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KENNETH WOODS

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By Colin Anderson

Conductor Kenneth Woods explains his passion for championing the music of Hans Gál as he embarks upon a project to record all four symphonies for Avie.



Conductor Kenneth Woods wishes to hear from and dialogue with you. His [website](#) includes his much-liked blog. “The exchange with readers is one of the most prized things I get from the blog; part of the ongoing debates and discussions I have with musicians and audience members at various receptions, rehearsals and pubs. There is a hunger to understand the nuts and bolts of conducting.”

I’m talking with Woods about the Viennese composer Hans Gál (1890-1987), a renaissance man thanks largely to the British record company Avie. Following volumes devoted to Gál’s music for solo piano (complete) and chamber and orchestral pieces, Avie is currently focusing on Gál’s four symphonies. Woods is recording them alongside Schumann’s four essays in the form, having just released an account of the [Third Symphony](#). (Avie has already released Thomas Zehetmair conducting Gal’s [debut symphony](#) and will issue his version of No. 2 later this year). When did Woods first become aware of Gál’s name?

“Like many conductors, I knew Gál as a Brahms scholar long before I had any idea he composed. He edited the scores for the Brahms symphonies and concertos that we all use. I was playing a piano trio concert with Annette-Barbara Vogel about 10 years ago when she mentioned that The Gál Society had asked her to record his Violin Concerto [with Avie]. She wondered if I might conduct – I was astonished to learn he was a composer! Eventually, I got my hands on a couple of scores, and was astounded to discover a forgotten major composer. Since then, I’ve tried to not only conduct as much of his music as I can, but I’ve also brought it into my chamber music repertoire. My string trio (I’m a cellist), Ensemble Epomeo, is recording his two trios [also for Avie] in December.”

Woods has started his Gál symphony cycle with the Third. Why start there, save to complement Zehetmair’s accounts of the First and Second? “It was really only that. Simon Fox (also Gál’s grandson), who produced both my recording and Zehetmair’s, suggested we divide it so that we minimize duplication early on. It couldn’t have worked better – I fell

completely in love with the Third. The Fourth, which we record next, will be a fantastic showcase for my colleagues in the Orchestra of the Swan.” I suggest the Third as a rather bittersweet work, and also behind its time, 1952.

“Well, this is a funny paradox about Gál – he is resolutely behind the times, and yet the music is incredibly fresh and original. Nostalgic? Absolutely, but in a deeply serious way – a sense of memory, longing and a connection with the past is a big part of what makes his music so moving. Nostalgia has become a bit of a dirty word in our post-modern culture – we associate it with perhaps pandering or naiveté. Gál’s music has this sense of longing for something that is challenging. You feel the loss of the past in the present, even though the past is not idealized. In pop-culture, nostalgia is associated with a sort of sanitizing of our relationship with the past. In Gál, nostalgia is part of how we come to terms with loss. Gál’s four symphonies make a nice overview of his creative life, from the tangy post-Romantic harmonies in his First to the slightly more disciplined language of the Third, to the gentler and more austere world of his late style in the Fourth.”

Gál’s Third Symphony is coupled with Schumann’s *Rhenish* Symphony. Why Schumann? “I think of most Germanic symphonists like Beethoven, Brahms and Bruckner as essentially great storytellers, whose use of form is very linear and dramatic. Gál and Schumann are both part of the same tradition and tend to treat musical time with more flexibility. Gál’s Third is pretty logically laid out most of the way, but about two-thirds through the first movement there is suddenly a passage where musical time seems to break down. Suddenly there is a disembodied, seductively directionless melody for solo viola and oboe in unison over some rather exotic and static pulsating chords. It’s not something Beethoven or Brahms would have done, but Schumann might have approved. It’s certainly vintage Gál.

“The fourth movement of the *Rhenish* just emerges as a giant outpouring of deep, deep sorrow in the midst of a sunny work. It seems like a bleak vision of the future, not a midpoint in the musical story. Also, both composers sometimes reveal their most complex feelings in music that seems simple at first glance. And Gál wrote a book on Schumann’s orchestral music, as he did Schubert and Brahms.”

