

# ECLIPSE

VOL. I - JOSEPH WÖLFEL



# JOSEPH WÖLFL

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SONATA IN C MINOR

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WALTZ IN C MINOR

ALL INTERMEZZI ARE COMPOSED BY MATTIAS SPEE.

## ABOUT THIS ALBUM

There is more music in the world than one person could ever listen to in a lifetime. The variety of things to listen to cannot be fathomed and in the era of the smartphone, all of it is available to us at the press of a button. This is a luxury that would have made earlier generations of music appreciators green with envy. That's why it's so curious that so many great artists remain unappreciated in this day and age. Despite this unprecedented accessibility, a lot of great music continues to go unnoticed. Nowhere is this more the case than in the realm of classical music, where we have a strong tendency to revisit the familiar favorites again and again. If you take a look at the calendar of a major concert venue, you will see the same names coming back year after year. A rather small group of composers has gained a permanent spot in the program booklets. And although these legends are undeniably valued with good reason, our sustained focus on them means that we miss a lot of fantastic music that has disappeared from the radar.

In some cases, a single composer's legacy is so big, that it casts a shadow over an entire generation. Ludwig van Beethoven, one of the most beloved musicians of all time, is a good example of this phenomenon. Being an avid fan of Beethoven's music myself, I can hardly object to the Beethoven-mania that continues to this day, but at the same time, I consider it a pity that we pay so little attention to Beethoven's contemporaries. Sometimes, it almost seems as if no other capable composers were born in the 1770s, except for Beethoven, which is not the case, of course.

Joseph Wölfl is, in my opinion, one of the most undervalued composers from this era. During his lifetime, he was one of the biggest stars in the world of music, which is remarkable, considering his complete lack of popularity now. About three years ago, I listened to Wölfl's music for the first time and was profoundly moved. I was surprised to learn that he was only three years younger than Beethoven. His musical vocabulary, while firmly rooted in a classicist background, is clearly indicative of early romanticism and is very reminiscent of Schubert's music and sometimes even Mendelssohn's or Schumann's, all of whom were only children when Wölfl died. So, it's safe to say that Wölfl's music was ahead of its time in many respects. What's more, his pieces cover a wide range of genres and styles; what you can hear on this album is only a fraction.

Last year, I started playing some of Wölfl's pieces myself and that experience has not just confirmed, but deepened my love for his music. I thought it would be very exciting, if more people could hear it and share my appreciation for it. That is why I am extremely grateful that I have had the opportunity to record this album. There are many people I would like to thank for supporting me in this endeavor, first of all my girlfriend and my family, on whom I have relied heavily in the process of making this album. Of course, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude towards those at the Conservatory of Amsterdam and the Mozarteum University of Salzburg, who helped me in my musical preparation for the recording, as well. I would also like to thank Thijs Bonger for writing

the “About the composer” section of this booklet. Furthermore, I would like to thank the sponsors, whose support made this album possible in the first place: the Amarte Foundation, the A.F.V.O.M.S. Foundation, Vocalise Almere, Anna van der Kooij & Hans Bos, Kees van der Burg, Loes Mol, Celine Schweizer, Joslène Roijackers & Willem Smit, Monique & Rob Verschoor, Odilia Ubbens, Harm Udding, Marjolein de Moor, Meriam Smit-Loos, Kitty Willemsen & Fokke Munk, Jennie Schotman, Daan Kloosterhuis, Eugenie van Dijk & Frank Brakkee, Rixt Zijlstra, Hugo van Beusekom, Marja & Tjaart Hofman, Clara Spee & Marlon Hart, Ruth Oudraad, Aki & Dennis de Lang, Wient Mulder, Reinier Schrader & Annemiek Nelis, Marcel van Dijk, Cecile & Simon Pool-Swinkels, Richel Bernsen, Nanny Roed Lauridsen, Marlene Victoria-Hilhorst, Sophia van der Hooft, Heleen Wüst & Bart van Rosmalen and Anne de Wijs-Vink. And lastly, I would like to thank you, listener, for sharing the experience of this wonderful music with me.

