

# Emil von Sauer

THE  
COMPLETE COMMERCIAL RECORDINGS

## Emil von Sauer, piano *The Complete Commercial Recordings*

### LINER NOTES

Although Emil von Sauer is viewed by many as the greatest of Liszt's pupils that made recordings, those who met him were struck by his simple, direct, unaffected manner. His humility and lack of flamboyance may in part be responsible for his now being overshadowed by other Liszt pupils, but no less a figure than Josef Hofmann singled out Sauer alone among the Liszt pupils in a letter he wrote to critic Harold C. Schonberg stating, "Sauer was a truly great virtuoso; Lamond did not impress me, and Friedheim was: so-so-la-la."

Born in Hamburg on 8 October 1862, Emil George Konrad Sauer began his piano studies at the age of five under the tutelage of his mother, Julia (Gordon) Sauer, herself an accomplished pianist of Scottish ancestry who had studied with Ludwig Deppe (1828-1890), director of the Music Academy in Hamburg. Emil showed little musical talent as a child and did not begin to make real progress until the age of ten. His father, a merchant and skilled organist, preferred that the boy study law, and the young Sauer's early ambition was along these lines. Two years later, while attending a recital by Anton Rubinstein, an awakening took place that was to forever alter the course of Sauer's life: "As the great man played, something seemed to break within me; everything took on a new meaning. The bonds of my soul were loosened and I knew that henceforth, good or ill, music was to claim me for her own." Soon after this, he had the opportunity to play for Rubinstein, upon whom he made a very favorable impression. Rubinstein recommended that he go to Moscow and study with his brother Nicholas Rubinstein.

Sauer arrived in Moscow in 1879 and was immediately put to the test. He later said Nicholas was "a demon to study with," but he apparently made excellent progress and soon joined Alexander Siloti at the head of the class. The sudden death of Nicholas Rubinstein in 1881 forced him to return home and he began giving concerts to help support his family. His debut that year in Hamburg was a great success and led to engagements throughout Germany. One critic praised his "great clarity, sanity, symmetrical appreciation of form, and unaffected fervor." His London appearances in 1883, however, were not as well received. English audiences of this time rarely welcomed newcomers and Sauer was not the only great artist to be ignored during a first visit to the English shores. Although his return tour in 1894 was greeted ecstatically, he never forgot his earlier experience there and many years later gave the following account: "[I played] a few little concerts, but nobody took any notice of me, and I eked out an existence by giving lessons at five shillings per hour." Sauer soon left for Spain where he quickly became a favorite. Some concerts in Italy followed and it was there that he met and played for the Princess Sayn-Wittgenstein who gave him a letter of introduction to Liszt.

Sauer was already a finished artist in 1884 when he arrived in Weimar to study with Liszt. His audition took place after a long journey that had left him little opportunity for practice. In his autobiography of 1901, *Meine Welt*, Sauer recalled the event: "I played some pieces by Chopin and Grieg, Rubinstein's staccato study, and Liszt's Twelfth Rhapsody. Although on account of so much continuous travel I was not in practice and my technique was not as faultless as I could have wished, the master was tolerant enough to express his warm approbation, particularly at my playing of his Rhapsody. At the end he signified his satisfaction by kissing me on the forehead and willingly granting my request to be allowed to join the circle of his pupils that summer."

Sauer studied with Liszt for two summers and quickly became aware of the master's shortcomings. His candid description of the Weimar masterclasses reveals a great deal. Lamenting on how numerous untalented pupils took advantage of Liszt's generosity, he wrote, "Such pupils greatly outnumbered the few who by reason of suitable preparation

were ready and able to cope with the situation. These could be counted on the fingers—Friedheim, Rosenthal, Reisenauer, Stavenhagen, Siloti, Dayas, van de Sandt, S. Liebling, Göllicher, and several others .... The rest simply did not belong there—and, what was worse, they often hindered the advancement of those who were really gifted. The race of idlers consisted of two groups: young women who instead of smooth scales brought pretty faces, and young men who employed the most refined art of flattery in order to endear themselves to the old master.” While studying with Liszt, Sauer did not hide his appreciation of music by Brahms—a composer not in favor with the master—nor did he conceal his opinion that the works of Anton Rubinstein were more original and melodious than those of Liszt. In spite of all this, Liszt expressed great fondness for Sauer and their relationship was of the most friendly character. Later, Sauer downplayed his status as a Liszt pupil, writing in his autobiography: “Though I stayed with Liszt for some months, I cannot consider myself one of his pupils. He was then very old and could not teach me much. My most important teacher was Nicholas Rubinstein, without any doubt.”

