

## Hans Gál

It's always gratifying when music by a neglected composer one admires – and in this instance knew personally – begins to establish itself in recordings. What was a trickle of releases of works by **Hans Gál** is now widening, it seems, to a regular flow. It wasn't always so. In 1985, shortly before Gál's 95th birthday, I alerted a friend of mine newly appointed a reporter for the BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme that she might scoop an interview with 'Britain's oldest composer'. She duly visited Gál in Edinburgh and interviewed him. On August 4th, the day before the birthday, I had a panicked call from her to ask if I had any Gál on LP, since they couldn't find a single recording of his music in the BBC library; I had nothing to fill the gap and so the report was shelved.

Hans Gál was born near Vienna in 1890, the son of a Jewish doctor, studying piano with Richard Robert and composition with Eusebius Mandyczewski, who had been a close friend of Brahms and with whom he was later to work on the Brahms complete edition. After active service in the Austrian army during the First World War (which didn't stop him composing), Gál found himself increasingly successful in Vienna, both as performing musician (he played cello as well as piano, and was a choral conductor) and composer: after his second opera, *Die heilige Ente* ('The Sacred Duck'), was premiered by George Szell (an old friend from student days) in Düsseldorf in April 1923, it went on to conquer opera-house after opera-house, was the first contemporary opera to be broadcast by RAVAG, Austrian Radio, in 1929, and was still playing across Germany when the Nazis came to power and silenced it. By then Gál had become head of the conservatoire in Mainz and was, of course, summarily dismissed. Flight back to Vienna became flight from Vienna after the *Anschluss*: Gál's intention was to use Britain as a stepping-stone to reach America, but Donald Tovey decided that someone as musical as Gál was worth hanging on to, and he created a job for him in the Reid Music Library in Edinburgh, and Auld Reekie became his home for the rest of his long life. He died on October 3rd, 1987, adored by Edinburgh's musical community but largely forgotten as a composer beyond Arthur's Seat.

*Tempora mutantur*. At last a CD devoted entirely to Gál's orchestral music has recently been released, which contains the Concerto for violin and small orchestra, Op. 39, of 1932, the Concertino for violin and strings, Op. 52, of 1939 and, sandwiched between them, the *Triptych*, subtitled 'Three Movements for orchestra', Op. 100, written in 1970. The first thing that strikes you about the Op. 39 Concerto – premiered in Dresden in February 1933 by Kulenkampff and Fritz Busch (also soon to leave Germany) – is the sweetness of the melodic writing (although there's some asperity in the strings in the opening gesture that reminded me of

## Hans Gál's glorious output emerging on CD

by Martin Anderson



Tansman): Gál really knows how to make the violin sing, and its effortless *cantabile* soars above the orchestra for most of the opening *Fantasia*. Dark chords in the string basses initially suggest that the central *Arioso* will be a more serious affair but, in the first movement, the oboe lays down a gorgeous melody that defuses any hints of tension; a cadenza carries the music over into the rondo-finale, where the general good humour is clouded by a few passages of introspection.

As the composer's daughter, Eva Fox-Gál, writes in her booklet text, the *Triptych* is 'a work of astonishing vitality for one in his 80th year'. The *Allegro risoluto* 'Impromptu' which opens the action sets out assuredly over striding basses, the pace maintained in the upper strings during a contrasting lyrical episode. The middle movement is a 'Lament', but conductor Kenneth Woods takes the tempo indication, *Andante*, literally so that the walking pace keeps sadness at bay until the atmosphere darkens briefly towards the end. The closing 'Comedy' repeats the long-legged pacing of the 'Impromptu': Gál never allows his good spirits to sink into sentimentality.

Fox-Gál explains that her father used music as an inner world into which he could escape so, just as the Op. 39 Concerto betrays no sign of the troubled times in which it was written, you would hardly know that the Op. 52 Concertino was the work of a man who had only recently escaped with his family from mortal danger. True, the first of its two movements has a couple of passages which are rather more severe than anything else on this disc, but that's because of its more contrapuntal nature than its prevailing mood, and they serve as contrast to its general tunefulness. A

virtuoso cadenza leads straight into a *rigaudon* which Gál had seen in the British Museum, the material gaining in complexity as the music progresses; eventually an extended cadenza runs back over the work as a whole before the dance-tune returns to bring the piece to a brisk conclusion.

