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Poldowski Rediscovered

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VIVA VOCE MAGAZINE ARTICLE

Poldowski was the pseudonym of Lady Irene Dean Paul, born Irene Regine Wieniawska, youngest daughter of the celebrated violinist and composer, Henryk Wieniawski. She was born in Brussels in 1879 but never knew her famous father due to his early death in 1880. As a composer she was largely self-taught and she enjoyed a successful career as a pianist. She studied piano and composition at the Brussels Conservatoire and is known to have begun composing at an early age but it was not until she moved to London sometime around 1900 that she began to have her compositions published. Her first published works, two songs with piano accompaniment appeared in 1900, published by Chappell in London. In 1901 she married an aristocrat, Sir Aubrey Dean Paul, Bart. and gave birth to her first son, Aubrey Donald in 1902. He died in 1904, the same year the second son Brian was born and a daughter, Brenda, followed in 1907. During this period, it is known that she travelled to Paris to study with the composers André Gédalge and Vincent d'Indy, though no details of the actual study are known. From 1911 onwards, Durand in Paris and subsequently, Chester in London, began publishing her French songs, mostly settings of the poetry of Verlaine, with whom she had a great affinity. (There are 35 published songs in all.) In the 1920s Chester published some solo piano works, works for violin and piano and clarinet and piano together with some more French songs. It would appear that most of the songs, despite their dates of publication, were written between 1900 and 1910; they often appeared on concert programmes and Poldowski was privileged to be personally acquainted with some of the leading performers of the day, including the tenor Gervase Elwes etc. She was also closely associated with Sir Malcolm Sargent, Sir Henry Wood (who twice invited her to perform her works at the Proms in the Queen's Hall) and Sir Thomas Beecham, who it is asserted, was interested in producing one of her short operas.

Poldowski did not have much luck in her life: the death of her eldest son, the break-up of her marriage and her disastrous financial situation, combined with poor health, meant that she had to be resourceful in order to survive. Like many other women composers, her name is not particularly well known today, but in London between 1900 and her death in 1932, Poldowski was a very well known personality and was considered to be a successful composer, despite her own misgivings. She expressed disappointment in a letter to her publisher, Chester, in 1924 that more of her large scale works were not accepted for publication. Indeed, many of her works remain unpublished and the original scores are missing. However, in 2003 Her Sonata for Violin and Piano was finally published in the US; the score had lain in the National Library of Poland for many years.

The earlier works, which appear to have been composer before the war, are certainly French in style. There are strong nuances of Faure and Debussy to be found, yet Poldowski exerts her original voice. It is particularly interesting to compare her settings of

certainly Verlaine poems with those by Fauré and Debussy. She emerges as equalling their endeavours in many instances. Her later works which began to be published in the 20s, see a change of style, adopting a more modernist approach for her instrumental works with increasing use of dissonance and a tendency to explore a more virtuosic approach.

For many years, these works remained unperformed. During her lifetime, Poldowski's works appeared on programmes in the UK, Belgium, France, Spain and the United States. During the last ten years, performers, particularly singers, are rediscovering these wonderful miniatures and they are now appearing in concert programmes and recordings. The restoration of an article in the latest edition of the New Grove Dictionary (having, like so many other women composers, been omitted from the previous edition) has prompted interest in this fascinating lady, who sought to combine family life with composition, and endured extreme hardships for her art. However, her indomitable spirit ensured that the music was heard while she lived. On her untimely death from pneumonia, after a long illness, in 1932, a series of concerts was organised by her influential friends, to promote her life's legacy in music and to comply with her alleged final words 'Do look after my music!'