

The logo for Convivium Records, featuring the word "CONVIVIUM" at the top and "RECORDS" at the bottom, separated by dots, arranged in a circular pattern.

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The background of the album cover is a photograph of a ballerina in a white tutu performing a dance move in a forest. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The ballerina is in a dynamic pose, with one leg extended and arms raised. The forest background is dense with trees.

FELIX BLUMENFELD

EPISODES IN THE LIFE OF A DANCER

and other piano works

JONATHAN POWELL | PIANO

Jonathan Powell has an international career that has taken him to the US and across Europe and Russia. His most recent concerts include concerto performances (Chopin and Field) in Kyiv, solo recitals in Lithuania (Druskininkai and Vilnius), and tours of Slovakia and the Czech Republic (including masterclasses in the Janáček Academy, Brno). He has performed the works of Blumenfeld and Szymanowski in the Filarmoniya and Neuhaus Music School in Kirovohrad. He established and curates the Schott Spring Piano Series in London, and is now planning its fourth edition. His CD of the early sonatas of John White has already received critical acclaim, and is the most recent addition to an extensive discography. Forthcoming appearances include concerts in Husum, Germany (his fourth invitation to the prestigious *Raritäten des Klaviermusik*), Moscow (Finnissy's 2nd Piano Concerto with the *Vremena goda* chamber orchestra), Levoča and Žilina (with the Slovak Chamber Orchestra under Dohnányi), Bratislava Mirbach Palace, Philharmonia of Ivano-Frankivsk (Carpathian region of Ukraine), the Jacqueline du Pré Music Building (Oxford) and venues in Warsaw and Gliwice in Poland (which he will make home from late summer 2011).



Felix Blumenfeld was one of the most prominent musicians in Russia at the turn of the 20th century. Related by family to the Neuhauses and Szymanowski, he was a virtuoso pianist and teacher who counted Horowitz, Grinberg and Tsfasman (a Soviet jazz pioneer) among his students. He was also a conductor who gave world premières of major works by his teacher Rimsky-Korsakov and friend Scriabin; successful Russian premières of Wagner operas were also given under his baton. But he was also a composer: his oeuvre is focussed on the piano, and many of his pieces are very fine examples of the art of the Russian *serebraniy vek* (Silver Age), a period in which the piano was given particular attention by Russian composers.

Blumenfeld was highly regarded by his fellow musicians. The critic Stasov considered him a 'great pianist and musician of the first rank'. His

student and nephew Heinrich Neuhaus described him thus: 'he was a musician from head to toe: composer, conductor, pianist, teacher – there wasn't a single "speciality" in the sphere of music which he didn't master completely, in which his remarkable and boundless talent didn't flourish'.

As a lauded exponent in four fields, Blumenfeld's career can be compared in scope only to Rachmaninoff's in Russia during that period. His abilities as a pianist were such that Paderewski was 'amazed that he had not devoted himself wholly to performance'. His principles of piano performance were highly significant in the development of Soviet pianism partly through the agency of his nephew Neuhaus (who taught Richter and many other giants of the instrument); he also was a source of inspiration for Sofronitsky. But after his death his compositions were little performed – with the exception of the *Etude* Op. 36 for



the left hand, which was notably championed by another ex-student Simon Barer – until they started to enjoy a revival of interest in recent years. Blumenfeld's piano works are among the most striking of an era which was particularly rich in literature for the instrument.

Blumenfeld spent his childhood in Elizavetgrad (now in Kirovohrad in Ukraine); their relatives the Neuhauses lived there, and Blumenfeld started his musical education with Gustav Neuhaus. Szymanowski later spent a great deal of time there and in his estate in nearby Tymoszwoka. Gustav Neuhaus (Heinrich's father) had arrived in the area from Germany and started a small piano making firm there and then a private music school, through which he had become friendly with Mikhail Frantsevich Blumenfeld (Felix's father) who was a teacher of French and history and whose daughter he would marry a few years later.



The wife of Mikhail's grandfather was Maria Szymanowska (the daughter of a Polish landowner), who was the sister of the grandfather of the composer Karol Szymanowski. In 1879 aged just 16 Felix Blumenfeld met Musorgsky in Elizavetgrad; he was on tour with the singer Darya Leonova, and even wrote about the meeting to Stasov who, on Blumenfeld's return to St Petersburg, invited the latter to the meetings that took place in the house of the singer Aleksandra Nikolaevna Molas. There, she performed all of Musorgsky's vocal works, accompanied by the composer and, later, by Blumenfeld. He then embarked on serious musical studies: the piano with Stein and composition with Rimsky-Korsakov at the St Petersburg Conservatory, where he taught the piano from his graduation in 1885 until 1918 (excluding the years 1905–11), being appointed a professor in 1897.

A major turning point for Blumenfeld came when a once-timber merchant turned Maecenas discovered the composing talents of the young musician. As the Stravinsky scholar Stephen Walsh has put it, 'to be published, be performed, to be received by Mitrofan Belyayev was the goal of every aspirant composer, and, human nature being what it is, Belyayev naturally got the music he was paying for'. Belyayev composers wrote piano music that was published with sometimes lavish title pages and then performed at the Pyatnitsi (Friday salons) held at his house. Although some of the pieces required a virtuoso technique like Blumenfeld's, many others were suitable for amateur pianists and thus were a good business proposition for Belyayev. Blumenfeld wrote more for the piano than all other Belyayevtsi: alongside almost 100 miniatures, he also wrote substantial pieces such as the Sonate-Fantaisie, two sets of variations as well as several suites and cycles of pieces.

In 1895 he was appointed repetiteur and in 1898 assistant conductor (to Napravnik) at the Mariinsky Theatre, working there until 1911. On 5 April 1899 he conducted the first Russian production of Tristan there and the performance was regarded as a success, and must have been a memorable event for Blumenfeld who, according to Rimsky-Korsakov's friend Yastrebtsev, 'literally worships Tristan'. He gave the premières of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Servilia* (1902) and *Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh* (1907). He also conducted the French premières of *Boris Godunov* and *Snegurochka* in the 1908 Saison Russe in Paris. He directed the first performance of the now-lost *Pogrebal'naya pesn'* – a tribute to the recently deceased Rimsky by Stravinsky – on 17 January 1909. Blumenfeld played an important role in Kiev musical life during the Civil War years, teaching in the conservatoire alongside Neuhaus, Pachulski, Glière, Yavorsky and others. By the 1920s the syphilis which

Blumenfeld had contracted years earlier had left him partially paralysed: in August 1927 Goldenweiser described him as 'pitiable, decrepit but sincere, deeply reconciled to his illness, pretty much confined to his own company, his wife's and his dinner'. Boris Asafiev characterised Blumenfeld's pianism, as 'velvety contact with the keys [...] any sense of [the existence of] hammers disappears without trace'; Blumenfeld had told Asafiev that he 'got this from Anton Rubinstein'. Many of his composer-colleagues dedicated works to Blumenfeld: Glazunov dedicated his *Three Pieces* Op. 25 to Mariya (wife of Felix), Sigismund (brother, also a composer) and Felix Blumenfeld; Arensky his *Arabesques* Op. 67; and Lyadov his *Four Preludes* Op. 39 (1895). Blumenfeld's repertoire also included contemporary works, even by composers younger than himself such as Alexandrov. The great pianist of the Soviet era Vladimir Sofronitsky described Blumenfeld as 'the kind of musician we don't see any more'.

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Recorded August 2008 at the Music School, Durham University.

Engineered and edited by Adaq Khan.

Produced by Jonathan Powell.

With thanks to Martyn Harry.



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