

From: Audiophile Audition

HANS GÁL: Symphony No. 4; SCHUMANN: Symphony No. 2 – Orch. of the Swan/ Kenneth Woods – Avie

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HANS GÁL: Symphony No. 4 (Sinfonia concertante), Op. 105; SCHUMANN: Symphony No. 2 in C, Op. 61 – Orchestra of the Swan/ Kenneth Woods – Avie AV2231, 73:09 [Distr. by Allegro] *****:

Hans Gál (1890-1987) is a largely forgotten composer born in a small village outside Vienna. He was both a victim and survivor of the Nazis. In 1942 his sister and aunt committed suicide rather than face a concentration camp; his son committed suicide later in 1942. Following the *Anschluss*, Gál fled to Great Britain, but was interned there.

Gál had been a promising musician (teacher and pianist, also) with support from Richard Strauss and Wilhelm Furtwängler and Gál was appointed to head the Mainz Conservatory in 1929. In 1933 he was dismissed from the conservatory and his music banned by the Nazis.

Despite these horrendous conditions of his early life, Gál did end up teaching at Edinburgh University and continuing to compose. Before he left Germany and Austria, his music was popular. He wrote operas and in other genres. His *Symphony No. 4* (1974) is reflective of his style, influenced by Brahms with traditional melodic construction. He did not adopt the Second Vienna School's atonality or twelve-tone practices.

Conductor Kenneth Woods and the Orchestra of the Swan are embarked on recording all four of Gál's symphonies, pairing them with those of Robert Schumann. Already released are Gál's *Third Symphony* and *Schumann's Third* (Avie AV2230).

Woods proves in this recording to be a front rank conductor, capturing the feeling of sorrow and compassion of the symphony. The work is for a chamber orchestra made up of two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, timpani and strings. Initially, this piece sounds gentle, even pastoral, but underneath is a current of turmoil and tragedy. It most sounds like R. Strauss' *Metamorphosen* and other of Strauss' late works.

Gál referred to this work as "...akin to a *concerto grosso*...with the brilliant display and competitive spirit of four soloists who act as both a group and as individuals..." The soloists who participate splendidly are violinist David Le Page, cellist Christopher Allan, flutist Diane Clark and clarinetist Sally Harrop.

Woods has seized on the essence of this Schumann *Symphony*. His reading is smooth, grand and exciting and well worth the purchase of this disc. The Gál may take a few hearings to sink in, but the Schumann is right there from the start and one of the best recordings available.

The Orchestra of the Swan is resident in the Civic Hall of Stratford-upon-Avon. The orchestra performs throughout England and Wales. It has made several recordings of the music of Arnold Bax, Berlioz and Mahler. It is quite a versatile group, easily shifting between Gál and Schumann.

The Avie sound is exact and spacious. Program notes are in English, German and French. The bios of the performers are in English only. Highly recommended!

—Zan Furtwangler