Sauer left conflicting reports of the impression Liszt’s piano playing had upon him. In *Meine Welt*, he states that he only heard Liszt play one time. The experience left him underwhelmed. “Notwithstanding my best will to the contrary, I could not but find what he gave us entirely too slight to warrant my joining in the rapture expressed by the faithful. I was prepared for the fact that flexibility and elasticity of touch could not be expected from a septuagenarian, but not for the surprise of finding that his musical performance produced no impression to speak of upon me.” However, many years later Sauer spoke favorably of hearing Liszt perform *La Campanella*, and to further cloud the picture, Arthur Friedheim, in his book *Life and Liszt*, recounts an incident where Liszt was the accompanist in Beethoven’s Kreutzer Sonata, after which Sauer “was so transported that he turned somersaults afterward in the adjoining room.”

After leaving Liszt in 1885, Sauer concentrated his efforts towards furthering his career as a touring virtuoso. His views on the artist’s responsibilities were stern, as this excerpt from an interview published in the December 1908 issue of *Etude* shows: “I have always felt that my debt to my audiences was a matter of prime importance, and while on tour I refrain from social pleasures of all kinds .... The performer who would be at his best must live a careful, almost abstemious life.” His views on alcoholic consumption while on tour were even more severe. “The habit of taking alcoholic drinks with the idea that they lead to a more fiery performance is a dangerous custom that has been the ruin of more than one pianist ....[I] have watched alcohol tear down in a few years what had taken decades of hard practice and earnest study to build up.”

Sauer’s Berlin debut in January 1885 had been enthusiastically received, with one critic even calling him a second Tausig. Tours of Russia, Denmark, and Sweden preceded his return to Berlin in 1889, where he performed all three Tchaikovsky Piano Concertos with the composer himself conducting. Performances in nearly all of the major European countries as well as Turkey and Bulgaria followed. Somehow, he found time in 1887 to marry his sweetheart, Alice Elb, who was to bear him nine children. In 1899, Sauer made his first tour of America under the sponsorship of the Knabe Piano company. Of his debut at the Metropolitan Opera House one critic wrote that “his imposing pianistic attainments took the audience completely by surprise.” His return to America in 1908 to play forty concerts was also a huge success; one critic raved about his “poetic imagination that invests all his interpretations with individual charm.”

In the late 1930s Sauer’s fame and career began to wane. His playing had not diminished, but public opinion had turned in favor of the new generation of pianists. Dinu Lipatti attended one of Sauer’s recitals in 1937 and in an essay for *Libertatea* entitled “Musical Life in Paris” wrote, “[I experienced] a profound joy when I realized that this artist had not deteriorated .... How is it possible that Emil Sauer must play in the small Salle Erard, despite his glorious past, when a Brailowsky or Uninsky can pack the Salle Pleyel?”

Sauer was the recipient of many awards and honors throughout his career. The most important of these were the French “Legion of Honor” (he was the first German to receive this honor), and being made an Hereditary Knight by the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (this allowed him to use the “von” before his surname). Sauer was also a sought-after teacher, and for many years he taught at the Vienna Conservatory, even serving as head of the piano department from 1901 until 1907. He was a demanding teacher, but gave each student’s needs and talents his undivided attention. “I never give more than four lessons a day—two in the morning and two in the afternoon. I can’t do full justice to more.” Many of his pupils built up successful concert careers including Webster Aitken, Stefan Askenase, Ignace Hilsberg, Maryla Jonas, Lubka Kolesa, Elly Ney, Dario Raucea, and Marie Aimée Varro. Esther Jonsson, another of Sauer’s students, said of Sauer’s teaching that “his whole interest seemed to be centered in passing on his secrets to his students.” Jonsson reported that Sauer had interesting things to say when teaching Liszt’s compositions: “[Sauer believed] Liszt wouldn’t recognize his music as it is usually played today ... piano

playing now is too loud and too fast... in Liszt's day artists were great souls." One girl that came to study with Sauer in 1921 was the young Mexican talent, Angelica Morales. She was ten years old when she began her studies with him, and eighteen years later, after the death of his first wife, they were married. Sauer had two sons with Morales—Julio and Franz.

