

# The Compositions of Parish Alvars from 1834-1849

by Floraleda Sacchi

with Wenonah Govea

*Editor's note: In 1999, Floraleda Sacchi published Elias Parish Alvars, Life, Music, Documents: annotated catalogue of his works for harp, piano, orchestra and voice, Odilia Publishing, ISBN 3-9521367-1-9.*

*The following is a summary of a section of that excellent work. For further information on the various editions of Parish Alvars, Ms. Sacchi recommends the website:*

*www.parishalvars.com*

The years 1834-1842 were a productive period for Parish Alvars. While in Vienna, his composition for harp, *Theme and Variations*, dedicated to Grosjean was published by Falter Editions, Munich, under the pseudonym "Albert Alvars": *Sehnsucht* (op. 27) was also published under the same pseudonym and used again later for *Scenes of my Youth* (op. 48); he was appointed solo harpist at Hofoper; studied composition with Simon Sechter and Ignaz von Seyfried, performed with Joseph Fahrback and the Lewy brothers, and, through the latter, met his future wife, pianist and harpist Melanie Lewy, whom he married in 1842.

At the age of twenty-seven, Parish had solidified a style of his own, as demonstrated by his *Concertino* (op. 34), the *Divertissement* (op. 38) and the *Great Fantasy* (op. 39).



Parish Alvars with harp

Although his first Fantasies may seem slightly rigid, schematic and inundated with Bochsá's new effects, the compositions written after 1835, under the influence of

his new teachers, are more balanced. It is these later works that Hector Berlioz praised in his *Mémoires*:

*This man [Elias Parish Alvars] is the Liszt of the harp. You cannot conceive all the delicate and powerful effects, the novel touches and unprecedented sonorities, that he manages to produce from an instruments in many respects so limited. His Fantasy on Moses [op. 58] [...], his Variations for harmonic notes on the Naiads Chorus from Oberon [op. 59], and a score of similar taste, delighted me more than I can say. This man is a magician. In his hands the harp becomes a siren, lively neck inclined and wild hair flowing, stirred by his passionate embrace to utter the music of another world.*

The influence of Mendelssohn is evident in *Concert* (op. 81) or in the *Fairies' Dance* (op. 76). It was at this time that Parish Alvars also began not only composing and arranging, but also using the popular compositional technique of using opera themes as a framework for pieces of various difficulty and length.

Some of his best work, the synthesis of charming themes and musical originality and technique, can be considered those written between 1842 and 1846; *Souvenirs of Naples*; Concertos op.90 (pianoforte), op. 91 (harp and pianoforte), op. 98 (harp); the orchestral overture *The Legend of Teignmouth*; and his *First Symphony* (e minor). However, he was criticised as a composer of symphonic works. In 1848, one year before his death, his *Second Symphony* (D major) for which the manuscript has never been found, and his *Concert in c- minor* (PA2 ms) were attacked in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* and *Adolf Bäuerles Allgemeine Theaterzeitung* as being too long and having a complexity that was not sustained by originality and musical quality.

In 1845, Parish Alvars fell and injured himself while on an excursion to Mount Vesuvius, an injury serious enough to require him to stay two additional months in Naples. Apparently, it was this injury that resulted in the problems with his arm that caused his

decrease in concertizing and increase in time spent composing and teaching.

The year 1848 was a year of revolution throughout Europe. The resulting upheaval affected musicians as well as governments. Parish Alvars found himself in serious financial difficulties. He could not travel, and he lost most of his pupils as the noble families fled to the country. In general, musical life came to an abrupt halt. In October, the situation worsened, and Parish Alvars and his family sought refuge in Leopoldstadt, on the outskirts (now a part of the city) of Vienna. They lived at 533 Jaegerzeil on the first floor. In November, he borrowed a hundred florins from his old friend and editor, August Artaria. Parish Alvars' health began to fail, and, although the records are not clear, it is believed that he died of pneumonia on January 25, 1849.

Parish Alvars has left us seven concerti for harp and orchestra on original themes: op. 34, 60, 81, 90, 91, 98 and PA2 ms. These works are certainly technically complex. Considered the most beautiful are op.81 (harp), op. 90 (pianoforte) [written for Liszt, the original orchestra score has never been found], op. 91 (pianoforte and one or two harps) and op. 98 (harp). The concerti op. 60 in C-major and PA2 in c-minor are excessively long. Special attention should be given to the *Concertino* op.34 (15 minutes in length) the only remaining parts of which are those for harp and either orchestra or string quartet. Fortunately, the first edition (Mechetti, 1838) of the orchestral score can be reconstructed from the extant wind solo parts.

