inspired by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—and the Symphony in A (1945). Before World War I, he also wrote in what he then termed "classical," i.e. German Post-Romantic style. The climax of that period is the 62-minute *Sonata Teutonica*, Op. 24 (1913)—abridged, recorded (CRI 368), and published (Oxford University Press, 1983) by the undersigned. The two compositions on the present disc, plus the *Sonata Noble*, Op. 21 (1908), form the rest of his major "classical" works for solo piano.

With the exception of the Hahr Variations, all of this genre includes extra-musical references—, the most elaborate of these items, by far, are the program notes which accompany *Teutonica*. Next in line in this regard are the various headings in the unpublished SONATE PSYCHOLOGIQUE, OP. 15 (1905), a work written while Powell was studying piano with Theodor Leschetizky in Vienna (1902-1907). The sonata is dedicated "To Warrington Dawson," a fellow Southerner. Its original title was in German (*Psychologische Sonate*), as was its motto ("On the text of St. Paul: 'The Wages of Sin is Death.'). The movement headings are given in a mixture of German, Italian, French, and Greek (the bracketed translations and key indications are this writers): I. *Kampf* (Struggle), *Grave—Allegro agitato* [*e-flat*]; II. *Nocturne*, *Hingebung* [Submission], *Andante—Allegro brioso* [*G-flat*]; III. *Scherzo diabolique*, "*In den Klauen*" ["In the Clutches"], *Allegro "con fuoco"* (*b-flat*); IV. *Thanatopsis* [Contemplation of death], *Tempo di Marcia Funebre, un poco mono mosso* [*e-flat*].

Powell's preoccupation with the writings of St. Paul is revealed in his home correspondence of early 1903. These letters also contain accounts of Strauss conducting *Death and Transfiguration*, and of Rachmaninoff performing a then "new concerto:" his Second. Besides the evident influence of these two composers on *Psychologique*, we have Powell later describing the piece as "Lisztian." Leschetizky had frequently devoted entire piano lessons to helping Powell as a composer, but after hearing the new sonata (early in 1906), the great pedagogue insisted that Powell should begin studying composition with Carl Navratil (1836-1914), a friend of Leschetizky's, who preferred, above that of all others, the music of Mozart and Brahms. (n.b. Navratil dedicated his first piano trio to Brahms, his second to Leschetizky. Powell's *Sonata Noble* has some striking similarities to the latter work.)

Psychologique contains little in the way of imitative counterpoint, but Powell was assigned many contrapuntal exercises by his new teacher, and the VARIATIONS AND DOUBLE-FUGUE ON A THEME OF F. C. HAHR, OP. 20 (1907), reveals that a profound change in musical style was effected. In addition to its 11 variations (the 16th of which is entitled *Canon*) and an extended, thoughtful *Finale*, the piece has three fugues: the first and third are on a variation of Hahr's theme; the second uses one of the third's counter-subjects. The influence of Leopold Godowsky, who liked to play informally for Leschetizky's classes, can be seen in Variation 8, which is for left hand alone. The theme is in the Aeolian mode (*b-flat*); its choice foreshadows Powell's later (after 1931) exclusive use of modal materials.

The dedicatees of these works, FREDERIC CHARLES HAHR (1843-1915) and FRANCIS WARRINGTON DAWSON (1878-1962), made major contributions to Powell's development and success. Hahr was born in Sweden. In 1865 he came to America to fight for the Confederacy, but arrived too late for the war, he stayed on to teach music in North Carolina and Virginia. In 1880-1883 he travelled to Germany to study with Kullak, Scharwenka, and Liszt. After returning to the United States, he settled in Richmond, where eventually (following Powell's sister, Elizabeth Brockenbrough) he became Powell's teacher. Powell frequently performed Hahr's pieces on his concert tours; the *Variations and Double-Fugue* received the inscription "To F. C. Hahr," whom Powell playfully addressed as "Pa Fritz."

Warrington Dawson's first professional assistance to Powell came on the occasion of the latter's successful Berlin debut (Dec. 28, 1907), which Powell had arranged in spite of Leschetizky's dire predictions concerning that city's severely critical audiences. Dawson—whose father, incidentally, had in common with Hahr the experience of having migrated from Europe to fight for the Confederacy—was a native of South Carolina; he and Powell became acquainted as schoolboys in Richmond, a friendship that deepened during a brief visit in Paris, where Dawson had become the UPA correspondent. Shortly before the all-important debut—at Powell's urgent request—Dawson travelled to Berlin and began a long association as Powell's unofficial manager. While in that city, he wrote articles on Powell's recital for release by UPA, and made introductions to those who were famous, and to those who soon would be. Outstanding among the latter was Arthur Rubinstein, who was anxious to duplicate Powell's Berlin triumph in Vienna, where he, Rubinstein, had not yet performed. Later, in London, Dawson introduced Powell to Joseph Conrad, for whom Powell frequently performed Chopin. In Paris, Dawson continued writing of Powell's performances, found opportunities for more recitals, persuaded Camille Flammarion to nominate Powell for membership in the *Société Astronomique* (Powell was an amateur astronomer), and arranged for Powell's music to be published by A. Zunz Mathot.

The *Sonate Psychologique* was one of the pieces submitted by Dawson to Mathot, in 1908. Mathot eventually (1911) published the Hahr Variations and the piano suite, *In the South*; but during these times, Powell's and Dawson's growing interest in "reason and sanity in art," which resulted in their founding of the London-based "Fresh Air Art Society," was becoming less compatible with the thrust of the sonata, which even lost its opus number to some songs published by G. Schirmer.

The performance history of *Psychologique* begins in 1905, when Powell occasionally programmed the *Scherzo diabolique* separately. A London critic, writing of the 1914 *Sonata Teutonica* premiere, remarked that it had been "not long since he [Powell] himself introduced us to his 'Sonate Psychologique;'" and, much later, Powell made an excellent tape before a small audience at his "Longways" estate near Charlottesville. However, there is no evident printed program of a complete public performance before the one given by the then-doctoral student Wayne Smith, at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., April 30, 1978.

The Hahr Variations fared somewhat better: the piece was performed to favorable notices in London and Vienna by Powell and Benno Moiseiwitsch on several occasions—one being by Moiseiwitsch at the initial public meeting of the Fresh Air Art Society, June 23, 1913. Another was by Powell, when the Society met in Vienna; however, the world events of 1914 ended the group's activities, and its membership lost a potentially important outlet.

R.H.J

Roy Hamlin Johnson is a native of West Virginia. His serious musical training began in Charleston (under Walter Bricht), moved to the studio of Sander Vas at the Eastman School of Music where he received the Artist's Diploma and the Doctor of Musical Arts degree, and thence, as the recipient of a Fulbright Award, to Paris to study with Yves Nat and Georges Enesco. In 1953-54, he served under Erich Leinsdorf as pianist for the Rochester Philharmonic; the next year he joined the piano faculty of the University of Kansas, Lawrence, a position that he left in 1965 for one at the University of Maryland, College Park, where he is a Professor.

He has performed in concert, on radio and records, and is increasingly known as a composer; his Sonata No. 2 for cast-bell carillon was premiered at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1983.

(original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)