



Ernő DOHNÁNYI

Symphonic Minutes

Ernő Dohnányi (27 July 1877 – 9 February 1960) was a Hungarian composer, conductor, pianist, and educator whose work bridged Romanticism and early modernism with effortless charm and technical brilliance. He first studied music with his father, a professor of mathematics and amateur cellist, and when he was eight years old, with Carl Forstner, organist at the local cathedral. In 1894 he moved to Budapest and enrolled in the Royal National Hungarian Academy of Music, studying piano with István Thomán and composition with Hans von Koessler, a cousin of Max Reger. A towering figure in Hungarian musical life during the early 20th century, Dohnányi was a champion of national identity in music, yet his compositional style remained deeply rooted in the classical traditions of Brahms, Liszt, and Wagner. His music, though often overshadowed by contemporaries like Bartók and Kodály, is admired for its craftsmanship, lyrical warmth, and playful wit.

One of his most beloved orchestral works is **Symphonic Minutes** (Szimfonikus percek), Op. 36, composed in 1933. Originally premiered in Budapest in 1934, this five-movement suite showcases Dohnányi's mastery of orchestration and his gift for melodic invention in a compact, accessible form. Light in tone yet rich in detail, the work is a brilliant synthesis of classical clarity and Hungarian color, offering a kaleidoscopic journey through mood and character.

The opening movement, Capriccio, is sprightly and virtuosic, featuring dazzling orchestral interplay and rhythmic agility. Bright woodwinds, sparkling strings, and syncopated figures create a sense of buoyant mischief a spirited overture that sets the tone with playful exuberance.

The second movement, Rapsodia, turns inward. Drawing on Hungarian folk inflections and expressive rubato, it unfolds with improvisatory freedom and emotional depth. The music alternates between brooding melancholy and impassioned lyricism, with rich harmonies and modal coloring lending it a deeply Magyar character.

Scherzo, the third movement, is a marvel of precision and charm. With its light textures, rapid articulations, and almost pointillistic orchestration, it recalls the sparkle of Mendelssohn or early Stravinsky, filtered through Dohnányi's Hungarian lens. The rhythmic playfulness and quicksilver exchanges between sections give it a breathless, almost mischievous energy.

The fourth movement, Tema con variazioni, is the emotional and structural core of the suite. A simple, noble theme undergoes a series of transformations by turns lyrical, solemn, and animated demonstrating Dohnányi's command of form and expression. Each variation reveals a new facet of the theme while showcasing orchestral color and character.

The final movement, Rondo, closes the work with verve and elegance. Its infectious main theme returns with increasing brilliance, culminating in a lively and satisfying conclusion. The movement is a celebration of form, flair, and orchestral color, reflecting Dohnányi's effortless synthesis of classical tradition and 20th-century sophistication.

Though not a large-scale symphony, *Symphonic Minutes* is a jewel of the orchestral repertoire a compact, vibrant showcase of Dohnányi's musical personality. Its balance of virtuosity, humor, and heartfelt lyricism has made it a favorite among conductors and audiences alike, affirming Dohnányi's place as a composer of both substance and charm.