

HANS ROTT

Dr David C F Wright

If you are an admirer of Mahler then, like Mahler himself, you owe a debt of gratitude to Hans Rott.

Mahler wrote of Rott that he was the founder of the new symphony, and that Rott's first symphony soars to heights of genius. When I first heard it I had to listen to it again at once, even though it lasts an hour. The next day I listened to it twice. Like a good book, I could not put it down. I still listen to it regularly.

The Austrian Hans Rott was born in 1858. His father was Karl Rott who was a very famous comedy actor who graced all the theatres of Vienna and elsewhere. Hans's mother died in 1860 when Hans was in his second year of life, and Karl had a serious accident while performing on stage in 1874 and died two years later. Hans was eighteen and had to fend for himself. He had no money to continue his studies at the Vienna Conservatory which had begun the previous year. The loss of his parents and financial worries made him mentally delicate..

Among his studies were those with Anton Bruckner and Rott developed into being a very fine organist. Bruckner was a very kind man, decent, honourable and upright all his life and he excused Rott from paying the tuition fees even after Rott had graduated from Bruckner's organ class in 1877 and taught him free of charge throughout the final years of the student's studies. Bruckner bestowed on young Hans the highest accolades praising his immaculate technique and his amazing understanding of the works of Bach.

Composition was Rott's main interest and he studied with Franz Krenn at the conservatory. Krenn was an admirer of Wagner and, to a slightly lesser extent, of Bruckner as well, but he did not wish to seem sycophantic. For his final year Rott had to compose a symphonic movement and what he submitted was to later become the first movement of his Symphony in E, the work that has so impressed me.

But the symphonic movement did not go down well. It was condemned as being too much like Wagner which is absurd. The jury laughed at the performance and this added to the tragedies in Rott's life and deeply distressed him. It is not like Wagner. It is gentler and more lucidly scored although it could be argued that certain melodic fragments from Bruckner may appear, or be suggested in it, particularly Bruckner's Third Symphony. Bruckner, a mild and gentle man by nature, was furious at the jury's response to Rott's movement, berating them with assertions that one day Rott would prove them all wrong.

Even today there is a lot of injustice meted out to composers, and this in turn is exacerbated by misplaced praise and attention to other composers.

Rott worked at the symphony completing it in June 1880. Mentally frustrated by the complaint that the work was Wagnerian, Rott quoted the main theme from the finale of Brahms's Symphony no. 1 in his finale. This created another storm. There were many who disliked the music of Brahms and Rott subsequently suffered more scorn which added to his already precarious mental condition. Bruckner stood by him at some cost to himself. Rott was heard to say that he could not do anything right, but that is often the case and the plight of many composers and writers.

The twenty two year old could find no work in Vienna but it is clear that he tried and tried and tried. All his rejections proved to prolong his depressed state. He applied for grants. He approached the conductor Hans Richter to perform the symphony.

One of my choir members, has supplied an idiomatic translation of a letter Richter wrote to Rott dated 13th October 1880

“Dear Herr Rott

Excuse my rushing today but my time is not my own and I was then prevented from being home in good time. Permit me though that I may look at your work in detail. It would be very kind of you if, with you, I might run through your work, but I will not burden you with more excuses. If you have time and

would wish it, you could find me at home tomorrow, Thursday at 3.30pm. With best greetings, Yours,
Hans Richter.”

Rott visited Brahms in September 1880 and played the symphony to him but Brahms did not like it. Richter refused to perform it. Rott entered the Beethoven competition but was unsuccessful and concluded that he did not win any prize because Brahms was on the jury.

Rott took up a post in Mulhausen. The Ministry for the Arts in Vienna, some months later, awarded him a grant for composition but, by then, he had his contract with Mulhausen.

Mahler was a fellow student with Rott in Krenn's composition class and thought Rott to be very personable.