In both concertos Annette-Barbara Vogel is sweet-toned and reliable, always in tune despite the high registers Gál often asks of his soloist. The Northern Sinfonia and Woods bring rhythmic precision and textural clarity to their side of the recording (Avie AV2146, 1 hour 10 minutes).

Vogel turns to Gál's music for violin and piano – minus only the Three Sonatinas, Op. 71, of 1956-57 – where she's accompanied by the Finnish pianist Johani Lagerspetz. The B flat minor Sonata, Op. 17 (1920) which opens her chamber disc is more emphatic than any of the orchestral works on the other, but – without sacrificing anything in approachability – it plays off its new-found boldness against a moving, inward-looking delicacy and gains real emotional power from this combination of assertiveness and hesitancy. The 12-minute Suite in G major, Op. 56 (first composed for mandolin and piano in 1935 and adapted for violin and piano in 1942) is lighter-hearted and easier in manner, its four movements (a *Preambulo*, *Capriccio*, *Aria* and *Rondo*) plainly written for the pleasure of both composer and performer – though its technical demands are still considerable. The D major Sonata from 1933 was unpublished until 2008 but recorded by Gál's compatriot David Frühwirth and Henri Sigfridsson (another Finn) on Avie AV0009 in 2002, along with works by Křenek and Korngold. It was written shortly after the Gáls returned to Vienna from Mainz and – although his style remained consistent across his entire composing career (once he had got rid of his early Brahmsianism) – it has a textural clarity and transparency that wasn't the concern of the Op. 17 Sonata. So why didn't he publish it? If he did indeed use music as a retreat from the external storms that buffeted him, there may well be something in Fox-Gál's booklet suggestion that this particular Sonata was too directly associated with the troubled times from which its composition had offered a refuge (Avie AV2182, 1 hour 1 minute).

Since it never rains but pours, Frühwirth has also taken up his lance for Gál again, in the Sonata he had yet to record, the Op. 17; his partner here is the London-based German

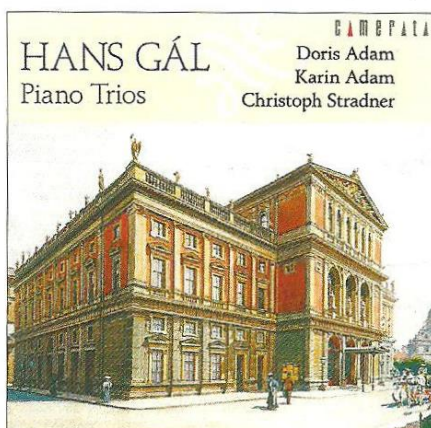


pianist Florian Uhlig. Frühwirth and Uhlig offer an alternative view of the piece: they don't see it as being as confident as Vogel and Lagerspetz do, and so their interpretation holds back a little and emphasizes the emotional ambiguity of the piece. Their generously filled CD offers two other Viennese rarities: the Violin Sonata in D major, Op. 15, by **Egon Kornauth** (1891-1959, another composer who deserves exhumation; I pass over in silence the fact that for this part of the booklet the notes are by a bloke called Martin Anderson), and the Sonata No. 1 in F sharp minor, Op. 3, by **Ernst Křenek** (1900-91), then still proudly sporting the hacek in his surname (**Editions Abseits EDA32**, 1 hour 15 minutes).

