FROM THE SOUNDBOARD ARCHIVE

Elsa Just’s Ständchen for Guitar Trio

The Guitarist’s Album

MATANYA OPHEE (1991)

Finally, I figured out how to present a piece of ensemble music in this column, without forcing you to tear off pages from your cherished copies of Soundboard, which must be unpalatable for you. I certainly do not wish to encourage anyone to xerox pages. A guitar trio in score form: what a lovely solution to our dilemma, and particularly when it is such a pleasant and simple piece, which can be used to great advantage by students with a modicum of familiarity with the fingerboard. When you perform this piece, make sure that your players all have their own copies of this issue of Soundboard. If they don’t, do encourage them to become members of the GFA. Also, note that some handwritten fingering changes have been left untouched. You may agree with these changes, or you may not. The original is quite readable.

The piece appeared in the musical supplement to the German guitar magazine Der Gitarrefreund in Munich in its May–June issue of 1920. The actual copy comes from the collection of the Viennese guitarist Max Danek, one of the leading members of the I.G.V., the International Gitarristische Vereinigung. I was fortunate to buy a large portion of that collection in the old Doblinger antiquarian music store a couple of years ago.

The title Ständchen means simply “serenade.” The identity of the composer is somewhat of a mystery, since no first name is provided but rather a place of birth or residence. The German city of Breslau is no longer German. It is now part of Poland, and it is called Wrocław. It is home today to some very fine young musicians, among whom we can count Krzysztof Pełech, who almost made it to the GFA competition in Pasadena, if not for some bureaucrat in the American consulate in Warsaw. Second-prize winner in the 1990 Tychy, seventeen-year-old Waldemar Gromolak, also hails from Wrocław. And of course, the city has some very talented guitar teachers, like Piotr Zaleski and Marek Zieliński.

The best I can do about our mysterious composer from Breslau/Wrocław is to ask old reliable (most of the time, anyway) Josef Zuth in his 1926 Handbuch der Laute und Gitarre. One entry in Zuth’s seems to fit both the family name and the place of residence. Here it is in translation:
Just, Elsa, born November 14, 1894, in Buxtehude, near Hamburg, and died June 2, 1919, in Breslau, received her earliest musical instruction from her father Prof. Arthur Just, studied under Max Puchat in the Breslau Conservatory, where later she herself became a member of the faculty. Just is known primarily as a composer of piano music together with bowed string instruments, as well as a composer of guitar music. She published some remarkable pieces in the magazine Der Gitarrefreund in 1917 and 1919.

My collection of the musical supplements of Der Gitarrefreund is rather substantial but in no way complete. I haven’t been able to check the 1917–1919 issues. The fact that Zuth does not mention the 1920 issue may be an oversight or a simple mistake. I do feel, however, that the person described in the entry above is most probably the composer of this delightful trio. One wonders what else we would have had from this young woman who died at the tender age of twenty-five.

This column was first published in Soundboard 17, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 55–60. It is reproduced here as part of a collection, “From the Soundboard Archive,” featuring selected notes by Matanya Ophee to the Guitarist’s Album series. The text is unchanged except for typographical corrections and minor changes in house style.

About Soundboard Scholar

Soundboard Scholar is the peer-reviewed journal of the Guitar Foundation of America. Its purpose is to publish guitar research of the highest caliber. Soundboard Scholar is online and open access. To view all issues of the journal, visit http://soundboardscholar.org.

About the Guitar Foundation of America

The Guitar Foundation of America inspires artistry, builds community, and promotes the classical guitar internationally through excellence in performance, literature, education, and research. For more information, visit https://guitarfoundation.org.