

Franz Schmidt
Symphony No. 1

**BBC National
Orchestra of Wales**
Jonathan Berman



Digital Booklet



Franz Schmidt (1874-1939)

Symphony No. 1 E major

I	Sehr langsam. Sehr lebhaft	11:47
II	Langsam	12:14
III	Schnell und leicht	12:32
IV	Lebhaft, doch nicht zu schnell	10:16

Franz Schmidt was born in Preßburg. The Schmidt family – part of it was of Hungarian origin – moved to Vienna in 1888. Franz Schmidt influenced the Vienna musical life in many ways: from 1896 to 1911 he was a member of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, until 1913/14 he held a post as cellist in the Vienna Court Opera Orchestra. As teacher for piano, violoncello, counterpoint and composition at the present University of Music and Performing Arts he educated numerous students who later became renowned musicians, conductors and composers. 1925–27 he was director, 1927–31 rector of this traditional education centre. After Alban Berg and Franz Schreker's death, Alexander Zemlinsky and Arnold Schönberg's emigration, Franz Schmidt was legitimately regarded as one of the most distinguished composers of the former 'Ostmark'.



Franz Schmidt and his First Symphony

By Jonathan Berman

In conversations about Franz Schmidt the recurring theme emerging for many is that listening to a performance of his music at a young age became the turning point in their lives – the realisation of how powerful music can be.

It was when I was researching Franz Schmidt for my first performance of his music (the 4th Symphony) that I found what was to become a key to Schmidt's music for me and has fuelled my love of his music.

In the British Library in London I came across a small manuscript book not much bigger than the size of my hand. It was full of counterpoint exercises from 1925 by the 14 year old Susi Jeans (later to become an eminent organist, teacher and musicologist), all heavily corrected by Franz Schmidt, her counterpoint teacher at the Vienna Conservatory. These corrections weren't just about adhering to the rules (there were no mistakes in the exercises *per se*), but they were aesthetic corrections to improve the organic connection between notes and the beauty of the lines.

Soon after, in Vienna, I was able to study Schmidt's own sketches for his 4th symphony. It became obvious that Schmidt adhered to the same criteria in his own compositions; constantly refining each line, first one line at a time, then combining them, constructing musical structures from the relationships notes have to each other and building up from details to larger musical ideas.

This for me is the essence of Schmidt's language. Even though he expresses many different emotions, creates many varied characters, and even references many styles of music, it is his awareness and care taken over every line, every interval of his music which I find so bewitching. There is a natural or organic quality which like many things in life appears simple, but takes a great amount of work to achieve.

The First Symphony, sketched when he was 22 and finished three years later in 1899, is, of course, early in his compositional journey. But already his personal voice is evident, and his desire for organic structures can be seen through a phrase he added at the end of his 1st Symphony "Ich singe wie der Vogel singt, der in den Zweigen wohnt" (I sing like the bird sings, that lives in the branches). Schmidt entered his first symphony into the Beethoven Prize anonymously – as the rules stated – and won.

The first movement begins with a slow introduction; a graceful and majestic reimagining of a Handelian French overture, moving through an almost melancholic trumpet solo (a colour Schmidt will use throughout his life) to a fast classical sonata movement whose main subject bares more than a passing resemblance to Richard Strauss' *Don Juan*. Throughout this movement though, there is a constant quest by Schmidt for grace and elegance, however dramatic the surface layer may appear.

The second movement showcases Schmidt's 'Austro-Hungarian-ness' (the fusing of nationalities that was to effect the music of Mahler, Schmidt, Dohnányi and others). The first part is a plaintive Magyar (Hungarian) style melody which continually varies with every repetition. The second section is an almost photographic picture of the hills around Vienna; a church service represented by a horn choral juxtaposed with pastoral birdcalls in the winds. The movement builds up to three climaxes before disintegrating, from where salvation comes in the form of an echo of the church chorale. In this movement, although very different in character, Schmidt emulates Bruckner by the way his very similar musical ideas are constantly and subtly changed to tell vastly different stories in different places. It gives the impression of a single organism continually evolving.

The third movement also bares Brucknerian traces, not least in the way Schmidt hides under the surface of the opening section a full (but short) sonata form. The refinement of the Viennese Waltz is never far away in this movement marked "fast and light". The Scherzo has two trio sections connected with a passage as

sensuous and decadent as parts of Salome. The first Trio is a miniature passacaglia with a descending chromatic bass line, whilst the second Trio is the most extraordinary dreamlike scene, perhaps the most unique passage in the whole symphony. It is created out of deep chromaticism mixed with rhythmic subtlety (of the type you find in late Brahms where the character is varied by changing the relationship between the strong beats and the bar line within each voice), which was to become a fascination of Schmidt throughout his life. If one was being poetic you might say that this Trio sounds as though half awake on a foggy icy Viennese morning, you hear a slow Strauss waltz in the distance.

