

Fanfare Magazine

-Jerry Dubins

Exactly one year ago, in issue 35:6, I reviewed a disc of cello works by Leopold van der Pals (1884–1966), a composer so obscure that not a single one of his more than 250 works had ever been recorded. It was cellist Tobias van der Pal, great grandson of Leopold's brother Nikolai, who finally dug into Leopold's extensive catalog and with pianist Catherine Penderup recorded a handful of his pieces, among which was a major addition to the cello sonata repertoire.

Now, for the same Polyhymnia label, but with a different pianist, Kristoffer Hyldig, and the addition of violinist, Elisabeth Zeuthen Schneider, Tobias has recorded four more of Leopold's works, a piano sonata, a duo sonata for violin and cello, a piano trio, and three fugues. It was my pleasure to chat with all three players in a recent interview.

Jerry: This first question is directed to Tobias. The place to start, it seems to me, is to ask what led you to this discovery of Leopold's music. How did you come to be aware of its existence? Where did you find it? And in what state of performance viability was it?

Tobias: I remember hearing about the conductor Nikolai van der Pals and composer Leopold van der Pals from my grandfather as a child, but it was not until I started my cello studies at the Royal Academy of Music in Copenhagen in 1999 that my eyes were really opened to who they really were. One day my teacher came to me and said that he had read about my family in Riemann's Music Lexicon in the school library. I was of course intrigued by this and talked to my grandparents about it. First I was given Nikolai's scrapbooks with concert programs and literally a thousand reviews from his concerts throughout Europe in the 1920s through the 1950s, together with letters and cards from Jean Sibelius, Selim Palmgren, Hugo Alfvén, and Ture Rangström, among others. Then, we took a trip to Dornach, Switzerland, to visit Leopold's daughter Lea van der Pals, and an archive which holds Leopold van der Pals's complete manuscripts. We were taken to a room where all the cupboards were opened. First, I got out a score of an opera, *Der Schweinehirt*, from the H. C. Andersen's fairytale—450 handwritten pages—next, a symphony, then chamber music, songs, stage music. In front of us were the musical output from Leopold van der Pals's entire life, 252 complete works plus unfinished material and youth material, all in handwritten autographs. But the music was silent. It was overwhelming.

But the picture of a hard-working, dedicated, and highly skilled composer was already clear from the material at hand. We also got in contact with a man in Germany, Wolfram Graf, who without our knowledge had, at the time, already spent about 5 years to write his doctoral thesis on Leopold van der Pals, his life, his music, and the composing of the first music for Eurythmie Dans, created closely with Rudolf Steiner and his wife Marie. We found out about the performances with the philharmonics in Berlin, Vienna, New York, etc. We arranged for copies to be made of selected works and my work begun to understand the composer and his music.

Jerry: I'd next like to ask each of you in turn to give your own description of the music in terms of its content and style, its influences, and where it fits in the larger picture of 20th-century composition.

Kristoffer: Pals's music, as I see it, is very personal and quite intuitive, despite the use of the classical forms as sonatas and fugues. Where many composers of his time took the neoclassical approach, it seems that Pals took a page from the more heimlich and Biedermeier styles that must have been appealing in between and during the wars. The music, as I see it, has some elements of Schubert in it. Even if the subject is very serious, the perspective and colors of the chords often drag the music back to a very personal, homey atmosphere. An example is the very serious and deep-thinking start of the second movement of the piano sonata, which, in relatively short time, becomes sweet and caring and comforting, without taking away the seriousness of the material. Also, the simplicity of the melodic material gives this feeling of seeing the world from inside your own house. Almost the entirety of the piano sonata is based on the first three tones you hear, even though it evokes many moods and landscapes.

Elisabeth: This is hard for me to pin down. The music has a misty, dreamy side to it, and at the same time a sense of restlessness. I have encountered French and Franco-Belgian music that has the same

effect on me—floating, not seeming to find places of landing and rest. And - this might sound a bit strange – there is a feeling of autumn in it. In the central part of Europe autumn is a very long and tender season.

