

From Classical Source

Hans Gál & Schumann – Symphonies 3 [Orchestra of the Swan/Kenneth Woods; Avie]

Reviewed by: Colin Anderson

Gál Symphony No.3 in A, Op.62
Schumann Symphony No.3 in E flat, Op.97 (Rhenish)

Orchestra of the Swan
Kenneth Woods

Recorded 6 & 7 December 2010 in Civic Hall, Stratford-upon-Avon, England



CD Number
AVIE RECORDS
AV2230

Duration

Avie here continues its survey of the music of Hans Gál (1890-1987) with the first recording of his Third Symphony, and with it launches the first of four Orchestra of the Swan/Kenneth Woods releases that will couple one of Gál's four symphonies with one of Robert Schumann's four; it's not just a numeric convenience for Gál authored sympathetically about Schumann's music. As an aside, we may need to do a Gál double take, in that Avie has already issued Thomas Zehetmair's version of Gál's First Symphony and (as of June 2011) his version of Symphony 2 is imminent; so, maybe, Zehetmair will go on to also record Gál's four symphonies.

Gál's Third Symphony (completed in 1952), in A (but it could major or minor) opens winsomely with an expressive oboe solo, the music sometimes harmonically curdling in bittersweet fashion, English ears being reminded of Gerald Finzi, antennae attuned to musical matters that are further afield also being aware of Franz Schmidt (a fellow-Viennese of Gál's) and, to a lesser extent, Paul Hindemith. After a lengthy, flowing introduction, the bulk of the substantial (14-minute) first movement is waltz based, one more troubled than from Vienna's golden past. Contrasts of mood and tempo abound – turmoil and nostalgia – and a gentle flute solo offers some solace (and recalls Prokofiev). Like the first, the slow movement opens softly and again features the oboe, lullaby-like, suggesting a boat on a lake on a summer's day; such placid contentment is contrasted by quicker if still-light sections; Honegger's Pastorale d'été is recalled. The finale is firm of direction if unsure of mood, the speed is sprightly but there are dark clouds on the horizon, sunshine sometimes breaking through until a clarinet spirals the music on to a

brighter future and conclusion (among the many subtleties of orchestration is a getting-slightly-louder from nowhere roll on a cymbal), and the English ear returns, this time citing Lennox Berkeley.

Not that the mentioning of other composers is intended to steal Gál's own thunder (not that he rumbles as such – structural linearity and orchestral clarity are his watchwords); the composer-references are merely guides to help listeners to music that is well-worth getting to know, in this case a work that notched up two performances in the 1950s – the first conducted by Gál himself followed by one under Rudolf Schwarz – and then fell from view until Woods reclaimed it for us in this obviously excellent and considerate account.

Schumann's 'Rhenish' Symphony is given a superb outing, gloriously joyous in the outer movements, exuberant without being pushed, and also generously lyrical when needed, not least in the triptych of middle movements, beautifully phrased and sounded, breathing and shapely, sensitively addressed and lovingly detailed. The fourth movement (whether concerned with Cologne Cathedral or not) is suitably solemn to which the nonchalantly tripping finale is the perfect foil. Orchestra of the Swan is of chamber proportions, just the right size for the sort of lucidity that suits Schumann's music and sitting well in the generous acoustic of Stratford-upon-Avon's Civic Hall to avoid sounding anaemic. Woods, with violins either side of him and a master of Schumann's small print, trusts the composer and leaves in no doubt that the allegation that he couldn't orchestrate is bunkum. As for alternative recordings of the 'Rhenish', Woods holds his own against such wonders as Sawallisch (Dresden rather than Philadelphia), Celibidache (Munich), Giulini (Chicago) and immediately becomes a favourite for this delectable work.

Throughout, the members of Orchestra of the Swan are willing souls, as content in the new-found Gál as they are with the old-friend Schumann, and both works are excellently recorded. Bring on the next three volumes!