Lots of love, Mattias

## ABOUT THE COMPOSER

‘Joseph Wölfl?’ ‘A composer?’ ‘Never heard of him’. Even most musicologists get a puzzled look on their face when you mention Joseph Wölfl’s name.

But if you asked about him around the year 1800 in and around the Austrian empire and what is now Germany, you would probably have received a very different reaction. To name a few examples, Václav Tomášek, the big cheese in Prague’s music scene around that time, wrote: “Wölfl’s huge reputation made all musicians in Prague want to listen to him. His performance at one of his concerts was incredibly beautiful and subdued. No other pianists can be compared to him, also when you consider the size of his hands.” And in Hamburg, Wölfl’s improvisations were compared to those of Carl Philip Emanuel Bach, who, ten years after having passed away, was much more famous than his father Johann Sebastian. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s widow Constanze wrote a laudatory letter of recommendation on Wölfl’s behalf to a prominent German music publisher, which opened a lot of doors for him. He was already famous in Paris, before moving there in 1801. In ‘Le Journal de Paris’, he was described as: “The famous pianist, long awaited by all French music lovers”.

Joseph Wölfl was born in Salzburg on December 24th of 1773. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was 17 years old at the time. He and his father Leopold both worked for the tyrannical archbishop Hieronymus von Colloredo, just like Joseph Wölfl’s father Johann. As an employee of the archbishop, Johann Wölfl and his family were allocated a residence in an apartment building, where their downstairs neighbor was Joseph Haydn’s younger brother Michael, also an employee of the archbishop. Joseph Wölfl’s parents discovered early on that their son was musically gifted. At the age of five he took his first violin lessons with Leopold Mozart, who was a high-profile violin teacher at the time. It didn’t take long before the daily lessons started to pay off, as Joseph

performed as a solo violinist for the first time when he was only seven years old. Leopold Mozart taught Joseph to play the piano as well. As if that wasn't enough, he had a talent for singing, which got him into the choir at the Salzburg Cathedral at the age of 10. As a chorister, he was automatically enrolled in the church's music school, where his neighbor Michael Haydn would become one of his teachers. After a while, the young Wölfl started specializing in playing the piano under the tutelage of Nannerl Mozart, Wolfgang's older sister. As far as musical education was concerned, what more could you wish? Wölfl didn't just visit the Mozarts for lessons, but also because his mother had died before he was ten. He was a welcome and frequent guest at the Mozart house, even though his father regularly neglected to pay for his tuition.

At a young age, Wölfl developed an interest in musical theater. He was thirteen years old when he played his first role in an opera. A year later, his life turned upside down when his mentor Leopold Mozart died. In addition, his voice changed as Wölfl was in the midst of puberty and he had to leave the church choir. This meant he had to look elsewhere for his education. Not much is known about the period of Wölfl's life that followed, except that he enrolled in the Benedictine University in Salzburg for about two years. It is believed that in those years, he kept to himself and was completely engrossed in studying the piano, which would explain his marvelous piano technique, that would serve him so well later on. Furthermore, he grew to be about two meters tall, extremely rare in those days. His hands kept up with his growth, which allowed him to span a twelfth on the keyboard or even a thirteenth, according to some sources. Wölfl suffered from Marfan syndrome, a disorder in the connective tissue. He showed all the signs of this syndrome, growing extraordinarily tall and having large hands with long fingers, an elongated face and very flexible joints. Two other musicians famously suffered from this syndrome: pianist/composer Sergei Rachmaninov and violinist/composer Niccolò Paganini, the latter of whom could play in three different positions on the violin without moving his hand on the fingerboard. People who suffer from this syndrome often have trouble sleeping horizontally, heart problems and a sudden death.