Sauer's recordings were all made during the last 20 years of his life. His earliest recordings, for Spanish Regal in the early 1920s, are among the rarest piano records in existence. These were shortly followed by seven acoustic records for Vox. Between 1928 and 1930 three records of Sauer were issued by Pathé and four by Odeon, and at the end of his career twenty sides were recorded for Columbia, including the two Liszt Concerti. In order to fit some of the recordings onto 78 rpm record sides, some musical compromises had to be made. The most serious of these occurs in *Carnaval* where three movements are omitted ("Replique", "Estrella", and "Promenade"), slight cuts employed in "Florestan" and "Coquette", and several repeats not taken, including that of the very opening measures. In spite of these restrictions, Sauer's performance is full of vitality. The section entitled "Chopin" is exquisite in its poetry while the playfulness of "Reconnaissance" is engaging. Sauer's scaling of the Finale is intriguing in that he begins at a much slower tempo than one is accustomed to today. In his other recordings, minor cuts occur in the two Liszt Rhapsodies, "La Campanella", and the Odeon recording of his own "Concert Polka."

Although Sauer's technique was almost limitless, he was first and foremost a poet, and this is evident throughout his recordings; the Mendelssohn/Liszt "On Wings of Song" and the already mentioned "Chopin" section of *Carnaval* are supreme examples of this. Even in passages of extreme difficulty, where Sauer's technical ease and mastery often astonish the listener ("Reconnaissance" from *Carnaval* for instance), it is the shaping and attention to musical detail that impress most of all. Certain aspects of Sauer's technique, however, are at such an exalted level that they cannot help but be noticed. His ability to play rapid staccato or non legato passages has rarely been equaled; one need only listen to him in his composition *Meeresleuchten* to experience the wondrous crispness and clarity he could obtain in such passages. Sauer also had one of the greatest left hands in the history of piano playing. Time and again difficult left hands runs are tossed off with an aplomb that arouses awe even in today's age of digitally edited miracles (to cite just a few examples of his left hand prowess: the "Florestan" section of *Carnaval*, the coda of Liszt's twelfth Hungarian Rhapsody, Sauer's *Echo aus Wien*, and the aforementioned *Meeresleuchten*).

Beautiful tone was an essential part of Sauer's artistry, and here Sauer stands apart from many of the other Liszt pupils in that he never banged or created a harsh sound, not even in the biggest chordal passages or the loudest fortissimos. The beauty of his tone is evident in all his recordings, but it is most prominent in Liszt's *Liebstraum*, the Mendelssohn/Liszt "On Wings of Song," and the minor key sections of Schubert's A-flat *Moment Musical*; Sauer's myriad of nuance and shadings, and his ability to seemingly make one note melt into the next create almost hypnotic readings.

Chopin's piano works are well suited to Sauer's pianism. One of Sauer's specialties was the Waltz in A-flat, op. 34, and his recording of it is the perfect combination of aristocratic refinement and individualism, right down to the unexpected, tongue-in-cheek *diminuendo* he employs to end the work. The C-sharp Minor Etude, op. 25, no. 7 has been singled out by James Methuen-Campbell in his book *Chopin Playing* as "one of the greatest recordings of this piece, showing a real grasp of the contrapuntal writing and a variety of dynamics which few are able to achieve." The recording is startlingly vivid with its quicker than average tempo and sparse use of pedal. In the C-sharp Minor Waltz, op. 64, no. 2, Sauer's *rubato* in the central section is particularly alluring, and his creation of an inner melodic line by emphasizing the notes played in the preceding section by the right hand thumb is a refreshing throwback to the nineteenth century. Occasionally, Sauer's playing can sound mannered (his hiccup like rhythm in the E Minor Waltz for example), but such instances are the exception rather than the rule. The one real disappointment in Sauer's Chopin is the Etude in E, op. 10, no. 3 where Sauer is uncharacteristically square and metronomic in the agitated central section; the surrounding sections however, are beautifully played.

