

Musical Treasure Chest #21

There is no denying that fall is nigh: the days are noticeably shorter and the evening breezes are unmistakably cooler. The deep green foliage is beginning to look tired and be replaced by hints of amber; the fields of corn are withering, and vegetable stands transition to pumpkins. Perhaps because of the autumnal proximity I programmed an entirely Scandinavian program for our live stream this week. I have always had a deep connection with Nordic music--discovering the Sibelius symphonies as a freshman in college was a revelation and later getting familiar with the music of Carl Nielsen was equally satisfying. I love the brooding, majestic, dark and churning qualities of their music, which sounds to me like their landscapes and long nights.

Even today, the classical music of Scandinavia remains rather underrepresented in concert programming, relegated to a few familiar names and pieces. As much as I enjoy Grieg, I have grown weary of his wonderful piano concerto, I have heard it a bit too often. And, Sibelius, with his amazing oeuvre of works, seems to be confined to performances of Finlandia and the Karelia Suite, which have become nearly pops pieces, while ignoring much of the other repertory (OK, I do admit there are lots of performances of his violin concerto and first and second symphonies). But what about other Scandinavian composers? There are lots of them....I thought today I would focus on **Johan Svendsen**, a violinist, conductor and composer I stumbled onto during my long overnight shifts at WMHT back in the 1980s.

Svendsen (1840-1911) was a Norwegian, born in Oslo, who spent most of his life in Copenhagen, performing and conducting. He was trained as a violinist and studied briefly at the Leipzig Conservatory with Ferdinand David (concertmaster of the Leipzig Philharmonic, and close friend of Mendelssohn) before a hand injury ended his violin career. He remained at the Conservatory, switching to composition, where he worked with German composer Carl Reinecke, and where he won first prize in composition in 1867. After travels and studies throughout Europe (including in Italy, England and France) and a trip to New York City to

marry Sarah Levett Schmidt, he eventually settled in Copenhagen as conductor of the Royal Theater Orchestra, a position he would hold for most of the rest of his life.

Svendsen split his time between conducting and composing. His works were well-received and often played in his homeland, though they failed to gain traction outside of Scandinavia. Writing almost entirely instrumental music (symphonies, violin concerti, and chamber pieces, as well as a ballet) his compositions won many awards, and he was considered one of the shining stars of Norway and Denmark's musical talents. So great was his acclaim that he wrote a wedding cantata for Prince Oscar Gustav Adolph and Princess Sophia Maria Victoria in 1881 and a Hymn for the golden wedding anniversary of King Christian IX and Queen Louise in 1892.

Today the only composition by Svendsen that is regularly performed is his **Romance for Violin and Orchestra, op 26**. This gorgeous piece was my introduction to Svendsen late one night on my radio shift, I was an immediate, ardent fan. The Romance, with a simple, but such heartfelt melody introduced at the soloist's entrance, soon moves into more turbulent waters with a dark, insistent middle section that somehow brilliantly transforms, almost inevitably, back into the original melody. The *Romance* is a little masterpiece, and if you haven't heard it, I strongly encourage you to listen. The recording I heard that night nearly forty years ago, was with Henri Temianka—simply fantastic playing. I haven't been able to find it for you. Here is a beautiful YouTube version, alas the outstanding violinist is unnamed. It includes both pictures of the dapper Svendsen and the sheet music. And, you can also hear me play on the live stream this **Sunday, September 13th at 3pm** with Max Caplan as pianist.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZ_N7rpbG-c



1898 Music festival in Bergen by [Agnes Nyblin](#). Left to right: [Christian Cappelen](#), [Catharinus Elling](#), [Ole Olsen](#), [Gerhard Rosenkrone Schelderup](#), [Iver Holter](#), [Agathe Backer Grøndahl](#), [Edvard Grieg](#), [Christian Sinding](#), Svendsen and [Johan Halvorsen](#)^[1]