Many comparisons have been made between Mahler and Bruckner and, as with the Wagner / Brahms, divide, very many make injudicious statements about which composer is the better of the two. I suppose we all have a view. It is my contention that Mahler, as a composer and as a man, was not as refined as Bruckner, and that Bruckner is probably the better composer whose music sometimes reaches a profound spirituality that Mahler's never did. It is also recorded that Mahler was a difficult man with people and a martinet with orchestras. There is some evidence that Mahler was cruel and defamatory to Hugo Wolf and some scholars believe that that may have triggered Wolf's madness, although it is more likely that Wolf's syphilis brought on dementia. On the other hand, all the contemporary records that I have seen portray Bruckner as a very kind and decent man. Bruckner stood by Rott. Mahler admired Rott when he was dead, sixteen years later in fact when, in 1900, Mahler read the score of the symphony again and praised it highly. But he had seen and studied it in Rott's lifetime.

What is clear is that Mahler emulated Rott in his own symphonies. There is evidence that Mahler reused the material Rott uses in his symphony and one could call it exploitation. If you listen carefully to both Rott and Mahler you will discover this for yourself. In his music Mahler perpetuates his own personal debt not only to Rott but to Wagner and Brahms as well.

Rott's symphony was complete by 1880. Mahler began work on his first symphony in 1884.

But referring back to the fundamental differences between Mahler and Bruckner, it seems that Mahler's compliments were always tinged with unsavoury criticism. He said of Rott's symphony, "It does not quite hit the mark but I know what he is driving at." It seems an arrogant and unfair remark.

On his journey from his native city of Vienna to Mulhausen in October 1880 the first major sign of Rott's mental illness displayed itself. Another passenger was lighting a cigar and Rott restrained him with considerable force and while holding a revolver. Rott said that Brahms had had the train booby-trapped the train with dynamite. Further outbursts followed at various places and by 1881 he was residing in a mental hospital. Here he was tortured by his demons, the death of his mother whom he hardly knew, the death of his father, his poverty, the derision of his symphony, his rejection by Brahms and Richter, his inability to stay and work in his beloved Vienna, being turned down for grants and having to travel to Mulhausen to work. No wonder he sank into depression.

At first it was thought that he could be helped to a full recovery but he sank into depression as well as distressing eccentricities. He used some of his compositions as toilet paper claiming that they were worthless, an idea forever etched into him by the rejection and humiliation he had suffered. It is all very well dismissing this as persecution mania, as if his condition was of his own making. But this is surely unfair. To add to his state he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and died on 25 June 1884. His grave is in the Zentral-Friedhof.

Up to 1989 none of his music had been published or performed. It was the splendid Symphony that was the first work heard being premiered by the Cincinnati Philharmonic Orchestra under Gerhard Samuel on 4 March in that city. It was repeated on 10 March 1989 in Paris by the same forces and at St James's Church, Piccadilly in London on 12 March.

I have not seen a score of the Symphony but I have listened to it many times in a performance by an orchestra from the Netherlands and so I can only describe it from repeated hearings. It is in E major, an unusual key for a symphony. It is set in four movements. The scoring would appear to be for double woodwind but there is also a part for double bassoon along with four horns, three trumpets, three trombones (there does not appear to be a tuba part). The percussion consists of timpani and triangle and there is the usual string section. Generally speaking the orchestration is not thick as with some composers. The first movement is leisurely but never dull and in *alla breve* time. The second movement which begins in the subdominant key is a broad slow movement often of great beauty. There follows a scherzo and trio in ternary form with some marvellous effects. The finale is the most original in form, and is often quite staggering. One expects the Valkyries at any moment! It contains a prelude and fugue thus revealing Rott's love of Bach and the closing pages are very satisfying.

Yes, there are flaws which may be attributed to his youth and to the fact that it was his Symphony no. 1, (he does not know when to end) and I take it his only symphony, but then composers of mature years still show flaws in their music.

Six months after writing and completing this article I have heard the performance by the Cincinatti Orchestra on Hyperion which is not as good as the Dutch performance I have lived with, the American performance being, in my opinion, somewhat lack lustre. But it is a splendid symphony and, surprisingly emotive at times. While it is not a dark symphony it seems to be prophetic of the tragic life of this very gifted composer.

Copyright David C F Wright 2002. This article or any part of it must not be copied, downloaded, stored in any retrieval system, used or even quoted in any fashion such as any written reproduction or recording without the prior written consent of the author. Failure to comply will be a breach of copyright laws and render the offender liable to action at law.

18/12/2002