We need, though, to place Gál into the great musical scheme of things. What is his lineage? “Gál was deeply rooted in the Viennese tradition. He comes from the same line as Haydn, Mendelssohn, Schubert and Schumann. He’s a classicist, someone who wears his profundity lightly, and who, like Haydn, doesn’t like to beat listeners into submission. I sometimes joke that Gál is like Mahler without angst!

“His connection to Brahms is telling. Gál’s mentor, [the composer, conductor, teacher and musicologist Eusebius] Mandyczewski, was among Brahms’s closest friends. Brahms fought all of his life to reconcile the temperament of his time, this fiery Romantic impulse, with his fundamental nature as a classicist. Gál had a similar challenge – to reconcile the lush post-Romantic soundworld of his youth with his Classical instinct and distinguishes himself from other Viennese composers of the same generation, like Schreker, Schmidt or Korngold. With Gál, the craftsmanship is part of the point of the music. When you read his descriptions of Brahms’s obsession with craft, you feel that he’s talking about himself. The lack of a true Classical composer after Brahms seems to have cut Gál to the quick.”

What has been the catalyst for this increasing interest in Gál’s music? “For a long time the few archival recordings available were just not good enough to give anyone any sense of whether the music was worth playing, and it is not sight-readable. Gál’s music sounds accessible, but it is incredibly virtuosic. His harmonic language makes it very tough for intonation. Leon McCawley’s recordings of the solo piano works (Avie) were a watershed, and now we have good recordings of other music. It means people can at least make a reasoned evaluation of the music. And times have changed. Gál was considered hopelessly old-fashioned when Modernism reigned supreme. We can look back and see that it was amazing that Gál, Messiaen, Berio, Shostakovich, Britten and Boulez were all writing at the same time, and that the idea that there was a right or wrong aesthetic was always fundamentally flawed.” Based in Stratford-upon Avon, England, Orchestra of the Swan is common to Woods’ Gál/Schumann project. Is the conductor aware of growing into this music together with them

and forming an evolving relationship?

“The process we went through with Gál says a lot about the orchestra – a few minutes into the first rehearsal, one of the musicians asked if I would take a moment and talk a bit about the composer. I can’t tell you how unusual that kind of invitation to dialogue is. With a little sense of Gál’s Viennese roots, the text quickly started to come to life. Schumann was possibly a bigger challenge – there are more received misconceptions about Schumann than almost any other composer, and the upshot of this is a performing tradition that seems guided by some of these old canards about orchestration and so on. Schumann’s orchestral music should exude incredible rhythmic energy, real vibrancy of color and lyricism. However, you must also realize how technically and physically demanding it is, and that it requires lots of imagination. This is where the building of a relationship really counts.”

Away from Gál, but still with Orchestra of the Swan (he is its principal guest conductor) Woods has recorded Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde* – in Schoenberg’s reduction, completed by Rainer Riehn. What might we learn from an arrangement made when the music was less familiar but is heard today as Mahler left it?

“Well, it is such incredibly intimate music – more like a personal confession than just about anything Mahler wrote, and doing it with solo players brings the listener that much closer to Mahler’s inner world. That’s not to say you don’t sacrifice things – the original has a breadth and a power, especially in the first song, that the chamber version can’t match, and it has a bigger range of color. Emma Curtis (the recording’s contralto) said that it was more like singing with a string quartet than with an orchestra. A solo violinist or cellist can engage with the singer a little more easily and flexibly than someone sitting in a vast orchestra.”

Finally, I ask Woods about recording for different record companies (the Mahler is for another British label, Somm). “I’m a performer first, I live for concerts, but as long as I can remember I’ve wanted to make records. You learn a lot working with different people, but the best thing about having relationships with multiple companies is that you can make more records!”

Read Martin Anderson’s review of Kenneth Woods’ recording of Gál’s Third Symphony on theclassicalreview.com

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