Whether Sauer's performances of Liszt are an indication of how Liszt himself played is a moot point. All of Liszt's most talented pupils had their own musical personalities, and there is little resemblance between the playing of Friedheim, Lamond, Rosenthal, D'Albert, or Sauer. Even Arthur de Greef, the only Liszt pupil other than Sauer to record both Liszt Concerti, had notably different conceptions of the two Concerti. This does not in any way negate the many points of interest in Sauer's Liszt recordings. The D-flat Consolation and Valse Oubliée both conclude with unexpected cadences that are not normally found in the published scores. Sauer's recording of "Ricordanza," made at the ripe age of 79, belongs on any short list of the greatest Liszt recordings ever made. Sauer was one of those rare pianists whose technique diminished little with age, and his artistry comes across even in his very last recordings. The two Liszt Concerti, also made very late in life, are unusual in

their moderate tempos and lack of overt virtuosity. Some find his approach to the Concerto noble and majestic while others are less convinced. Whatever one's stance, there is no denying the beauty of the Sauer's playing in the "Quasi Adagio" section of the E-flat Concerto or the tremendous burst of energy with which Sauer concludes the A Major Concerto. It is also interesting to hear Sauer in the twelfth Hungarian Rhapsody, a piece he played when he auditioned for Liszt in 1884.

Sauer is virtually unknown as a composer although his output is not small. His compositions include two Piano Sonatas, two Piano Concertos, two Suites, twenty-nine Concert Etudes, and numerous salon pieces. His works are often quite inventive and are in need of further investigation. Sauer's programs would often contain one or two of his compositions, and his own Etudes were not uncommon as encores. Sauer's recordings of his own works are particularly impressive; his Vox recording of the "Concert Polka" ranks among his greatest efforts, and the ease with which he tosses off his Etudes is impressive. "Echo aus Wien", a charming potpourri of attractive themes, demonstrates the high level of artistic achievement that can be brought to the performance of a "salon" work.

Ultimately, Sauer is remembered as one of the great Liszt pupils although his feelings towards Liszt were complex and changed throughout his life. Sauer refused to capitalize on his association with Liszt in order to advance his career, yet later in life he became one of the most ardent champions of Liszt's music. In the midst of all his performing, teaching, and composing, Sauer found time to prepare editions of all the major works of Liszt (published in twelve volumes by C.F. Peters) as well as near complete editions of the piano works of Brahms, Chopin, Mendelssohn, and Schumann.

Sauer felt that upon him fell "the duty of transmitting my impressions and my experiences as best I may to all those who would care to profit thereby before taking final leave of this world." In that aim he succeeded admirably. Emil von Sauer died in Vienna on 27 April 1942.

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## TRACK LISTING

### CD 1 (75:42)

#### SPANISH REGALS, ca. 1923

##### Mozart:

1. Rondo alla Turca, from Sonata in A, K. 331 3:13  
(10) 5546

##### Beethoven:

2. Adagio Sostenuto from "Moonlight" Sonata, op. 27, no. 2 4:24  
(9) 5547

##### Chopin:

3. Waltz in C-sharp Minor, op. 64, no. 2 3:12  
(12) 5547

##### Mendelssohn/Liszt:

4. "On Wings of Song" 3:29  
(14) 5546

##### Liszt:

5. Hungarian Rhapsody no. 12 8:15  
(15-16) 5548

##### Schumann:

6. Carnaval, op. 9 16:56  
(17-20) 5549-50

#### GERMAN VOX RECORDINGS, ca. 1925

##### Beethoven:

7. Adagio Cantabile from "Pathétique" Sonata, op. 13 4:59  
(2229A) 06260

##### Sauer:

8. Konzert-Polka 3:57  
(2230A) 06254

##### Liszt:

9. Hungarian Rhapsody no. 15 4:13  
(2231 1/2A) 06254

##### Chopin:

10. Waltz in E Minor, op. Posth 2:36  
(2232A) 06253
11. Berceuse in D-flat, op. 57 4:29  
(2233A) 06253
12. Impromptu in A-flat, op. 29 3:06  
(2234A) 06260