When Wölfl was seventeen years old, he moved to Vienna. We don't know much about his time there either, except that he took piano lessons and composition lessons and regularly performed his own compositions. While in Vienna, he kept in touch with Wolfgang Mozart. Mozart was not really teaching Wölfl, though. After they performed together in Prague, Mozart said: "This young man plays marvelously indeed and he doesn't owe that to me but to my sister." Wolfgang Mozart had such faith in Wölfl, that he recommended him to become the new private piano teacher of count Michał Kleofas Ogiński, a Polish diplomat and amateur composer, whose polonaises were quite popular. Ogiński played the violin, the clavichord and the balalaika, but wanted to improve his piano playing. That's why he hired Wölfl, who taught him for about one and half years. Wölfl spent a few years living in Warsaw. Ogiński later wrote: "In 1791 and 1792, Wölfl was in my services for over 15 months. Later,

he resided in Paris, London and many other cities, performing as a composer and as a virtuoso he was able to play the most intricate passages, figures and tenth chords with perfect ease, also instructing pianists with shorter fingers."

In the year 1772, Poland was attacked by its neighbors, Austria, Prussia and Russia. About ten years later, Poland had been removed from the map. Warsaw and the surrounding lands came under the rule of the Russians. In those years, many prominent Poles fled the country and Wöfl's employer, count Ogiński was no exception. However, as it turned out, Wöfl could fend for himself, despite being only nineteen years old. He performed regularly, both on the stage and in people's houses. Many Russian officers of the occupying army in Warsaw were fanatic music lovers. Wöfl dedicated his three piano sonatas, opus 28, to countess Borosdin, who was the wife of a Russian officer.

A quick side note: The third of these three piano sonatas, opus 28, is basically identical to the sonata in B minor, opus 38, which is played on this album. Accurately dating Wöfl's compositions is often difficult, sometimes well-nigh impossible. Partly to blame was Wöfl's popularity in transcending borders. Many of his works were published multiple times in different places. The sonata in B minor, opus 38, was published in 1808 in London, but its identical twin, the sonata in B minor, opus 28 no. 3, was written around 1794 or 1795, when Wöfl was still in Poland.

During his stay in Warsaw, Wöfl earned huge sums of money as a piano teacher. But in 1795, when insurrections and military interventions made the city unsafe, he moved to Vienna again. There he seamlessly assimilated back into the music scene. He was successful, not just as a pianist and improviser, but as a composer as well. He wrote four very well-received operas in quick succession, one of which bears the wonderful title *Das Schöne Milchmädchen* or *The Beautiful Milkmaid*. Furthermore, Wöfl composed a number of string quartets, a very popular genre at the time, several piano trios and two sonatas for violin and piano, cleverly incorporating themes from Joseph Haydn's incredibly popular oratorio *Die Schöpfung* or *The Creation*. In short, Wöfl was doing well. At the age of 26 he had close ties with multiple major publishers in Vienna, including Artaria. In 1799, Constanze Mozart wrote a letter to the most important German publishing house, Breitkopf & Härtel in Leipzig - as mentioned before. In this letter she spoke very highly of Wöfl and from that moment on, Wöfl was able to expand his popularity into Germany as well.

Many newspapers and magazines praised Wöfl for his performances and compositions. People couldn't get enough of his improvisations and his virtuosity was legendary. He sometimes performed fourhanded piano pieces on his own. All this made him the only serious rival of Ludwig van Beethoven in the Viennese music scene. Beethoven was particularly popular among the nobility, often performing in salons. Beethoven was known as a formidable pianist, but his reputation was mainly limited to the aristocracy. Wöfl had many more admirers, also abroad. In Vienna around that time, there was a phenomenon called the piano duel. Muzio Clementi and Wolfgang Mozart, for