As was customary at the time, a few fantasies originally for solo harp also exist with orchestral or string quartet accompaniment. This is the case of op. 36 on themes from *Norma*, op.78; on themes from *Lucrezia Borgia*; and op. PA3 on Ricci's themes. There is also an accompaniment arranged by Ludwig von Richter for Parish Alvars' *Marche* op. 67. With a duration of approximately ten minutes, *Marche* can be considered as an encore piece.

Another characteristic compositional technique of Parish Alvars is the "Series," or themes developed over the course of several years in several compositions. The most personal are *Scenes of my Youth* or *The pleasure and sorrow of an artist*. These include

nine romances divided into three volumes (op. 42, 48 and 56) and a fantasy (op. 75). Op. 42 is dedicated "to the Lady of his Heart," most assuredly his bride, Melanie as in his dedication of op.75. His most famous romances were dedicated to her, works which, after the first edition, were often published separately in various collections, a method that has made it difficult to determine the generating theme. The introductory quotations, either from Dante or Byron, are of unrequited love and/or reciprocated love made difficult by separation. His journeys, his trials and finally his homesickness for England are expressed in *The Scenes of my Youth* and Fantasy op. 75, *Gypsies' March*, *My lodging on the cold ground*, and finally the brilliant variations on the British National Anthem, *God save the Queen*.



The opening lines of the opus 70 Impromptu for piano, 1843. The original is found in the Musikverein in Vienna.

Parish Alvars' years of travelling abroad are reflected in the six pieces of *Travel of a Harpist in the East* (op. 62), the *Sultan's March* (op. 30), the *Hungarian March* (PA10), the *Choir of the Greek Corsairs* (op. 53), pieces that are successful, easy and even catchy, while much simpler than his other compositions.

The influence of Italy and her music and poetry on Parish Alvars is found in his *Souvenir of Milan* op. 31, *Barcarole* PA9 and *Souvenir of Besnate* op. 69. The *Souvenir* is one of his less mature works, full of special effects, some of which can no longer be executed on the modern harp because of the increase in string tension. The remaining two are pleasant pieces of medium difficulty, but are not often played today. *Souvenirs of Naples*, unfortunately rarely considered as a whole, is perhaps Parish Alvars' best "Series," very successful then and now.

Another compositional technique employed by Parish Alvars is the programmatic. In *Scenes of*

my *Youth*, the thematic materials have a biographical flavor, while in *Illustrations of German Poetry*, op. 71 and 72, they are derived from texts of Schnezler and Goethe. Again, *Illustrations of Italian Poetry*, op. 97, on verses by Petrarch, the pieces are descriptive. These works, of medium difficulty, are still charming today, thanks to the union of text and music, as in the romances, *The plaint of a Young Girl*, op. 64 and *Farewell*, op. 68, text by Byron.

Care should be taken before attempting some of the Fantasies, Themes with Variations and Souvenirs on original themes. There are virtuoso passages such as in *Fairies' Dance*, op. 76, *Rêveries*, op. 82, as well as in op. 35 and 61 and *Souvenir of Bochsá* (PA8) which contain pages of dense and technically challenging music.

Of great importance to understanding the technical demands of Parish Alvars' compositions is an understanding of the instrument he used both for composition and performance. His instrument was a double action harp: 1.70 m. tall; having 43-46 strings; pedals so closely placed that two could easily be moved with one foot; the string spacing of an octave slightly wider than what would be the reach of a sixth on the modern harp; an inconsistent A tuned between 415 and 432Hz; and string tension a third of that found on the modern harp. It compares well with today's Celtic harp. Though the differences in performing on this instrument are obvious, they in no way diminish the technical abilities of Parish Alvars and other harpists of his time. Liszt describes Parish Alvars as a tall, strong man, but playing his music on the single action harp implies agility and touch, rather than sheer strength. If his compositions were to be played in this manner, the resulting performance would be hardly audible. Consequently, for the very best possible musical effect, it is suggested that this repertoire be played on historical instruments or their replicas. Moreover, the single action harp has a rapid decay and therefore needs a thicker palette of sound. The modern harp is exactly the opposite. Its general resonance is greater, has a longer decay, and consequently will cloud the clarity of these technically brilliant works. These aspects must be considered when approaching the more difficult passages. However, Parish Alvars' works of medium

difficulty or modest dimensions can be brilliantly performed on the modern instrument.

