

BLUMENFELD

Felix Mikhailovich (1863 -1931)

Felix Blumenfeld was a fine musician who achieved excellence as composer, conductor, pianist and teacher. His background and family connections are interesting and distinguished and linked to the Neuhauses and Szymanowskis.

The Blumenfeld family hailed from Austria, from which country Felix's grandfather moved to Russia in 1802, taking Russian citizenship, his name being entered in the register of Russian nobility of the Volynsky government. An architect by profession as well as being a state employee, he designed a large number of buildings and churches in the southwest Ukraine.¹

Felix's father, Mikhail Frantsevich Blumenfeld, married Marie Szymanowska, the daughter of a Polish landowner, and sister of the grandfather of the Polish composer, Karol Szymanowski (1882 -1937).² Mikhail Blumenfeld taught French and music.³

The union of Mikhail and Marie Blumenfeld brought forth abundant fruit -there were seven children.⁴ The oldest, Stanislav (1850 -1897), was born in the village of Verkhnyachk, in the Kiev government, on an estate of which the owner's children were taught music by Mikhail. Stanislav became a music teacher in Kiev, where he founded a music business and school.⁵ He also composed, and some of his works for piano solo and voice were published by Leon Idzikovsky of Kiev.

The next child, Sigismund (1852 -1920), was born in Odessa. He was trained as a singer at the Moscow conservatoire. He was much acclaimed for his vocal gifts and in demand at musical gatherings.⁶ Belaieff published sixty-one songs by Sigismund Blumenfeld, the first set within the year of the founding of the firm, the last in 1912. Three sets of these songs, Ops. 11, 12 & 13 were available in two settings, for high voice and lower voice. There was no regular transposition interval. This was a luxurious innovation, introduced by Belaieff, at the same time that he provided the facility for most of the many songs of Rimsky-Korsakov which, at that time (1897), awaited publication. Sigismund Blumenfeld also wrote a few engaging miniatures for piano solo, published by Belaieff as Ops. 2, 5, & 6, with attractive coloured title pages.

Stasov held Sigismund Blumenfeld in very high esteem. In a letter to Sofya Fortunato dated 22nd January, 1886, he described him as almost as talented a singer as Felix, a pianist.⁷ Elsewhere he referred to the attractions of his compositions.⁸

The birth sequence of the remaining five children is not quite clear. Felix is stated as having been the fourth born on 7th April, 1863.⁹ His three sisters, Ol'ya, the eldest, Zhanna (Jeanne) and Marie and the fourth brother, Josif, complete this large family.¹⁰

To return to Ol'ga, shortly after Felix was born (at Kovalevk, a small town in the Kherson government), the Blumenfelds moved to Elizavetgrad (renamed Kirovograd), and it is there that the Neuhaus family enter the scene.¹¹ Gustav Wilhelm Neuhaus, who had a German father and a Dutch mother (born 1847), founded a piano factory in Germany. He eventually settled in Elizavetgrad, where he occupied himself as a private teacher of music. He also came to know the Blumenfelds, whose children he taught music. In about 1874, he married Ol'ga Blumenfeld, and in 1888, their son Heinrich (Harry) was born. He lived until 1964, and was to rise to great heights, both as pianist and as a teacher, numbering Sviatoslav Richter and Emil Gilels among his pupils. He was, therefore, Felix's nephew, and a close relationship developed over the years, particularly after the Revolution. He also developed contacts with Karol Szymanowski, through the connections of his grandmother on his mother's side. Thus were the links between these brilliantly gifted families established.

Elizavetgrad was distinguished, among provincial centres in Russia, for its cultural activities. It had a theatre, a newly founded, well-stocked library and a thriving industry in local newspapers - the 'Elizavetgradskii Vestnik/Elizavetgrad Herald', which appeared thrice weekly, is said to have been the first of its kind in Russia. The town was also notable for its visiting artists -a tradition established after Liszt's visit in 1847, when he gave his last piano recital, at a time when his relationship was developing with Princess Caroline Sayn-Wittgenstein at Woronince.