Tobias: Well, let's take it from the beginning. Leopold van der Pals, born 1884, was brought up in St. Petersburg where his father Henrik van der Pals was the Dutch council in Russia.

In Leopold van der Pals youth he was greatly inspired by performances held in the home (which also was the Dutch embassy in Russia) with renowned artists such as Pablo Casals, the Tchaikovsky brothers and Anton Arensky, Zemlinsky among others. Already as a child, he started to compose, encouraged by his grandfather Julius Johanssen who was professor of counterpoint and director of the Conservatory in St. Petersburg in the 1890's. Soon Leopold left for Switzerland where he studied at the conservatoire in Lausanne with professor Denereaz together with his friend Ernest Ansermet.

After completing his studies at the conservatoire he moved to Berlin around 1907 to continue his studies with the famous teacher Reinhold Gliere (on the recommendation from Rachmaninoff). Early in Leopold van der Pals career he made friends with established profiles in Europe, such as Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Koussevitzki, Lotte Lehman and Alexander Siloti among others. He was a part of the inner cultural circle.

The young Leopold was composing in more or less two different styles, either Impressionistic or Romantic. Van der Pals first breakthrough was the premiere of his first symphony Op 4 with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. The year was 1909 and the concert gave him several new opportunities, for instance to write for the New York Philharmonic or to get his concert piece for violin and orchestra performed throughout Europe.

As he developed as an artist, the two styles seem to merge into one, and the result of this, van der Pals created his own, personal expression. Musical components that are also important to mention is his use of expression in the harmonic development and the idea of metamorphosis in the musical form.

Later in his life (as it is clear, judging from the music on this CD) he turned more towards the idea of polyphony. And if you consider that, the idea of continuous development in music, like a metamorphosis, then the polyphonic writing is actually a quite natural development, I think.

As far as musical style is concerned, it is difficult to put a label on van der Pals music. because it contains elements of both old and new music. Traditional considering structure and polyphonic ideas, and modern when it comes to harmonic development.

An important point, I think, is to consider the origin of Leopold van der Pals's music making. The music seems to have poured out of him, and he often composed music initiated by inspiration. Each note is filled with expression, with himself and personal expression as artistic counterweight to a composition. When you compose in this way, the concept of Impressionism (where the music focuses more on suggestion and atmosphere than detail in the shaping of the tones themselves) is gone, and we are moving towards the area of Expressionism. But, van der Pals music is not dissonant, like other Expressionists. Therefore, I think the closest we get to a character description is lyrical Expressionism.

His music is "absolute music", and draws no direct reference to program or visual image, (which was common in the music from the 19th century). This places him in the area after the romantic period, thus should van der Pals music be interpreted based on the composition itself, its expression, color, development, etc.

That was a long answer! But, labeling van der Pals music is difficult, specially since we so far have heard only a very limited amount of his compositions, and we need to look at the main part of his output before we can really get to the bottom of this.

However, if anyone has a suggestion regarding this matter based on what we have so far, I would be happy to hear it!

Jerry: To quote from your press release, "Although Leopold van der Pals was a very successful composer during the first half of the 20th century, he disappeared from the international music scene in the aftermath of World War II. Suddenly, there was no longer room for the lyric-dramatic musical language that Leopold van der Pals's music stood for." Reducing it to its essence, what this is saying is that van der Pals suffered the fate of many another composer throughout all periods of music history who were viewed as "reactionary," "old-school," "hangers-on" to styles

and forms no longer in vogue. My response to that is as it has always been: “Beautiful music is beautiful music, regardless of who wrote it or when.”

As I listen to the piano sonata on the disc, my analysis of the piece in terms of how it’s put together is that its means are quite economical—just a few notes at a time—and its dissonance level relatively low; but the consonance of its chords belie harmonic progressions arising from concentrated contrapuntal writing that are anything but regular or predictable. The result to these ears is a bit like what I imagine Bach would sound like if he’d been born French and named Claude. Kristoffer, would you care to comment on this?