example, had competed in such a duel in 1781. In the year 1799, baron Raimund von Wetzlar organized a duel between Wölfl and Beethoven in his house. Baron Wetzlar was part of a group of rich people who had recently been ennobled. This group was in Wölfl's corner. Beethoven was supported by the older noble families, the establishment, so to speak. So, the piano duel was about more than music alone. For both pianists there was a lot at stake; Wölfl hoped to get his foot in the door with the influential older nobility and Beethoven hoped to expand his popularity to a wider audience. Usually, there was a lot of betting on these piano duels, which meant the winner would not go home empty-handed. There are a few testimonies by "earwitnesses", which give us a glimpse into the duel. In those accounts, Wölfl comes across as being a thoroughly trained musician, who was in absolute control. He played the most impossible passages with stunning precision, seemingly without effort. The long fingers on his gigantic hands moved quickly and his interpretations were very charming and engaging. Beethoven's playing, on the other hand, was also brilliant ("Beethoven's playing tore along like a wildly foaming waterfall"), but less subtle than Wölfl's and often sloppy. He apparently made a significant number of mistakes. What didn't help, was his moody and arrogant demeanor, starkly contrasting with the much friendlier Wölfl. But as an improviser, Beethoven was undeniably a step above his opponent. Part of a piano duel was usually taking turns improvising on a popular melody. To get an idea of how this must have sounded, you can listen to Luisa Imorde's album *L'Affaire d'honneur*. You will hear her perform two sets of variations on a theme from Antonio Salieri's opera *Falstaff*, one composed by Wölfl, the other by Beethoven. The sources are not completely clear on who was ultimately victorious, but most likely, Wölfl was named the winner.

Later in 1799, Wölfl married the actress Therese Klemm. The spouses didn't see each other much, due to Wölfl's traveling. Significant is a passage in a letter Wölfl wrote from London a few years later: "You will do me a great favor if you find out from somebody in Frankfurt if my wife is still there. I have not received any letter from her for a long time."

Vienna was too small for the ambitious Wölfl and he started touring in Bohemia and Germany. A year later, Wölfl and his wife had a son. Wölfl mentioned his son for the first time in a letter he wrote from Hamburg. In this letter, he proudly writes that his son was already during his birth ticking the beat with his hand.

Speaking of ticking the beat, another quick side note: Wölfl developed a kind of prototype of the metronome with his friend, inventor, publisher, entrepreneur and artist Rudolph Ackermann. This device was called the Ackermannpendulum. Wölfl was the very first composer to try and solidify his tempo notations in numbers.

Again, we don't know much about the period of Wölfl's life, when he was touring. Our most valued sources are the letters he sent to his publishers. We can read there that he traveled quite a lot, considering the time it took to cover large distances -a carriage averaged about 8 kilometers an hour- and it

was frightfully expensive. Wölfl probably didn't want to waste all that time, so he must have tried to compose in the carriage, being tossed around on bumpy dirt roads. During his travels, he maintained his pianistic skills, though.

Once, half an hour before a concert, he discovered he had to perform on an instrument that was tuned a semitone too low. He 'simply' played the entire piece a semitone higher and no one noticed a thing. He performed in Hamburg, Leipzig, Weimar, Dresden, Magdeburg, Halle, Berlin, Braunschweig, Kassel, Frankfurt, Mainz, Koblenz, Trier, Metz and Breslau, among other places. He also stayed a while in Prague, where he was noticed for generously spending his money. He loved gambling and one time even lost so much money on a billiards wager, that he had to promise his opponent the entire fee for an upcoming concert.

In Hannover, he announced his intention to travel to Paris and London. In Paris his fame had preceded him and he was so successful, that he stayed there for four years. He gave countless performances, often featuring his own compositions. He had a lucrative concert tour to the Netherlands, but the war made a trip to London impossible. In Paris, two operas by Wölfl were performed, the second of which flopped. This might be one of the reasons that he skipped town rather suddenly. Furthermore, there were rumors that his love for gambling had landed him in hot water. In 1805, he ultimately did arrive in London, where he was welcomed as a celebrated pianist and composer. After a performance by Wölfl at Covent Garden Theatre, an attendee wrote: "Half a dozen more competent auditors expressed their rapturous wonder at his powers, which really put me completely out of breath and sent me home fatigued, as if I had been playing the concert myself".

In 1806 he performed about three times a week. And he continued to compose one work after the other: operas, orchestral works, a piano concerto that he performed no fewer than five times in one year, and music for the ballet, which includes a piece with the historically telling title *Naval Victory and Triumph of Lord Nelson*. Wölfl wrote to his publisher: "I still have a lot of work and my price, both for giving lessons and compositions, is the highest among musicians here. I speak English well enough to settle all my business in it." He complained about the English' poor taste in music, but they did make him a lot of money. In 1808, there was an announcement in *The Times* about a concert in King's Theatre that featured no less than four pieces by Wölfl.

