A Stephen Foster Curiosity

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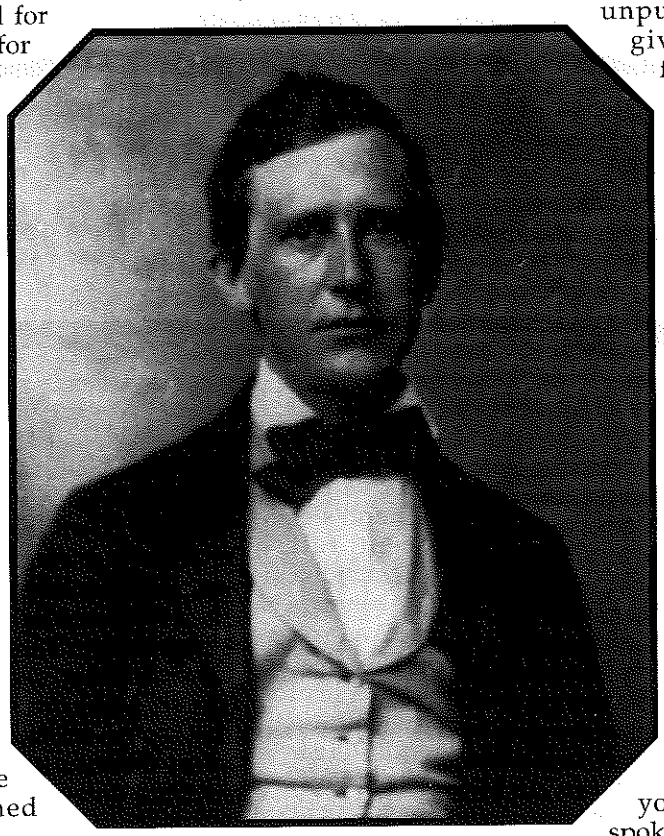
BY JOSEPH SMITH

My recent CD, *Rhythmic Moments* (Premiere PRCD 1028), is a collection of pieces — all fully composed for the piano, and most intended for the concert hall — by composers best known for a branch of American popular music: Foster, Herbert, Joplin, Gershwin, James P. Johnson, Bix Beiderbecke, Arlen, Levant, and Ellington. Since many of these pieces are out of print, and some exist only in manuscript, people often remark to me that I must have done a lot of research to assemble this material.

In fact, I do not consider my investigations to be research at all. To me, research is directed toward a specific practical goal. I indulge the greedy craving of an abnormal curiosity. Most of the music on *Rhythmic Moments* was not in fact acquired with the album in mind — it was lying around in my files for years — in some cases, for decades. I obtained them from a variety of sources.

Harold Arlen's characteristically bluesy and subtle "Ode" was clipped from a 1984 copy of this magazine — the composition's only publication. When I read in a volume of Oscar Levant's memoirs that he had composed a Sonatina, I burned with desire to read through it, and called his publisher, hoping perhaps to get a xerox of this long out-of-print music. Never imagining that there would one day be a revival of interest in Levant's music, they simply sent me their one remaining file copy — gratis.



Stephen Foster

It is not always so simple. My search for the then-unpublished Gershwin pieces resembled Henry James's story, "The Aspern Papers," but with a happy ending. When Charles Schwartz's Gershwin biography appeared in 1973, I noticed, tucked away in an end note, the enticing information that the pianist Josefa Rosanska possessed manuscripts to two unpublished Gershwin pieces, given to her as a token of friendship by the young composer. I looked her up in the phone book and summoned the nerve to introduce myself. While we would occasionally talk on the phone, and she did attend one of my recitals, it seemed apparent to me that her offer to let me come over and see the manuscripts would be continually, perpetually deferred. When I learned that her health problems were becoming serious, I resolved not to bother her by phoning, although I would drop her a note from time to time. The years passed.