Kristoffer: Yes, and that’s what makes the working process quite interesting. The succession of the harmonies is very flexible, and you have to find the reason to the harmonic progression in the single voices. It gives the music a nice and steady direction, as if thoughts are wandering and evolving in a metamorphosis; yet, at the same time, they give possibilities for quite quick changes in colors and direction. Only one of the voices needs to change from the path that would have been the logical one to follow in order to change the musical direction. For me, this takes the music away from the academic approach to the fugue and makes way for a freer, more personal form.

Jerry: The repertoire for violin and cello duet is way, way larger than one might initially assume, but unlike duos for violin and viola, which are also quite numerous, those for violin and cello, with a few notable exceptions —Kodály, Martinů, and Schulhoff, for example—are mainly by composers with less familiar names. What’s the history behind van der Pals’s duo-sonata?

Tobias: Well, from the diaries we only get very limited information about what inspired the creation of the Duo-Sonata. He had an idea to write something for violin and cello solo, and a week later he was finished. However, there are other indications of inspiration that might have influenced the composer—his brother, Nikolai van der Pals, for instance, who was a musical companion and a dear friend to Leopold; perhaps the collaboration with the famous violinist Gustav Haveman, who premiered the piece; or his teacher, Reinhold Glière, who composed 10 small pieces for the same instrumentation.

Leopold van der Pals was in fact also a cellist. In his youth he was given a cello labeled Carlo Bergonzi from 1712, a cello which he utterly adored for the deep richness in the sound. So, I think he was composing for himself. In any case, after studying many of van der Pals’s compositions, it is clear to me that his music is initiated by inspiration rather than intellectual impulse. The moment the inspiration arrives, he composes, concentrated and fast. The Duo-Sonata was completed in less than a week.

Jerry: An entry from Leopold van der Pals’s diary, dated 5 October, 1922, which is quoted in the album note, reads, “Yesterday the Schurmanns spent the evening with us. Played parts of the Duo-Sonata. Sounded good and full. But it is very difficult to play.” It doesn’t sound difficult for the two of you [Tobias and Elisabeth]; you play it so beautifully. What did Leopold find difficult about it?

Elisabeth: The melodic writing is using none of the tricks and turns that “lie under the fingers” for string players. It is music of a searching mind and not instrumentally conceived.

It is a dialogue between two personalities not between two different instruments.

Tobias: On this occasion, Pals was playing the cello part, so I think this comment refers to the cello part in particular. He was not a concert cellist, and I think this sonata was technically very difficult for him. Being a professional cellist myself, I can attest to the fact that the instrument demands continuous technical practicing over time. However, there are technical challenges in the sonata, for example, the large stretches in the left hand at the beginning of the finale that require special attention. Also, when you play as a duo you have a bigger responsibility to fill out the sound in order to make it work as an ensemble. But this is really easy when you play with such a violinist as Elisabeth!

Jerry: The Duo-Sonata strikes me as quite eclectic. The first movement is unmistakably redolent with the turn of the 20th-century Viennese humid atmosphere of early Schoenberg, for which I’ve coined the description, “Prelude to an Afternoon in a Jurassic Swamp.” The second movement leaves the mire and methane behind for cooler, northern climes, portraying, perhaps, a pristine Nordic or arctic landscape, not too terribly distant from the terrain and folkloric runes that inspired Sibelius. A playful pizzicato Scherzo follows, which seems influenced in equal measure by the Scherzo from Tchaikovsky’s Fourth Symphony and the second movement from Ravel’s String

Quartet. The last movement, though, frankly, has me stumped. From its opening strains, from which the methane mists of the first movement seem to rise anew, it proceeds on to a sequence of triadic arpeggios that distantly echo the first movement of Beethoven's Tenth Violin Sonata, and then on to a folk-like tune in the violin over a strumming accompaniment in the cello that sounds like a cross between a Romani high-stepping dance and old American revival music. What were your initial reactions to this work, and how did you manage to integrate its many disparate styles into such a coherent, persuasive performance?