The last movement is a glorious finale drawing on different models, such as the various dances from a Bach orchestral suite, moments of baroque trio sonatas, Mendelssohn (symphonies and organ works), and a good dose of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (at least the overture, Scene I, and the crowd scenes in Act III). Schmidt unifies all these models under the formal processes of a Rondo-Sonata form, with one Double fugue, and another Gigue-fugue, all with a lightness, joy and gracefulness, which is infectious.

Whilst the first symphony is redolent of many other composers, it is in the details in which Schmidt's personality lies. It is through these details that we can connect to his sensitivity and imagination. Schmidt's grace and refinement is what has motivated us to record these symphonies, and which we have tried to draw out on this recording.

This is the first recording in a cycle of the complete Franz Schmidt symphonies, forming the backbone of a much larger project to promote the music of Franz Schmidt through performances of his symphonies, televised concerts, radio documentaries about his life and a festival around his chamber music, all leading to celebrate his 150th Birthday in 2024. Due to Covid, those plans have been delayed, but we will recommence recording the symphonies in November 2021.

As a taster of what's to come we have decided to release this First Symphony as a 'digital only' recording. The preparation and recording of this symphony has been a labour of love, and I hope that after such a challenging year, the care Schmidt took over his music and that we took with this recording will, in some small way, bring you moments of joy.



JONATHAN BERMAN first conducted when he was 14 years old and has since established a reputation as a conductor of great insight, and a polymath whose wide ranging achievements both on and off the stage reveal a thoughtful, imaginative artist beyond his years.

From critically acclaimed operatic productions such as Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* and Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito*, to his performances of symphonic repertoire, such as a recent performance of Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony which "made me think about the music more intensely than any performance I've heard". From his articles for "Intelligentsia", an international magazine on music, art, literature and leadership, and his award winning productions as a classical music filmmaker, to his Stand Together Music initiative to help musicians in the UK during the pandemic; and now to his debut recordings of the complete symphonies of Franz Schmidt.

Jonathan has a long standing relationship with the BBC Orchestras, in particular the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, along with many broadcasts and interviews on BBC Radio 3. Equally at home in the opera pit (he has a repertoire of over 40 operas) and the concert hall, Jonathan has worked with orchestras and opera houses internationally including Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra, Tanglewood Festival Orchestra (Boston), Nederlandse Reisopera, Sinfonietta Riga, and in his native London with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, Royal Opera House, and the Philharmonia Orchestra.

As a champion of new music, he has conducted many world premieres, has collaborated with and formed friendships with the leading composers of our day including Sir Harrison Birtwistle, Magnus Lindberg, Sir George Benjamin, and Julian Anderson. He is regularly invited to work with the London Sinfonietta, Ensemble Modern, Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, New European Ensemble (Amsterdam), Crash Ensemble (Dublin), and the Kammerensemble Neue Musik Berlin.

Jonathan has also devised, written and directed nine critically acclaimed classical music films. These include a documentary series about the music of Vienna using art to visualise musical concepts, called 'Postcards from Vienna'. He has also created a groundbreaking new genre of classical music video presenting music from Bach to Satie and Stravinsky using visual art, literature and cinematography as a lens through which the audience can explore the music.

Since his teenage years, Jonathan has been mentored by and became close friends with Oliver Knussen and Stanisław Skrowaczewski. He is also the first Brit and first conductor to have won the Kempinski Young Artist Prize, which enabled him to study with Franz Welser-Möst and the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra, and with Michael Tilson Thomas and the New World Symphony.

In the tradition of Leonard Bernstein, Jonathan is a conductor who relishes in communicating complex ideas with all audiences. He goes above and beyond the tradition role of a conductor engaging and forming the trust of audiences from traditional listeners to the next generation.

For over 90 years, the **BBC NATIONAL ORCHESTRA OF WALES** has played an integral part in the cultural landscape of Wales, occupying a distinctive role as both a broadcast and national symphony orchestra. Part of BBC Wales and supported by the Arts Council of Wales, it performs a busy schedule of live concerts throughout Wales, the UK, and the world. The orchestra is an ambassador of Welsh music and champions contemporary composers and musicians.

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