Exil.arte is an Austrian organization dedicated to reviving the music of composers driven out by the Nazis; it has collaborated with another Vienna-based institution, the CD label Gramola, to produce a disc of Gál chamber music, 'The Right Tempo'. It opens with a flawless account of the *Three Intermezzi* for flute and piano, Op. 103, written in 1974, when the composer was a mere 84; the score specifies flute or treble recorder and piano or harpsichord, and here the performers are the flautist Ulrike Anton and pianist Russell Ryan. The style was deeply unfashionable, then, of course, but Gál wrote as he had always written, his cardinal virtual, as ever, being attractive melodies and textural clarity. Unfortunately the two string players on this CD – violinists Cornelia Löscher and Wolfhart Schuster – don't have Anton's security of delivery, and the intonation in the Sonata for Two Violins and Piano, Op. 96 (1941), and the *Huyton Suite*, Op. 92, for flute and two violins (written in internment at Huyton in 1940 for the only instruments available in the camp), is rather hesitant – and in such company one notices in Op. 92 that this piano is not in tip-top condition, something I found more troubling in the reflective second of the early, Brahmsian *Three Sketches*, Op. 7 (1910-11) rather than in the swifter-moving outer numbers. Anton's playing steadies the strings in the *Huyton Suite*, giving the sheer

enjoyment Gál obviously found in contrapuntal composition the kind of *élan* it requires – with the buoyant music once again defying the discomfort of his material surroundings (**Gramola 98896**, 1 hour 7 minutes).

By the way, if you want to examine the *Three Sketches* in the context of Gál's piano music as a whole (or almost), you have two choices: Leon McCawley's complete recording, released on three CDs from Avie in 2005, or the two-CD set brought out by Martin Jones on Nimbus in 2007 – the difference is that the McCawley set includes the *24 Fugues*, Op. 108, that Gál composed as he turned 90. (The sets were reviewed in *IRR* in December 2005 and May 2007 respectively.)



Another recent CD from the Japanese label Camerata brought Gál's two Piano Trios, No. 1 in E major, Op. 18 (1925), and No. 2, Op. 49b (1948?), together with the early *Variations on a Popular Viennese Tune*, Op. 9, written in 1914. Op. 9 shows the young Gál already a master craftsman: these 24 variations and coda dance past in a mere six-and-a-half minutes, as coquettish as you like, and ought to be a concert favourite. It's interesting that, though the Op. 18 Trio falls between the Violin Sonata, Op. 17 and the D major Sonata and Op. 35 Suite, the increased harmonic resources of the medium coax its composer much further out into the

major/minor ambiguity typical of Austrian music. The outer two movements of Op. 18, at 13 and 11 minutes apiece, might just overstretch their material, but the idiom is so agreeable that it would be churlish to complain. The later Trio was written for amateurs, yet though Gál may not ask much of his musicians' fingers (the violin is limited to the first three positions, and the cellist to the first), they must listen and count with the best of them: the music is texturally subtle and rhythmically inventive and so sounds as rewarding to play as it is a delight to listen to. Doris and Karin Adam (piano and violin) and Christoph Stradner catch the mood of these works in deft and sympathetic performances (**Camerata CM28149**, 49 minutes).

Bit by bit, Gál's glorious output is emerging on CD. Other recent offerings have brought the works for string quartets, which range from the *Five Intermezzi*, Op. 9 of 1914 to the Fourth Quartet, Op. 99 of 1970, in inspiring performances by, fittingly, the Edinburgh Quartet (on two CDs from Meridian, reviewed in May 2006 and October 2007). A surround-sound disc of his organ works appeared from the label New Classical Adventure (60162) in 2007 with the Concertino for Organ and Strings, Op. 55 (1948), *Two Religious Songs*, Op. 21, for soprano, organ and cello (1923), and the Toccata, Op. 29 (1928), the Prelude and Fugue in A flat (1956, unpublished) and the *Phantasia, Arioso and Capriccio* (1956?, also unpublished), all for solo organ. Best of all comes news that the First and Second Symphonies are being recorded by the Northern Sinfonia under Thomas Zehetmair, No. 1 back to back with Schubert's 'Great' C major, and No. 2 with Schubert's No. 6. Nos. 3 and 4, one then hopes, will follow in due course. If a major cellist realizes what a glorious gem awaits discovery in the Cello Concerto, Op. 67 of 1944-49, we would hear that in concert with increasingly frequency.

In the meantime, if you want to explore Gál's music further, perhaps even join The Hans Gál Society, you'll find a very informative website at [www.hansgal.com](http://www.hansgal.com).