

Wilhelm Stenhammar's *Late Summer Nights*, Op. 33: Rediscovered Swedish Character Pieces

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Introduction

The late-Romantic Swedish pianist-composer Wilhelm Stenhammar is largely unfamiliar among American teachers and students of classical music. Stenhammar's compositions did not reach the same international acclamation as those of his contemporaries, Scandinavian nationalists Edvard Grieg, Jean Sibelius, and Carl Nielsen. However, Stenhammar's piano works demonstrate his unique harmonic language, virtuosic writing, and mature, reflective style, and they offer valuable lessons for late-intermediate to late-advanced students. This presentation will attempt to summarize Stenhammar's legacy and explore the musical and technical skills of the *Late Summer Nights*, Op. 33 for advanced students.

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Stenhammar (1871-1927): His Life and Music

Background

- Born in Stockholm, Sweden and composed for family quartet and his church
- Formal piano study at age 16 with Richard Andersson, a pupil of Clara Schumann
- Graduated with a degree in organ from the Stockholm Musikkonservatoriet and studied for one year in Berlin, where he became influenced by the music of Brahms, Wagner, and Liszt
- Concert pianist, composer, and conductor



Style

- German Classical foundation decorated with Swedish and Scandinavian music features
- Influenced by Nordic nationalistic composers Grieg, Sibelius, and Nielsen as well as German composers
- Differences between Stenhammar and Grieg's nationalistic styles due to historical events
- Scandinavian folk elements in Stenhammar's music
- Master of counterpoint (Renaissance music study)

Piano Works

- Five sonatas, two piano concerti, two impromptus, an intermezzo, fantasies, *Sensommarnätter*, Op. 33, two sets of small piano pieces, and other individual pieces.

Sensommarnätter (Late Summer Nights) Op. 33 as Teaching Pieces

Composition

- Developed during the early 1900s after Stenhammar terminated his composing contract with a Danish publisher
- Published during his mature period in 1914
- Demonstrates his melancholic, introspective nature
- Title reference to the dark evenings at the end of Sweden's short summers, and love for the scenic landscape

Five Character Pieces

- Well-suited for early- to late-advanced students
 - ❖ Comparable to Brahms' Opp. 118 and 119 and Grieg's *Lyric Pieces* but do not include titles like "Intermezzo"
- Common musical skills:
 - ❖ Balance in thick textures
 - ❖ Voicing in contrapuntal and homophonic textures
 - ❖ Shaping and dynamic control
- Common technical requirements:
 - ❖ Rapid finger work
 - ❖ Parallel octaves and sixths in both hand
 - ❖ Ability to play up to four-voice texture
- Uncommon ABAB forms and titles for character pieces

I. Tranquillo e soave

Musical skills

- Clear voicing from low to high registers
- Voicing melody in all four voices
- Shaping long phrases
- Orchestral texture and tone colors
- Portraying a pensive, serious mood

Technical Requirements

- Balancing the four-part hymn texture in a *piano* dynamic range
- Complex fugal counterpoint in second A section
- Clear pedaling in low register

Stenhammar, *Sensommarnätter*, Op. 33, "Tranquillo e soave," mm. 1-3



II. Poco presto

Musical skills

- Voicing in three-part texture
- Shaping long and short phrases in the lyrical B section
- Coloring unusual tonal shifts
- Sense of forward motion

Technical Requirements

- Light, quick movement and loose wrist to voice the full chords in a *piano* dynamic range
- Simple parallel motion
- Rapid scale passage

Stenhammar, *Sensommarnätter*, Op. 33, "Poco presto," mm. 1-4



III. Piano. Non troppo lento

Musical skills

- Voicing the doubled melody in the soprano and tenor parts
- Impressionistic character
- Changing the tone colors of the repeated harmonic and melodic progression in the A sections (theme and variations)

Technical Requirements

- Parallel octaves, sixths, fourths, and thirds
- Four-voice texture
- Clarity in the parallel motion
- Clear pedaling

Stenhammar, *Sensommarnätter*, Op. 33, "Piano. Non troppo lento," mm. 1-8



IV. Presto agitato

Musical skills

- Voicing in four-part texture
- Voicing full chords in the right hand while shaping left hand arpeggiated patterns
- Playing the etude-like piece with a lively musical character

Technical Requirements

- Rapid scale passages in sixths and parallel sixths in the right hand
- Parallel octaves and arpeggios in contrary motion
- Agility

Stenhammar, *Sensommarnätter*, Op. 33, "Presto agitato," mm. 1-5



V. Poco allegretto

Musical skills

- Voicing in three-part texture
- Portraying the primitive, rustic nature of the A sections in contrast with the lyrical B sections
- Attention to legato and non-legato articulations and phrase lengths

Technical Requirements

- Most accessible of the set
- Sturdy, yet light left-hand movement
- Large jumps in both hands
- Wide rolled chords

Stenhammar, *Sensommarnätter*, Op. 33, "Poco allegretto," mm. 1-3



Stenhammar's Contribution

- Beautiful study and performance pieces for late-intermediate to late-advanced students
- Style: unique harmonic language, virtuosic writing, and mature, reflective style
- Offer variety to accompany the standard repertoire
- Available for purchase at: <https://www.gehrmans.se/butik/instrument-ensemble/sensommarnatter-n06473>

Selected References

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