



Friedrich Gernsheim: String Quartet No.2

Siegfrid Karg-Elert: Chamber Music for Winds



Friedrich Gernsheim (1839-1916) is a composer whose music was held in the highest regard by critics during his lifetime. No less an authority than Wilhelm Altmann, perhaps the most important chamber music critic of all time, writes in his *Handbuch für Streichquartettspieler* that Gernsheim's quartets are poetic and of a high intellectual content. But Gernsheim also had the misfortune to be born within 6 years of Brahms. A misfortune because, in what is surely an extraordinary phenomenon, virtually every composer in the

German-speaking countries born within a decade either side of Brahms were so eclipsed by him that their reputation and music virtually disappeared when that era was over. Names such as Rheinberger, Reinecke, Kiel, Bruch, Dessoff, and Herzogenberg, among many others, come to mind. Strangely, it did not even seem to matter if their music showed no influence of Brahms, as was the case with the first four mentioned. This probably explains why they (Kiel excepted) are better known than the last two whose music, in varying degrees, shows the influence of Brahms.

Gernsheim, somewhat of a piano and violin virtuoso as a child, was eventually educated at the famous Leipzig Conservatory where he studied piano with Ignaz Moscheles and violin with Ferdinand David. During the course of his life, he held academic and conducting positions in Cologne, Rotterdam and finally Berlin. He used his position as a conductor to advance the cause of Brahms' music. The two, while not close friends, carried on a correspondence for many years during which it was clear that Brahms had considerable respect and admiration for Gernsheim's work. An accolade which was, in Brahms' case, no mere flattery as Brahms never hesitated to be harsh and critical as his relationship with Herzogenberg among others clearly indicated.

Gernsheim composed in every genre except opera. Chamber music comes to nearly one fourth of his total output. He wrote 5 string quartets, 2 piano quintets, 2 string quintets (one with 2 Vla, one with 2 Vc), 3 piano quartets, a quintet for flute and string quartet, 2 piano trios and a number instrumental sonatas. **String Quartet No.2 in a, Op.31** was published in 1875 approximately two years after Brahms' Op.51 quartets appeared. It is expertly performed on **Audite CD 97.503** by our new members, The Mandelring String Quartet in what may well be its first recording. The first movement, *Allegro*, characterized by its elegiac mood of restless energy, clearly shows the influence of Brahms to the extent that there is even a near quote of one of the better known phrases from the Op.51. Still the music retains its originality. The lovely *Adagio* which follows is free of Brahms. The passionate middle section is especially impressive. Next is a muscular and very dramatic scherzo, *Molto vivace ed energico*, of which the second theme is especially fine. A short, dreamy trio section releases the tension and provides excellent contrast. The rhythmic finale, *Allegro moderato e molto energico*, seems to begin where

the scherzo has left off—it almost seems part of the same movement right down to the introduction of the lovely and lyrical second theme. There is also an ingenious fugal section in the middle of this captivating movement. Despite the influence of Brahms that one can clearly hear in the first movement (but not elsewhere), I find this is an absolutely first rate work, well worth the price of the CD by itself. But also on disk is a superb performance of Brahms' Op.51 No.1, which only provides further evidence as to why the Mandelring are in the front rank of performing quartets before the public.

Sigfrid Karg-Elert (1877-1933)

Karg-Elert trained at the Leipzig Conservatory and abandoned the career of concertizing pianist for that of composer. He attracted the attention of Grieg and Reger and with the latter is considered in the first rank of early 20th century composers for the organ. A while back we reviewed Karg-Elert's *Jugend Quartet* for piano, clarinet, flute and horn, a very nice piece. Here on this **Hungaroton CD 32166**, we have two more excellent works of chamber music for winds.



The fact that Karg-Elert also learned to play the flute, clarinet and horn must to some extent be the reason. The first work, **Trio in d for Oboe, Clarinet & English Horn, Op.49 No.1** dates from 1902. The quiet first movement, *Introductio*, has, especially at movement's end, a soft organ-like quality which in some ways permeates the entire work. Lazy and dreamy it meanders along showing some influence from the French impressionists, Debussy in particular. The second movement, *Doppelfuge*, takes J.S. Bach as its point of departure. It is a lively and exquisite double fugue, linearly developed. As close as the tonality approaches the early 18th century, there is some immaterial quality which gives it a slightly more modern touch. The Baroque provides the title to the third movement, *Sarabande*, but the mood and tonalities more closely resemble the first movement with its impressionist use of chromaticism. The lively finale, *Rigaudon et Musette* is bright and clever, sounding a bit of Jean François. This short work, though of no great emotional depth, is a charming gem. The second piece on disk is the **Quintet in c for Oboe, 2 Clarinets, Horn & Bassoon**. The first of the three movements, *Leidenschaftlich*, while the most substantial, does not exactly open in a passionate way. The music is lively and full of humor, reminiscent a bit of *Til Eulenspiegel*. The parts are masterfully handled and the thematic material is very rich in ideas. The quiet, valedictory second movement, *Interludium*, has a lovely chorale quality to it. The music is characterized by a sense of serenity. The lively finale, simply marked *Finale*, has a bouncy rhythmic theme which carries the high spirited music along effortlessly. A slower and dreamy middle section provides a nice contrast before the return of the main theme and then the coda with its teasingly jarring penultimate chord. These are two fine works for winds, mostly in an impressionist and neo-classical vein. Also on disk are two sonatas for clarinet and piano. A worthwhile CD.