One day I picked up the phone, and to my astonishment heard Ms. Rosanska saying, "I haven't forgotten you!" From that point on, we spoke often. Due to her illness and advancing age, she had become totally isolated from the world of music, and I was now the only one with whom she could discuss the musicians she had known — Gershwin, Schoenberg, Hofmann, Gruenberg, and her ex- husband, Rudolf Kolisch — and who could appreciate her own achievements.

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(She had given premieres of Berg's Sonata and Ravel's G major Concerto in several major European cities, and was one of the first American pianists to play in Russia.)

Once she would begin talking of the past, the sick old woman would become the vivacious young girl she had been. I had the pleasure of reading her a quote from a book which had recently appeared, *Schoenberg Remembered* — Dika Newlin's diary of her youthful studies with the moody composer. An entry from 1940 describes Rosanska as "...an excellent pianist especially famed for her renditions of Chopin and, what's more, right attractive — and does Schoenberg know it!" Three days before my 1986 New York recital, she called to ask whether I would like to learn Gershwin's "Rubato" from her copy, and play it as an encore! My performances of this and of Gershwin's "Novelette in Fourths" the following year were probably the first since the composer played them in 1926.*

My interest in Stephen Foster began in skepticism. In my readings in American music, it seemed to me that Foster was most extolled by musical reactionaries deploring the supposed subsequent deterioration of popular music. Was Foster, I wondered, really any good? I read through a volume of his songs, and "Beautiful Dreamer" in particular convinced me that he was indeed good. When I looked up the standard biography (by John Tasker Howard), I found that one of the illustrations reproduced the first manuscript page of Foster's own piano variations on "Old Folks at Home," and I began salivating. When I went to the research library at Lincoln Center, I was excited to learn that they had a copy of the Foster Hall collection of Foster's complete works. Alas, the "complete works," it turned out, did not include this piece. Had the manuscript been lost, or was the page which Howard showed perhaps the beginning of an incomplete work? (I was able to console myself with the charming "Village Bells Polka," which I soon programmed.)

I wrote to Foster Hall in Pittsburgh for information. They sent me two pamphlets — and ignored my inquiry. Some years later, I noticed an article in *Notes* on variant readings in early Foster editions, and wrote to the author to ask whether he knew anything about the variations. Yes, he did — they were published in a recent G. Schirmer book of Foster piano music. How anti-climactic to find, after my vain endeavors, I could now get the elusive piece simply by going to the music store and buying it!

The variation form has produced both some of the most intellectually imposing works in Western music, and some of the most empty and trivial ever intended for the concert stage. In the first type, the theme, or elements thereof, is transformed into a collection of new pieces, whereas in the second, the theme, essentially unchanged, is strewn with formulaic embellishments and figurations. Foster's variations, while harmonically limited and pianistically modest, do genuinely re-think the contours of the famous theme. Hearing the first or third variation apart from the work, one might easily fail to recognize their derivation from "Old Folks at Home."

While the second variation remains close to the theme melodically, it dares to vary its form — a passage in the relative minor is sandwiched between repetitions of a section encapsulating the entire theme. In these variations, as in his songs, Foster's invention is primarily — almost exclusively — melodic. The theme and in fact most of the piece is harmonized exclusively with tonic, dominant, and subdominant. Therefore, the coda's re-harmonization of the song's initial phrase brings an unexpected twinge of pathos.

My fondness for the three Foster pieces on my recording ought not mislead me into making exaggerated claims for these modest efforts. In one respect, though, they can aid our understanding of Foster. With the songs, it is hard to separate the effect of the melodies from that of the words. Hearing the piano pieces, we can admire Foster the musician, and his gift for creating expressive music from the most rudimentary means. Like the other pieces on *Rhythmic Moments*, the composer, while working in an unexpected medium, shows his beloved, familiar personality. ■

*Materials from these pieces were published in a 1925 violin adaptation by Gershwin and Samuel Dushkin. Rosanska's copy of the *Novelette* includes a strain absent in the violin piece, however, and Gershwin's recently-discovered piano roll includes yet another strain.

See Foster's *Old Folks At Home Variations* on page 11.