In considering recommendations for the inclusion of his works in performance, the following suggestions are made. The most spectacular fantasies are certainly op. 57 (based on various Italian themes), 58 (on *Moïse*), 59 (*Oberon*), 78 (*Lucrezia Borgia*), PA2 post. (*I Montecchi e i Capuleti* and *Semiramis*). Harpists should be fully aware of and warned away from the so-called *Introduction, Cadenza and Rondo*. It is not a legitimate part of Parish Alvars' compositional output. It has been extracted from op. 57, *Grand Fantasia and Virtuoso Variations on Italian Themes* (which lasts approximately twelve minutes). The *Introduction, Cadenza and Rondo* starts with the central Largo harmonically of *Grand Fantasia*, yet with a different tonality at the beginning than at the end (a typical characteristic of Alvars' music), but the main theme on which the piece is based is eliminated. In fact, approximately all the first eight pages of the work have been eliminated and a new title invented!

Of the operatic arrangements, the compositions of medium difficulty are op. 38 (*Beatrice di Tenda*) or the pieces probably written for his students: PA4 post. (*La Fille du Régiment*), PA5 post. (*L'Elisir d'amore*). For those who are fond of opera, the reductions for harp of the most famous arias can be found in *Souvenirs of Italian Operas* (op. 86 and 92-96).

For a level of difficulty from easy to medium, there are the arrangements of works by Meyerbeer, Weber, Mendelssohn, Field, Schubert, Rossini, Liszt, Donizetti and Lafont-Czerny. Alvars' chamber music works for harp and pianoforte and harp and flute should also be considered. ♪

#### About the author:

Born in Como, Italy, *Floraléda Sacchi* studied harp with Lisetta Rossi, Alice Giles, Judy Loman and Alice Chalifoux. An international prize winning performer, she has performed in Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Canada. Miss Sacchi records on the Decca label. Since 2006, she has served as the artistic director of the Lake Como Festival.



## Table of the Works of Parish Alvars

Author's note: List of the repertoire with indications of difficulty (1 = easy, 2 = medium difficulty, 3 = difficult). PA plus a number identifies pieces without opus numbers. Post. is the abbreviation for posthumous.

Title		Special techniques
Sehnsucht or Melancholic Romance op. 27 (firmata Albert Alvars)	2	étouffés
Theme and Variations op. 29	3	harmonics
The Sultan's Favourite March op. 30	2	étouffés, notes played near the soundboard, trills
Souvenir of Milan, Grand Fantasia op. 31	3	pedal slide, harmonics, étouffés
Introduction and Variations on a Theme by Bellini op. 32	2	étouffés
Theme and Variations op. 33	3	étouffés, trills
Concertino in E Minor for harp and orchestra op. 34	3	glissandos, harmonics
Fantasia op. 35	3	harmonics, trills
Introduction and Variations on Bellini's Norma op. 36 (orchestral accompaniment <i>ad libitum</i> )	3	harmonics
Divertissement on Bellini's <i>Beatrice di Tenda</i> op. 38	2	
Grand Fantasia on Favourite Italian Arias for harp and piano or two pianos op. 39 (in collaboration with Carl Czerny)	3	
Introduction and Variations on Bellini's <i>I Capuleti e i Montecchi</i> op. 40	2	
Scenes of my Youth, Romances (First series) op. 42	2	
Souvenir of Bellini's <i>La Sonnambula</i> op. 46	2	pedal slide
Scenes of my Youth, Romances (Second series) op. 48	2	harmonics
Souvenir of Donizetti's <i>Gemma di Vergy</i> op. 49	3	

Chorus of the Greek Corsairs, March op. 53	2	harmonics, étouffés
Scenes of my Youth, Romances (Third series) op. 56	2	
Grand Fantasia and Virtuoso Variations on Italian Themes op. 57	3	glissandos, étouffés
Grand Fantasia on Rossini's <i>Moïse</i> op. 58	3	glissandos, harmonics, étouffés, notes played near the soundboard, three-handed technique
Fantasia on Weber's <i>Oberon</i> op. 59	3	harmonics, trills
Grand Concerto in C Major for harp and orchestra op. 60	3	pedal slide
Grand Fantasia op. 61	3	three-handed technique
Travel of a Harpist in the Orient (Nos. 1 - 6) op. 62	2	étouffés
The Complaint of a Young Girl, Song without words op. 64	2	
Grand Duo on Donizetti's <i>Linda di Chamounix</i> for harp and op. 65 (in collaboration with Carl Czerny)	3	
Fantasia on Themes from Lord Burghersh's <i>L'Eroe di Lancastro</i> op. 66	2	harmonics
Grand March op. 67 (orchestral accompaniment <i>ad libitum</i> )	2	étouffés
The Farewell, Romance op. 68	2	
Souvenir of Besnate or The Lament, Song without words op. 69	2	
Impromptu in the Form of a Fugue for piano op. 70	2	
Illustrations of German Poetry, First part: "Traum am Bache" by Schnezler op. 71	2	
Illustrations of German Poetry, Second part: "Gretchens Gebet vor dem Bilde der Mater Dolorosa" op. 72	2	
Fantasia on Donizetti's <i>Belisario</i> op. 73	2	
Souvenir of Donizetti's <i>Don Pasquale</i> for harp and piano op. 74	2	