Elisabeth: It is very interesting to read your reaction to these four, very different movements, Jerry! I think that I tend to let my first reaction to a piece lead me together with knowledge of the composer's life, his joys and sorrows, and the climate and latitude where he grew up. I try to meet every piece I play quite openly and not too full of preconceived ideas. Rather the way you meet a person—not too full of information about family and background that will form your opinion. I realized that I was interviewed in *Fanfare* less than two years ago. The topic then was my recording of Corelli's Sonatas, op. 5, with my Baroque trio, Trio Corelli.

The keywords for me in that recording were “innocence” and “sunshine.” The information on style had to fit these keywords.

In the van der Pals duo, the first movement has an autumnal quality to it.

The second movement is very intense and sincere with some extraordinary harmonic changes.

The Scherzo caused me trouble and we recorded it a second time. In our first recording of it, I was quite obsessed with getting clear and perfect pizzicato. It is so hard to compete with a cello in pizzicato, and Tobias is brilliant! But then we realized that it did not have the *Schwung*/swing, and we played the middle part too slow and introverted. So we recorded it again with a more modern and cool feel to it.

The last movement has a feeling of freedom and optimism. These upward turning arpeggios ending the piece sound full of joy and celebration.

Tobias: I have always been impressed by Pals's way of writing, that he has a musical idea and follows it to wherever it takes him. It creates the impression that we are taken on a journey, and I have seen the audience in concerts we have played, that have the same experience, eyes wide open and the beginning of a smile. Fortunately, he was also clever enough to know how to bring us back in the end. This has, of course, to do with the form of the composition. It's important to know that all the development in the piece derives from the same thematic material, so when we found the idea we allowed ourselves to follow it.

Jerry: When it comes to the Piano Trio, the French influence asserts itself once again, and I can't help but wonder if Leopold van der Pals didn't have some French connection. Much of this score seems to hover around Fauré and Chausson, which, of course, instantly disarms me, since I have a strong attraction to French chamber music of that period. In any case, the trio certainly strikes me as the most Romantic and the most traditional in terms of content, style, and form. It's a real beauty. Tell me more about it, and any other chamber works van der Pal wrote for piano and strings.

Tobias: It is very interesting you mention the French inspiration, because I think it is quite clear myself. Yet, there is no direct indication from Leopold van der Pals that he had any direct connection with French composers. But taking the musical atmosphere of the time into consideration, and the impact of Debussy's Impressionist compositions, I'm sure he was influenced by the French music as a component in his own musical expression. And some of his early works certainly indicated this. Van der Pals wrote a lot of music for strings with piano accompaniment, but most of it is for one instrument with accompaniment, such as the six violin sonatas, or music for wind instruments and piano. None of these pieces has been recorded yet, so it will be interesting to see if the French inspiration is kept throughout his work list.

Jerry: This one is for Kristoffer. What is the piano writing like in this trio, and how does it compare to piano trios in general by other composers?

Kristoffer: The piano writing for the trio is quite special compared to most other trios. Where most other composers try to make the three instruments sound somewhat even, Pals has let the piano keep its role as a continuo, giving the harmony and the mood. But at the same time, he varies the figures and pace to make the role of the piano as important as the violin and the cello. There is never a feeling of just

playing an orchestral tutti, but the piano is setting and establishing the colors and moods for the long evolving lines of the violin and cello. It's the shapes and colors that are very personal, and which encourage and support the two strings. And in the few places where the piano has the themes, especially in the second movement, it comes like a "Poulenc-ish" conclusion to the music, without participation of the other two instruments.

Jerry: The Bach-like counterpoint previously noted in Leopold's piano sonata comes to the fore once again in the three very moving piano fugues on the CD. They have a fairly high opus number of 132, so I'm guessing they weren't student exercises. Can you shed further light on Leopold's interest in Bach?

