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Kenneth Woods continues Gal/Schumann symphony series

When Kenneth Woods was an undergraduate cello student at Indiana University, he played in rock and funk bands on the side. Classical music earned his long-term love, however — could there be much of a future in a band called the Screaming Yaardvaarks, really?

He studied conducting at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music before launching his professional career. With England's Orchestra of the Swan, he has launched a series on Avie Records pairing symphonies of Robert Schumann and the somewhat obscure scholar and composer Hans Gal (1890-1987), who escaped Nazi-occupied Europe and settled fruitfully in the United Kingdom. The new set has Gal's Symphony No. 4 (Sinfonia concertante) and Schumann's Symphony No. 2 in C major, op. 81.

Gal's final work in the symphonic form is an airy, delightful exercise in concertolike deployment of a small orchestra, featuring a concertino group of violin, cello, flute and clarinet. Principals from Orchestra of the Swan are involved to stellar effect, and Woods conducts with evident passion for this music and the skill to knit solo parts and the nimble orchestra accompaniment together.

The opening movement carries "Improvisation" (in Italian) as a designation, indicating the atmosphere of spontaneity that sends the composition on its merry way. The second movement gives the two wind soloists special emphasis; the "lightness" (*leggiero*) called for in this scherzo is never cloying. The soaring, passionate slow movement that follows highlights violin and cello in some very demanding music that requires the composure Woods' soloists bring to it. A couple of accented, almost mocking chords set the finale off on an apparent jog trot — lively enough, though, and never complacent. Gal was a composer who seemed not to mind rejecting the Viennese modernism of his contemporaries and went beyond that to invest supreme craftsmanship in blithe inspirations.

The well-known Schumann Second gets a streamlined account, its veneer removed. Plenty of conductors find the rhythmic energy in this piece, but they also indulge in hard-to-shake notions about what mid-Romantic music should sound like; Schumann is not a kind of pre-Brahms, folks. Once you strip away the upholstery, as Woods does, you get such wonders as a second-movement Scherzo that reveals Schumann showing off his contrapuntal skills and moving matters along on something more insightful than a snappy tempo.

The "Hans-and-Bobby" project of Woods and the Orchestra of the Swan is worth every music-lover's attention.

-Jay Harvey