

JULIUS RONTGEN

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Julius Rontgen was born in Leipzig in 1855 to Englebert Rontgen (1829-1897), the Dutch concertmaster of the Gewandhaus Orchestra at that time.

Julius showed a remarkable talent very early on. In 1869 his father and Joseph Joachim performed his Duo for violin and viola during the Niederrheinische Musikfest. The boy actually turned the pages for the two instrumentalists and his head did not reach the top of the desks and he was oblivious to the audience. From February 1874 he made a note of all his compositions in a notebook. He was known as the Wunderkind. His earliest works were two violins and many of his first works were dedicated to members of his family a Piano Piece in F major from is dedicated to his dear grandpa on his birthday, 4 May 1869. His Piano Sonata no. 1 in F minor was dedicated to his dear mama on 28 June 1864.

From May 1871 he received instruction in orchestration from Carl Reinecke in Leipzig and, the following year, he continued his studies with Franz Lachner. His first published work was his Violin Sonata no. 3 and his official Opus 2, his Piano Sonata in A was published as was his Opus 3, a Sonata for cello and piano, all published in 1873. He was working on his Symphony no. 1 in G major and completed his Piano Concerto no. 1. His Symphony no. 2 in F minor was completed in March 1875 but these first two symphonies are now thought to be lost.

A fellow pupil at the Leipzig Conservatory was Grieg, studying piano and composition in the traditional styles of Mendelssohn and Schumann. Rontgen was to be compared with Brahms but, initially, he did not favour the music of Brahms. It seems incredible that he should write letters dismissing Brahms's magnificent Piano Concerto no. 1, but he did. And yet, in 1884, he gave the Dutch premiere of the Piano Concerto no. 2 with the composer conducting and they were now firm friends. Another evidence of his own pianistic ability was as a sensitive accompanist to singers including the two fine baritones Julius Stockhausen and Johannes Meeschaert. Rontgen's capacity for friendship was also shown to Grieg and, after the death of the Norwegian composer, Rontgen completed the Norwegian's String Quartet in F. For his part Grieg, had composed a piano piece Sehnsucht nach Julius.

At the Conservatory, Rontgen studied with Louis Plaidy and, as already mentioned, Carl Reinecke and, with Moritz Hauptmann, he learned the disciplines of counterpoint, fugue and harmony. At this time Brahms was treated with suspicion and thought to be a modernist composer and it was this unfair appraisal that caused Rontgen to absorb this nonsense. Fortunately, he changed his mind.

It was after Leipzig that Rontgen went to Munich and studied with Franz Lachner a friend of Schubert but, by far, better composer than Schubert. From there Julius went on to Amsterdam in 1878 where he taught piano at the music school and it was his close association with the musical celebrities of the day such as Grieg and Brahms that was a major factor in this appointment. But it was Professor A D Loman, a close friend of Rontgen's father, that had recommended young Julius. It was in the previous year, 1877, that Rontgen changed his opinion of Brahms on hearing Brahms's magnificent Symphony no. 1, a work ridiculed by the ignorant as Beethoven's tenth symphony. Originally Rontgen has criticised Brahms's Piano Trio in B major Opus 8 as atrociously boring and saying Brahms's playing of the piano part was sloppy. It was in January 1877 that Rontgen rehearsed his proposed Symphony no 3 with the Gewandhaus orchestra but it did not come up to expectations. The Symphony no 3 that the composer acknowledged was written very quickly in 1910 and is a substantial four movement work premiered by the Utrecht Municipal Orchestra conducted by the composer on 11 January 1911

In 1878 Rontgen composed his Theme and Variations Opus 17 which shows the composer's carefree nature. In the autumn of that year he was given the task of organising chamber concerts held in the Felix Meritis concert hall at Keizersgracht. He also took part in such concerts.

On the 28 July 1880 he married his beloved Amanda Maier (1854-1894) in Landskrona, Sweden. She was a violinist and composer. Since 1875 she had visited Leipzig as a pupil of Julius's father and, in 1876, was the soloist in her own Violin Concerto with the Gewandhaus Orchestra..

In 1892 Julius appeared in a string quartet with his father, Gerard von Brucken Fock and Carl Nielsen. He also played the viola in the first performance of Grieg's String Quartet no. 2. Rontgen wrote three sonatas for viola and piano and did so in quick succession between 1924 and 1925. The first, in C minor, is the most demanding and the third sonata includes a set of variations on an old English melody. As with Brahms he wrote songs for voice viola and piano. Whereas Brahms wrote two as his Opus 91, Rontgen wrote five as a set in 1926. The last song lasts about 15 minutes and is entitled To Pity to a text by Frederich Theodore Vischer (1807-1887), as are the other four songs.

