

# Bold advocate

Kenneth Woods, cellist and recently appointed principal guest conductor of Orchestra of the Swan, wants to make the case for Austrian composer Hans Gál



Me and my Gál:  
Kenneth Woods

Few people would list Hans Gál and Schumann among music's humorists, but conductor Kenneth Woods does. Moreover he hopes that a new series of recordings which he and his Orchestra of the Swan have begun on Avie – starting with a pairing of Gál's and Schumann's third symphonies – will bring others to his view.

'There are a lot of ways in which they both speak to the same strain of German music,' Woods says. 'They are both master melodists, both have incredible senses of humour and mischief in their music. Schumann had a very difficult personal life and his music can be very emotional, but it can also be very light and spirited.'

'People who know Gál's life story know he was a refugee from the Holocaust,

so they expect his music to be filled with rage. There is deep emotion in his music, but there is also humour. When we speak about music in the 20th century we talk about sarcasm. Gál can do sarcasm but a lot of his music is like Haydn's: ten steps ahead of the listener, but not angry, more mischievous.'

Not many people did know about Gál, though, until Annette-Barbara Vogel asked Woods to join her in recording the violin concerto (recorded with the Northern Sinfonia and released by Avie last year). 'At that time I didn't know of Gál at all. It was quite a discovery.'

As well as the synergies with Gál's symphonies, Schumann's works had attracted Woods since he became principal guest conductor of the Orchestra of the Swan a year ago.

'The Schumann symphonies are something I have been wanting to record for a long, long time and this is the perfect orchestra to do it with. It is basically the same size band that the Schumann symphonies are written for. It is a revelation to hear how his orchestration does what it is supposed to do, which is sound big and explosive and colourful. The notorious doublings are only problematic if you have twice as many string players on stage as he would have had.'

Previous collaboration with another musician led Woods to his second current recording: Schoenberg's chamber orchestra arrangements of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* and *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, on SOMM. While Woods was conductor of the Oregon East Symphony Orchestra he performed *Das Lied* with tenor Brennen Guillory in 2007.

'Brennen has, in his quiet way over the years, become one of the great Heldenentors of our time,' Woods says. 'Das Lied is a funny piece in that the contralto part is bigger and it is the emotional heart

of the work, but most of the time the limiting factor on how effective the performance can be is the tenor, and his ability to get through the first song convincingly. You need someone who has that power, even in the Schoenberg arrangement; otherwise you don't get the sense of a man who has been ruined by the struggle through life.'

Having found his tenor, Woods insisted he wanted a 'real' contralto, and found one in Emma Curtis. 'You don't just need a contralto to sing the low notes, you need this maternal, warm, dark sound. A lot of people who have contralto on their CV tend to be foghorns. I wanted someone who had flexibility and warmth in their lower voice.' Finally, to round off the team he chose baritone David Stout.

Woods has no qualms about recording these arrangements of his beloved Mahler: 'It is a window into the minds of two creative people,' he says, and after all audiences have heard plenty of the real thing in two successive Mahler anniversary years.

Recording a Mahler cycle may have to wait some time, but Woods will be busy with Gál: after the symphonies there are works for string orchestra, choral pieces including a massive *De Profundis*, and the two string trios which Woods as cellist will record with his Ensemble Eponeo. And then there are the operas. As Woods says: 'Given the way that so many people who heard the first few of Gál's works love them, sooner or later the operas will get done. And I hope it will be by me.'



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