

An Introduction to Croatian Composer

Dora Pejačević

by Pamela Blevins

I must admit that I had never heard of Dora Pejačević until I came home one afternoon several years ago and found her on my doorstep.

She had arrived in a very large, somewhat travel-worn package from Croatia -- the Croatian Music Information Center to be exact. What a treasure trove I found when I opened it -- the newly published score of her first symphony, an illustrated, dual-language biography with a sampler CD as well as two other non-commercial CDs of her larger works -- the symphony and piano concerto. These were sent to me because I edited *Signature*, our online magazine about women in classical music.

I am always happy to meet new composers and Dora has proved to be an exceptional discovery. Like so many women in music she possessed many gifts -- composer, violinist, pianist, actress, patron of the arts.

Maria Theodora Paulina Pejačević (Dora) was born on 10 September 1885 in Budapest, a new addition to a noble Croatian family that had long played a significant role in the political life of that nation. Her mother was an Hungarian countess, a woman of great beauty who was a trained singer, played the piano and was a fine amateur painter. She was also an authoritarian force who was often at odds with her strong-willed, intellectual daughter whose curiosity led her to rebel against the constraints of the aristocratic life into which she had been born.

Tutored privately at home by an English governess, Dora was fluent in several languages, including English, and easily shifted among them in her voracious reading. Curiosity was the driving force in her life. She was interested in politics; she knew how to talk to the men and women in the street and understood them. Her views led her to be labeled "Socialist."

Dora started to compose at the age of twelve. Fortunately her parents recognized her natural gifts and allowed her to study abroad. However, those studies included relatively little instruction in music and were largely devoted to broadening her intellectual horizons. She was largely self-taught in music, which is remarkable considering the inventiveness, rich brilliance and enduring quality of her compositions. Dora could hold her own with her male contemporaries. Her travels took her to Germany, Bohemia and other European countries. During her travels, Dora came to know the leading artists and intellectuals of the day, including Rainer Maria Rilke whose poems she later set.

Her early compositions were mainly miniatures -- piano pieces, songs and sonatas -- but they were of high quality meriting merit performances by some of the most important soloists of the day. Her music often had its premiere in Germany.



Young Dora in an Alsace costume, 1902



A visionary and gifted young woman who participated in the world beyond her noble status.

Dora Pejačević

Continued



Dora's village, Našice, and her palatial home.



A woman of principles and compassion.

Beginning in 1913, Dora entered a rich period of artistic maturity marked by steady productivity. She composed her first orchestral work, a piano concerto in 1913 when she was twenty-eight. She was the first Croatian composer to write a concerto.

At the height of the First World War, Dora experienced a reality known to few of her sheltered fellow aristocrats. She was greatly affected by what she saw firsthand of grotesque horrors of the war. She volunteered as a nurse when wounded soldiers started arriving at Našice, her home village.

Pejačević's biographer Koraljka Kos believes that Dora composed "vigorously during the war years perhaps out of the need to fence herself off from some of the awful reality she witnessed daily." Some of her finest works come from this difficult time, including her splendid *Symphony in F Sharp Minor*, composed between 1916 and 1917. It received its premiere in Dresden in 1920.

After the war she became even more alienated from and critical of members of her class. Their superficiality went against everything she held dear. She wrote to a friend:

"I simply cannot understand how people can live without work -- and how many of them do, especially the higher aristocracy I despise them because of this."

She scorned those who ignored the misery and suffering of the war and who only became excited when threatened with losing some of their wealth. "I cannot stick with the members of my class."

Always introspective and highly sensitive, Dora became more so after the war years. "I think," she wrote, "that the surroundings and external events never take a force capable of outweighing what occupies and fills our souls." And her soul was filled with beauty and love. She believed that "everything that is good and great springs from love"

Romantic love came into Dora Pejačević's life much later than it might have done had she followed a true aristocrat's path. In 1921, Dora married Ottomar von Lumbe, a military officer seven years her junior. They settled in Munich, where Dora became pregnant with their first child. In a letter written to Ottomar in October 1922, just three months before the birth of their son Theo, she seemed to sense that death was waiting for her.

"I hope that our child should become a true, open and great human being -- prepare its way for it, never prevent it from knowing in life that suffering ennobles the soul because only in that way can one become a human being. Let it develop like a plant...if it has talent, encourage it...give it freedom when it seeks it...so act this way if it is a boy or girl; every talent, every genius, requires equal consideration, and sex cannot be allowed to come into the matter."

Four weeks after Theo's birth, Dora Pejačević died from kidney failure.

True to her beliefs to the very end, she refused to be buried in the family crypt and requested that her tombstone bear only her name "Dora" and the words "Rest now."

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Dora Pejačević Recordings & Biography

The recording company CPO has released seven acclaimed CDs of Dora Pejačević's music:

Symphony in F sharp minor, op. 41

Phantasie Concertante in D minor, op. 48

Lieder for alto and piano

Piano Concerto, Overture & Orchestral Songs

Piano Trio, Cello Sonata

Violin Sonatas & shorter works for violin and piano

The Complete Piano Works (Two CD Set)

Chamber Works: Piano Quartet, Piano Quintet, String Quartet (Two CD Set)

These recordings are available from Arkiv Music, H&B Direct and Amazon Classical Music.

Koraljka Kos's dual-language biography (in Croatian and English) *Dora Pejačević* was published by the Croatian Music Information Center in Zagreb in 2008. It includes a sampler CD of *Pejačević's* music.

For in-depth information on Dora Pejačević, visit: http://mic.hr/composer/dora/composer_articles/bio



The pianist.



The traveler.



The violinist.



Dora & her husband Ottomar von Lumbe

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The composer.