In 1892 and for the 25th anniversary of Grieg's marriage to Nina, Rontgen wrote his suite: Aus Jotunheim for violin and piano. Mr and Mrs Rontgen played the work in the presence of the Griegs in Norway. The composer later orchestrated the work.

But he also wrote much orchestral music. In 1910 he had completed a large symphony in C minor which, in some quarters, is known as the Symphony no. 3. It is, in turn, powerful and solid and does show some influence of Brahms.

Rontgen wrote three cello concertos. The first, in E minor, dates from 1893-1894 and is in three movements. The Cello Concerto no 2 was written for Pablo Casals in 1909 and is in one movement lasting about 19 minutes. The Cello Concerto no 3 in F sharp minor of 1929 starts promisingly but despair seems to set in, although all the concertos start in the minor key and end in a major key. All the concertos are attractive but when they end, they end. It is like turning off the tap. You do not really remember much.

Between 1912 and 1924 Rontgen was the Principal of the Amsterdam Music School which, by now, was known as the Amsterdam Conservatory. But to backtrack. He had taught there since 1884 with some 15 of the total 32 pupils. All his pupils were female. Joachim offered him a position in Berlin in 1884 but Rontgen declined feeling his place was in Amsterdam as he had worked so hard in establishing the Music School. The Concertgebouw was completed in 1888 and he conducted one of the first concerts there and, later, conducted a performance of Beethoven's Missa Solemnis. He also conducted Brahms's German Requiem, Verdi's Requiem and the B minor Mass of Bach. In 1889 he gave the premiere of his own Piano Concerto no. 3 with Wilem Kes conducting.

However, his heart was in Leipzig. His family was there as were all his friend in the Gewandhaus Orchestra.

From his first marriage Julius had two sons — Julius (1881-1951) and Engelbert (1886-1958) but, by the end of the 1880s, Amanda was taken ill and had to go abroad to recuperate. On 15 June 1894 she died of a cerebral haemorrhage. It will be of no surprise to say that Julius stopped composing for a while.

There had been coming to his house for lessons from 1892 Abrahamina des Amorie van der Hoeven (1870-1940). Eventually love blossomed and they were married in the summer of 1897.

They had four sons. Frants Edvard (1902-1969) who did not go into music, as did the other five sons of Julius, but became an architect and received a commission from his father to build a villa and this he did in Blithoven which, after the Second World War, became the home of the Blithoven Music Foundation. Rontgen's son, Joachim (1906-1989) was a violinist as was Julius junior, whereas Johannes

(1898-1969) was a pianist and the two cellists were Engelbert and Edvard (1902-1969). Rontgen's only daughter, Amanda, died when she was four.

There were many well-known visitors to the Rontgen home such as Carl Flesch, Harold Bauer, Frederic Lamond and Pablo Casals. With his two eldest sons, Rontgen formed the Rontgen trio.

In the 1920s Kart Straube asked Rontgen to write something for the famous Thomanchor and the result was eight motets of extreme difficulty.

It was in 1927 that Rontgen and his wife visited New York to visit their son Engelbert. Here he was introduced to jazz and admired Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue and purchased a copy of the score.

Grieg and Rontgen visited each other as and when they could. They also took trips together. They shared a love of nature and folk music. In some of his works Rontgen used Norwegian folk music but he was Dutch through and through. He collected old Dutch songs. He had many admirers. The Australian composer, Percy Grainger played his music. Rontgen had met Grainger in 1907 while they were both visiting Grieg.

As to being a composer, he wrote about 800 works including 25 symphonies, 15 concertos, 22 string quartets, 14 violin sonatas, 14 cello sonatas and numerous other works. One of his operas is based on a play by Strindberg. Many of his works are unnumbered which creates confusion and frustration. For example his Symphony in C sharp minor is simply referred to as Symphony (1930). But his symphonies in the 1930s are mainly in one movement and that they are not numbered is a nuisance. The same applies to his concertos. For example an early piano concerto is identified as Opus 18 and yet he wrote two piano concertos for Donald Tovey which are not numbered or have opus numbers and yet are annotated 1929 and 1930 respectively.

The Tovey connection arose when the city of Edinburgh bestowed an honorary doctorate on Rontgen and the city was rewarded with a new symphony.

When Rontgen died in 1932 Tovey wrote that "he was an inspiration for the future but with a link in the past. His compositions cover the whole range of music in every art form; they all show consummate mastery in every aspect of technique; even in the most facile there is beauty and wit; each series of works culminate in something that has the uniqueness of a living masterpiece."

However, Rontgen's works slipped into oblivion His music is much of a muchness and lacks originality. He wrote too much and a lot of it is very ordinary. However, interest in now growing in his music.

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