


Symphonies

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

Orchestra of the Swan/Kenneth Woods.

Avie AV2230 (full price, 1 hour 7 minutes). Website
www.avie-records.com  Producer/Engineer Simon
Fox-Gál. Dates December 6th and 7th, 2010.

Comparisons:

Schumann:

ORR/Gardiner (Archiv) 457 591-2 (1997, three discs)

Los Angeles PO/Giulini (DG) 400 062-2 (1980)

Stuttgart RSO/Marriner (Capriccio) 49.433

(1986, five discs)

Philharmonia Orch/Muti (EMI Classics) 3 71497-2

(1977, two discs)

This excellent disc makes a valuable follow-up to Avie's release of Hans Gál's First Symphony, performed by the Northern Sinfonia under Thomas Zehetmair, which I reviewed in May 2011. The Third Symphony was Gál's last essay in the genre, composed in 1951-52; he had just passed 60 and had been living in Edinburgh, an exile from his native Vienna, since before the war. He himself conducted the première for Viennese radio in 1954 but after that, apart from a single performance from the CBSO under Rudolf Schwarz, the work remained unplayed and forgotten until the making of this disc.

This lack of success was very regrettable, for it's a substantial work, deeply felt and deeply thought; but not perhaps very surprising. Although easy – deceptively easy – on the ear (the initial impression is more of a serenade or a divertimento), I'd hardly call this Symphony a crowd-pleaser. The cultured *gemütlichkeit* of its surface only gradually lets us realize that Gál has serious things to say, and he takes his time about saying them. The work takes its time, too: at first hearing I had a strong feeling that I wasn't 'getting'

the half of it, and it took two or three further playings before I was sure I had its character fully fixed in my mind. An ultra-civilized musician to his marrow, Gál is not one to go in for breast-beating or the cheaper forms of *Angst*; for large stretches of the Symphony he hardly raises his voice. Deeply imbued in the Viennese symphonic lineage from Haydn to Mahler, the work affects a stance of serene neo-Classicism but actually is full of disquiet, doubt and, probably, of well-disguised grief. These darker undercurrents are all to be sensed in the half-lights, the elegant reticences, the persistent play between major and minor: the latter continually imparting a chill, a sere impediment to the songful, lyrical, serenade-like character that the music seems to want to assume. Busoni – and Busoni's pupil Kurt Weill – come to mind at several junctures.

Opening with a pastoral oboe melody, the large first movement is prefaced by an extensive *Andantino* introduction whose character is played off against the following *Allegro*, which Gál marks as *vigoroso e passionato*, though it would be truer to say that its highly contrapuntal attempts at vigour and passion are persistently dissipated in the contrasts with the *Andantino* music. The *Andante* slow movement is marked, with some irony, *tranquillo e placido* and again opens with an expressive oboe solo; there is a more dissonant *scherzando* central section but the movement as a whole seems very much a continuation of the first. Only in the *Allegro* finale, in the teeth of Gál's qualifying *molto moderato*, does the music clearly turn urgent and decisive, driving forward with a constructive energy worthy of Hindemith or Weill only to relapse more than once into brooding nostalgia, but finally winning through to a coda of apparent A major triumph that feels, and has been, hard won. I was glad to make the acquaintance of this thoughtful and thought-provoking work.

After the Gál, the opening of Schumann's 'Rhenish' strikes a note of almost brutal confidence. I don't mean there is anything hesitant about Gál's Third, for he has an absolutely assured orchestral technique, but the Schumann glories in axiomatic certainties about tonality, the healthy development of tradition and the general betterment of mankind that were simply no longer available to Gál a century later. Gál himself is quoted in the booklet as saying in his excellent little BBC Music Guide on Schumann's orchestral music that the 'Rhenish' is 'the most eloquent expression of a happy, creative disposition'.

Kenneth Woods, who conducts the Gál with obvious empathy and understanding (he also contributes the booklet notes), gives a strong, forceful reading of the Schumann, if for obvious reasons a little small-scale. The Stratford-based Orchestra of the Swan is not a huge band (its website shows a permanent complement of about 35 players) but it makes up for lack of numbers – especially in the

strings – with admirable clarity of texture and finely honed musicianship. The performance of the Gál could hardly be bettered. In the Schumann there is much tougher competition, and I'm not about to throw out such excellent established readings, with larger orchestras, as those of Gardiner or Giulini or Marriner or Muti, yet (as with Zehetmair's coupling of Schubert's Sixth with Gál's First Symphony) it's a fresh-sounding, highly recommendable performance that makes an excellent foil for Gál's No. 3, and reminds us eloquently how intimately Gál was bound up with the Austro-German symphonic tradition. With first-rate recording throughout, too, this is a very welcome release. *Calum MacDonald*