##### Sauer:

13. Spieluhr 2:43  
(2235A) 06249

##### Mendelssohn:

14. Scherzo in E Minor, op. 16, no. 2 2:22  
(2236A) 06249

##### Liszt:

15. Liebestraum no. 3 in A-flat 4:37  
(2237A) 06264

##### Sauer:

16. Concert Etude no. 7, "Meeresleuchten" 3:11  
(2238A) 06264

## CD 2 (63:06)

### Sauer:

1. Echo aus Wien 7:00  
(2239-40A) 06268

### Strauss/Schulz-Evler:

2. An der schönen blauen Donau 7:19  
(2241-2A) 06273

## ODEON RECORDINGS, 14 December 1928

### Chopin:

3. Fantasie-Improptu, op. 66 4:20  
(XXB-8261) 0-6817

### Sauer:

4. Konzertpolka 3:19  
(XXB-8262) 0-6764

### Liszt:

5. Gnomenreigen 3:04  
(XXB-8263) 0-6764

### Chopin:

6. Waltz in A-flat, op. 42 3:47  
(XXB-8264) 0-6817
7. Etude in E, op. 10, no. 3 4:47  
(2-21120) Parlophone E10863

### Sauer:

8. Spieluhr 2:39  
(2-21121) Parlophone E10863

### Beethoven/Rubinstein:

9. Turkish March from "Ruins of Athens" 2:01  
(36841) 0-4762

### Sauer:

10. Concert Etude no. 6, "Esenlaub" 2:31  
(36842) 0-4762

## PATHÉ RECORDINGS, ca. 1930

### Chopin:

11. Improptu in F-sharp, op. 36 4:59  
(N 300520 AR) X-5506

### Mendelssohn/Sauer:

12. Scherzo from "A Midsummer Night's Dream" 3:59  
(N 300522 A1) X-5504

### Sauer:

13. Concert Etude no. 6, "Esenlaub" 2:32  
(N 300523 B) X-5505

### Paganini/Liszt:

14. Etude no. 3, "La Campanella" 4:35  
(N 300524 A1) X-5504

### Sauer:

15. Galop de Concert 2:55  
(N 300525 B1) X-5505

### Chopin:

16. Etude in C-sharp Minor, op. 25, no. 7 4:19  
(N 300550 A) X-5506

## CD 3 (68:30)

### COLUMBIA RECORDINGS

#### Liszt:

1. Piano Concerto no. 1 in E-flat 19:20  
(LX 2112-1, 2113-1, 2114-2, 2117-1, 2118-1, 2119-2) LX 789-91
2. Piano Concerto no. 2 in A 20:39  
(LX 2120-1, 2121-1, 2122-1, 2123-1, 2124-1, 2125-1) LX 862-64  
*Rec. December 1938; Felix Weingartner, Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, Paris*
3. Consolation no. 3 in D-flat 3:23  
*Rec. December 1938; (2126-1) LX 807*
4. Valse Oubliée no. 1 2:47  
*Rec. December 1938; (2127-1) LX 807*

#### Chopin:

5. Waltz in F, op. 34, no. 3 2:25  
*Rec. ca.1940; (CR 758-1) LW 38*
6. Etude in C Minor, op. 25, no. 12 2:51  
*Rec. ca.1940; (CR 759-1) LW 38*

#### Schubert:

7. Moment Musical in A-flat, op. 94, no. 2 4:58  
*Rec. ca.1941; (CRX 196-2) LWX 381*
8. Moment Musical in F Minor, op. 94, no. 3 1:51  
*Rec. ca.1941; (CRX 197-1) LWX 381*

#### Chopin:

9. Etude in F Minor, op. 25, no. 2 1:32  
*Rec. ca.1941; (CRX 197-1) LWX 381*

#### Liszt:

10. Transcendental Etude no. 9 in F Minor, "Ricordanza" 8:44  
*Rec. ca.1941; (CRX 200-1, 201-1) LWX 353*

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