Tobias:

It is clear Leopold van der Pals held the utmost respect for J. S. Bach. He studied his compositions and played his works for piano and cello. Also, I think the interest in polyphony was "in his blood," inherited from his grandfather, Julius Johannsen. As a player, he was at one point collaborating with harpsichordist Wanda Landowska, playing the three gamba sonatas with her, and he studied the art of performing polyphonic music at the keyboard. This was very inspiring for him. His respect for Bach continued throughout his life. The last entry in Pals's 35-volume diary reads, "What kind of man must J. S. Bach have been, to be able to write the C-Minor Sarabande for solo cello; the embodied grief, like an inward tragedy!" 11 October 1965.

Jerry: With a catalog of over 250 works to choose from, I'm going to assume that we can look forward to you recording more of Leopold van der Pals's music. Are there any specific works you've set your near-future sights on? Also, I'm assuming that among that large repository of compositions there are larger orchestral works—symphonies or concertos, perhaps. Might you be in discussions with conductors and orchestra managers about having some of those works performed?

Tobias: Oh, yes I am, Jerry. This project is still in the very beginning, but as it develops, so does the interest for van der Pals's large scale works. Some time ago I had the pleasure of hearing and playing his first and second symphonies at a private rehearsal, kindly invested in the project by the Helsingborg Symphony Orchestra in Sweden, under their former chief conductor Andrew Manze. That made a big impression on all of us, and we now have a private recording of the works to go on with. After the rehearsal, Andrew said, "I am amazed at the quality in these pieces..." I hope that in the not so distant future, I can tell you about an upcoming re-premiere of this pieces. We'll see; orchestras plan long in the future.

At the moment we are planning recording sessions in August this year, with a selection of Pals's six string quartets with the VirtuaStringQuartet. I think it is important to remember that we are still at the foot of a mountain of music by Leopold van der Pals that is waiting to be explored. So far we have only recorded 10 out of a total of 252 compositions. It is a very inspiring work to play van der Pals's music, not only because it is previously unknown repertoire, but to uncover the style of a hugely productive and influential artist with a unique style.

Something which occupies me at the moment is how van der Pals developed as a composer through his life, from his personal development to circumstances of vital importance. I have indications about this, but to get to a conclusion in this matter demands a complete overview of his musical output. It is a big work, but I'm confident that once we have that overview, the door will really have been opened to the expressive world of Leopold van der Pals and possibly closer to the key of understanding his music.

Jerry: One final question that may be a bit off topic, but each of you plays so beautifully, as individuals and in ad-hoc ensemble combinations, I was just wondering if the thought might have occurred to you to form a permanent piano trio to record the mainstream piano trio literature? If not, what are some of your other current performing activities?

Elisabeth: We do play together! Kristoffer and I have a great project going, among other things playing Mozart and Beethoven sonatas. And together with Tobias I have a chamber ensemble formed around piano quartet. This ensemble is called KUBEensemble.

Kristoffer and I will be exploring the van der Pals violin-piano pieces, too.

Kristoffer: It has been very effortless to explore music together, and I hope there will be more concerts in the future with Elisabeth and Tobias. Lately, I have been busy exploring the music by Olivier Messiaen, recording both the songs and the quartet. The last CD with the songs will be released on Naxos in August. My work as freelance pianist in Denmark takes me to many interesting concerts, both contemporary and the classic repertoire.

Tobias: Elisabeth and Kristoffer are both right. We have actually played together in different combinations for many years, and enjoy doing so, I might add! There will be new concerts for us in this combination. All three of us have several projects running. Elisabeth and I play together in the KUBEensemble. Apart from that, I have a string quartet based in Sweden, the VirtuaStringQuartet, and for many years have collaborated with composer and pianist Dr. Wolfram Graf in Germany, and on several other projects with the multifaceted artist Thomas Agergaard. Last year I enjoyed a few projects with a great german violinist, Florian Meierott, in Germany and Scandinavia, and I look forward to continue this collaboration in the years to come. This is just to mention a few, we have to be versatile in this profession... (smile...)

Then, of course, the work with Leopold van der Pals will develop. At the moment I am considering taking up his early sonata for cello and piano, op. 5a, from around 1909. It is a work which I have in manuscript, so it needs a bit of attention before it will be possible to play it, but I'm really looking forward to see how this will turn out once it can be heard again after more than 100 years.