On May 16th of 1812, a new piano concerto by Wölfl was premiered, but Wölfl himself didn't perform it. He was in poor health and hadn't played in public for a while. Five days later, the following announcement appeared in the *Morning Chronicle*: 'DIED. On Thursday morning, after a short illness, Mr Wölfl, the celebrated Piano Forte Player'. The funeral procession was led by the two foremost pianists of the English music scene at that time, Johann Baptist Cramer and Muzio Clementi. In an obituary by his aforementioned friend Rudolph Ackermann, Wölfl was described as extremely friendly, humoristic and generous, as well as being unparalleled in imitating natural phenomena on the piano.

We don't know exactly what caused his death, but a year before he passed away, Wölfl suffered an epileptic seizure, from which he never fully recovered. In addition, he had a heart condition and fluid on the lungs.

**Thijs Bongers**

## ABOUT THE PIANIST

Mattias Spee is a pianist, who continuously strives to explore new ways to express himself on his instrument, for example by interacting with contemporary composers, performing forgotten pieces, working with live electronics and composing music for piano.

Mattias studied piano with David Kuyken and contemporary music with Ralph van Raat at the Conservatory of Amsterdam. Furthermore, he has been taught by renowned pianists, such as Pascal Rogé, Håkon Austbø, Michail Voskresensky and Jacques Rouvier. Also, he has received chamber music coaching from a.o. Shunske Sato, Jakob Koranyi and members of the Cuarteto Quiroga. Chamber music plays an important role in Mattias's musical activities. To him, there is nothing more joyful than making music together. Besides performing regularly in project-based ensembles, Mattias has been part of the Goudsbloem Trio for several years, together with cellist Hadewych van Gent and clarinetist Ana Prazeres. Furthermore, he is duo partners with his girlfriend, cellist Chieko Donker Duyvis.

One of Mattias's other big musical passions lies with contemporary music. He believes that in the modern repertoire, there are many treasures to be found, that will unfortunately remain undiscovered by a big portion of the audience. Besides that, he has a strong personal connection with contemporary music, both as a performer and a listener. That's why he regularly incorporates modern music into his concert programs. He himself writes music for piano, as well. Mattias is also fascinated by music that has, justifiably or not, slipped into oblivion, like Joseph Wölfl's. He puts emphasis on paying attention to the incredible amount of music that hides underneath a layer of dust and bringing it to life again. This fascination has resulted in this album, featuring music by a composer who is completely unknown, even to most musicians.

Over the years, Mattias has won several prizes, a.o. at the Princess Christina Competition, the Steinway Piano Competition, the SJMN Competition, the Rotterdam Piano Festival and, shortly before the outbreak of the Corona-pandemic, the Vrienden Culture Prize 2019. In the past years, Mattias has traveled both within and outside of Europe to give concerts. He looks forward to resume performing in front of live audiences again, when the pandemic is behind us.

At home, Mattias plays on a 1979 Bösendorfer grand piano, made available to him by the Dutch National Music Instrument Foundation.

You can find more information on [www.mattiaspee.com](http://www.mattiaspee.com)



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## CREDITS

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This recording was made between 5 and 7 February 2021 at Muziekcentrum van de Omroep in Hilversum (NL). Mattias performs on a Steinway Model D-274 concert grand piano.

## EQUIPMENT

Microphones

DPA d:dicate 4006A

AD/DA converters

Merging Technologies Hapi  
Merging Technologies Anubis

Master clock

Grimm Audio CC2 at 352.8kHz

Resampling for SACD

Weiss Saracon DSD

Monitoring

KEF Blade Two loudspeakers  
KEF LS50 loudspeakers  
Hegel H30 amplifiers  
Sennheiser HD800S headphones

Power conditioning

Furutech Daytona 303E  
CAD Ground Control GC1

Cabling

Furutech custom microphone cables  
Furutech custom balanced interlinks  
Furutech custom power cables  
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JCAT NET Card XE  
JCAT M12 Switch Gold  
Furutech e-TP609E NCF  
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