Scenes of my Youth, Fantasia op. 75	3	glissandos, étouffés, three-handed technique, trills
Fairies' Dance op. 76	3	trills
Souvenirs of Italian Operas: <i>Emani</i> by Verdi op. 77	2	
Grand Fantasia on Donizetti's <i>Lucrezia Borgia</i> op. 78	3	glissandos, three-handed technique, trills
Grand Fantasia on Donizetti's <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> op. 79	3	three-handed technique
Souvenir of Donizetti's <i>Dom Sébastien</i> op. 80	2	
Grand Concerto in G Minor for harp and orchestra op. 81	3	trills
Rêveries op. 82	3	pedal slide
Serenade op. 83	3	fluid sound, harmonics, pedal slide, trills
Grand Study in Imitation of a Mandolin or The Mandolin op. 84	3	three-handed technique, trills
Souvenir of Naples: Il pappagallo op. 85	2	harmonics, three-handed technique
Souvenirs of Italian Operas: <i>I Lombardi alla prima Crociata</i> by Verdi op. 86	2	
Souvenir of Portici, March op. 87	2	étouffés
Souvenir of Taglioni, Rondo op. 88	2	
Souvenir of Pischek, Fantasia op. 89	2	trills
Concerto in G Minor for piano and orchestra op. 90	3	
Concertino in D Minor for 2 harps or harp and piano and orchestra op. 91	3	
Souvenirs of Italian Operas: <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> by Donizetti op. 92	2	
Souvenirs of Italian Operas: <i>Marino Faliero</i> by Donizetti op. 93	2	

Souvenirs of Italian Operas: <i>L'Elisir d'amore</i> by Donizetti op. 94	2	
Souvenirs of Italian Operas: <i>Il Giuramento</i> by Mercadante op. 95	2	
Second Souvenir of Donizetti's <i>Dom Sébastien</i> op. 96	2	
Illustrations of Italian Poetry (Nos. 1-3) op. 97	2	
Concerto in E flat Major for harp and orchestra op. 98	3	
<b>Works without opus number</b>		
Theme and Variations PA1 (firmata Albert Alvars)	3	
Fantasia on the Last Theme by Bellini for flute and harp PA2 (in collaboration with Joseph Fahrbach)	3	
Fantasia and Virtuoso Variations on a Theme by Ricci PA3 (orchestra or string quartet accompaniment <i>ad libitum</i> )	3	glissandos, three-handed technique
Introduction and Variations on a Theme by Herz PA4	3	
Il Pescatore, Barcarola for voice and harp or piano PA5	1	
Ouverture to Parish Alvars' Opera <i>The Legend of Teignmouth</i> for piano four hands PA6	2	
Three Original Melodies PA7	1	
Souvenir of Bochsa PA8	3	trills
Barcarola PA9	2	harmonics
Hungarian March PA10	2	étouffés
Heimweh, Romance for voice and piano PA11	1	
<b>Post. works</b>		
Last Thoughts: Melody; Funeral March PA1 post.	2	étouffés

Grand Fantasia on <i>I Capuleti e i Montecchi</i> and <i>Semiramide</i> PA2 post.	3	glissandos, harmonics, three-handed technique, trills
Lights and Shadows PA3 post.	2	trills
Fantasias on Donizetti's <i>La Fille du Régiment</i> PA4 post.	2	
Fantasia on Donizetti's <i>L'Elisir d'amore</i> PA5 post.	2	
<b>Manuscripts</b>		
Symphony in E Minor for orchestra PA1 ms.		
Concerto in C Minor for harp and orchestra PA2 ms.	3	
<b>Arrangements</b>		
L'espagnole for harp and violin (Lafont - Czerny) PA1 arr.	3	
La Partenza, La Promessa, L'Orgia (Rossini - Liszt) PA2 arr.	2	
Three Romances (Schubert) PA3 arr.	2	
Two Nocturnes (Field) PA4 arr.	2	
Twelve Favourite Arias (various composers) PA5 arr.	1	
Wedding March for harp and piano (Mendelssohn) PA6 arr.	1	
Ballabile from <i>Les Huguenots</i> (Meyerbeer) PA7 arr.	2	
"D'un sacro zel l'ardore" from <i>Les Huguenots</i> (Meyerbeer) PA8 arr.	2	
"Nobil Signor" from <i>Les Huguenots</i> (Meyerbeer) PA9 arr.	2	
Aufforderung zum Tanze for harp and piano (Weber) PA10 arr.	2	
Gran Marcia militare imperiale for harp or piano (Donizetti) PA11 arr.	2	