

Musical Treasure Chest #48

I am elated today is the first day of spring. The sun has been feeling warmer for weeks and the longer days (especially exaggerated by Daylight Savings Time) are invigorating. The promise of summer is just around the corner. This energy of spring and rebirth is palpable and triggers memories of favorite vernal concerts, where the musical program becomes somehow infused with these special feelings and excitement. Not only do the performers feel this special synergy, the audience does as well. One such musical association for me is with the undeservedly forgotten Nonet of Rheinberger. This work, for the combination of wind quintet (flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon and horn) paired with string quartet (violin, viola, cello, bass) is a gem, almost chamber orchestral in its scope, yet retaining the intimacy of chamber music.

Josef Rheinberger is perhaps the only composer I know who hails from Liechtenstein—a fact that has made me want to visit the small country—born in its capital city of Vaduz in 1839. A prodigious talent, he held his first "position" at the age of seven as organist at a parish church. His father, who had resisted allowing Josef to pursue music, relented and at twelve, the young musician enrolled at the Munich Conservatory. He graduated with honors and was given a position at the conservatory as professor of piano and composition. He would remain affiliated with the Munich Conservatory throughout his career, with the exceptions of brief stints at the Munich Court Theater and Royal Chapel as conductor. His students include Richard Strauss, Engelbert Humperdinck and Wilhelm Furtwangler, and the American composers Horatio Parker and George Chadwick. He spent his entire career in Munich, dying there in 1901.

As a composer he left a large and varied corpus of works, including fourteen masses, many cantatas and motets, two operas, two symphonies, and various instrumental works. Not surprisingly, he wrote a significant number of solo organ works (these are probably his most frequently performed compositions). His style is influenced by Mendelssohn, Schumann, Schubert and even Bach. He writes memorable melodies, with driving rhythms, well-crafted counterpoint and much

creativity. I find his music very enjoyable and engaging.

The Nonet is yet another one of my "discoveries" working overnights at WMHT. I remember the first time I played the LP with this work on it, being so captivated by the Nonet, that I made up my mind that I had to have a chance to play it. (I finally did that about twenty years later!). Written in 1884, and originally conceived as an octet and then expanded to a nonet, the piece follows a long line of Austrian and German large chamber ensemble pieces, such as the Septet of Beethoven and the Octets of Schubert, Mendelssohn and Spohr. In all of these works the writing is virtuosic for the instruments, and each player is featured in a soloistic capacity at some point in the work. Rheinberger's work is in four movements and is a sunny work, with exuberant melodies, a lilting slow movement and an absolutely joyful final movement.

I have the original recording I listened to all those years ago. It's a stunning collection of players from the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonic Orchestras. Such exciting and gorgeous playing. I hope you will enjoy it too, a perfect piece to usher in spring!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmpMOMkSy0>