



Bisel Classics

Stephen

HELLER

ERLKÖNIG

Opus 34

**PIANO
SOLO**

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Preface

Stephen Heller is a Hungarian pianist and composer, whose works are becoming popular again after residing in obscurity for a number of years. He was born in Pest in 1813, of a Jewish family, but converted to Christianity during his youth. He studied with F Brauer, and after performing Dussek's concerto for two pianos, he was invited to study with Carl Czerny. Heller was unable to afford his expensive fees, and became a student of Anton Halm as a result. His first public concert was in Vienna, and undertook a tour through Hungary, Poland and Germany as a result of its success. He then spent time in Kassel, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Nuremberg and Augsburg before returning to Budapest.

Heller travelled to Paris at the age of 25 where he became renowned as both a concert pianist and teacher, as well as becoming acquainted with many composers including Berlioz, Chopin and Liszt. Heller composed many works for the piano, and his deep knowledge of the instrument was considered superior to that of Mendelssohn. Although his works are often said not to show much originality, they feature rich melodies and extensive rhythmical invention. The sheer quantity of studies he wrote overshadowed work in other musical genres; however, he wrote pieces of all kinds, including character pieces, fantasies, sonatas, nocturnes, waltzes and scherzos. Although his studies remain popular with students and teachers alike, sadly Heller outlived his reputation, and his life and works were set to be almost forgotten after his death in 1888.

'*Erlkönig*' is a work for solo piano, based on Schubert's lied known as '*Roi Des Aulnes*' or '*Der Erlkönig*' and is described as a *Ballade* for piano. Schubert's lied is based upon the poem of the same name by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Originally part of a ballad opera, it depicts the death of a child who is attacked by a supernatural being – the Erlkönig (literally translated to Alder King). In the poem, a young boy is being taken home by his father, on horseback. As they travel, the child seems to perceive of beings that his father doesn't – but his father gives naturalistic explanations, such as rustling leaves and wispy flog. Finally, the child yells that he has been attacked, and despite his father's efforts to rush to their home, he quickly dies.

Although many composers set the poem as a Lied (including Beethoven and Loewe), Schubert's setting – his Opus 1 – is the most famous of these. The fact that Heller specifies that this *Ballade* is based on Schubert's lied suggests that he used this as his source material, above and beyond Goethe's original poem. This is confirmed by his exploitation of the four different characters presented through Schubert's lied. The first character explored by Heller is that of the child, featuring strong, high notes in a minor key to signify suffering or distress, and often represented through the use of chords in this work. The second is that of the Erlkönig or King of Alder, with a major, sweet, seductive voice. The third is that of the father, the voice of reassurance, shifting between major and minor tonalities.

The fast quavers at the beginning of the piece symbolise the journey, in a similar fashion to the triplets at the beginning of Schubert's lied. It could also be said that these link to the fourth character of Schubert's – the narrator, presented as a minor baritone in his lied. During the fast journey, there are moments moving between major and minor