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# Hans Rott, 1858–1884

Paul Banks

Increasingly in recent years anniversaries of birth or death have been used as opportunities to reassess the work of major composers. In the case of Johann Carl Maria Rott (1858–84) the centenary of his death this year ought to encourage not reassessment but discovery. None of Rott's important works has ever been heard complete in public and none was published, yet his name has never been quite forgotten. His survival in the penumbra of music history is the result of the admiration he evoked in two men: his teacher, Anton Bruckner, and his fellow student, Gustav Mahler.

Bruckner met Rott for the first time when the young man entered the second preparatory class in organ playing at the Vienna Conservatory in autumn 1874.<sup>1</sup> Hans had been born and brought up in Vienna.<sup>2</sup> Little is known about his mother Christine (née Hoffman) beyond the fact that she died in 1860. However, his father Karl Matthias Rott (1807–76) was a well-known comic actor on the Viennese popular stage who had some musical ability.<sup>3</sup> In 1828 Karl composed the incidental music to Johann Nestroy's first full-length dramatic work, *Des Wüstlings Radikalur oder Die Dreissig Jahre der Verbannung*.<sup>4</sup> The music was not particularly successful and by the mid-1830s Karl had found his true métier as a stage performer.

Hans's education began in 1866 when he joined the k.k. Normal-Hauptschule St Anna as a private pupil and continued at the Akademischen Gymnasium (1868–72). Then for some reason he was sent to the first Öffentliche Höhere Handels-Lehranstalt from which he graduated in 1874. His father may have wished to discourage an artistic career or simply felt that a commercial training would be a useful background. At what date Rott's musical ability began to manifest itself is unknown. The earliest of his compositions which can be dated with any certainty, the Symphony for strings (1874–5),<sup>5</sup> is a work of some sophistication and he must have received some preliminary training as a performer before his entry into the conservatory in September 1874.

Rott studied the organ with Bruckner for three years. He

was an able pupil, attaining first grade in all three years and first prizes in the organ competitions held in 1876 and 1877. He took his *Abitur* and received a diploma and the Gesellschaft's silver medal. Bruckner expressed his opinion of Rott's ability in a letter to Ignaz Trauhmiller of 14 June 1878: 'He is a talented musician, most charming and unassuming, is *very virtuous*, plays Bach excellently and (for an 18-year-old youth) improvises wonderfully. You will not find a better young man. He is my best pupil so far'.<sup>6</sup>

Rott studied more than just organ playing with Bruckner. Some of his compositions, such as the Symphony in E major and the String Quartet in C minor,<sup>7</sup> show the influence of his teacher and his *Nachlass* contains a 41-bar movement on two staves headed 'Thema von Prf. Brknr.',<sup>8</sup> together with a copy in Rott's hand of the last 34 bars of the slow movement of Bruckner's Fourth Symphony.<sup>9</sup> The text used by Rott for this copy was the 1879–80 version, indicating that the young composer was allowed access to his teacher's scores even after his formal studies with Bruckner had ceased.

By 1880 Rott was anxiously trying to establish himself in Vienna as a professional musician and to further this aim he arranged an interview with Brahms. At this meeting, on 17 September, Brahms was discouraging; just over a month later, on 23 October, Rott was admitted to the psychiatric clinic of the general hospital in Vienna, having suffered a nervous breakdown. He never recovered his sanity. On 20 February 1881 he was awarded a state grant for the support of talented artists, but by then it was too late; he died of tuberculosis on 25 June 1884.

Bruckner attributed Rott's illness and death to the harshness of Brahms's criticisms of Rott's compositions. Certainly Brahms's response must have been particularly disheartening for a young composer who had drawn thematic inspiration from Brahms's C minor Symphony when composing his own first symphony (cf exx. 1a and b). But Fritz Löhrr,

## Ex. 1

a) Rott: Symphony in E major, fourth movement



b) Brahms: First Symphony, fourth movement, b63f  
Allegro non troppo ma con brio



<sup>1</sup> All information about Rott's career at the Vienna Conservatory is from *Bericht über das Conservatorium und die Schauspielschule der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Wien* (Vienna, 1875–).

<sup>2</sup> This account of Rott's life is based on Maja Löhr: 'Hans Rott: der Liebesschüler Anton Bruckners', *Lebendige Stadt* (Vienna, 1958), 16–22, and Leopold Nowak: 'Die Kompositionen und Skizzen von Hans Rott in der Musiksammlung der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek', *Beiträge zur Musikdokumentation: Franz Grasberger zum 60. Geburtstag* (Tutzing, 1975), 273–340. See also Paul Banks: *The Early Social and Musical Environment of Gustav Mahler* (diss., U. of Oxford, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> The most exhaustive account of Karl Rott's career is Constantin von Wurzbach: *Biographisches Lexikon des Kaiserthums Oesterreich* (Vienna, 1856–90), xxvii, 145f

<sup>4</sup> see *Johann Nestroy: Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Bruckner and Rommel, i (Vienna, 1922), 620, and *Johann Nestroy: Stücke I*, ed. Walla (Munich, 1979), 424f

<sup>5</sup> Nowak: op cit, no.37. All Rott's surviving music is in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.

<sup>6</sup> Nowak, op cit, 274f

<sup>7</sup> Nowak, op cit, nos.35, 44

<sup>8</sup> Nowak, op cit, no.78

<sup>9</sup> Nowak, op cit, no.79

an archaeologist and close friend of both Rott and Mahler who together with the philologist Joseph Seemüller took charge of Rott's manuscripts after the composer's death, was of the opinion that at the time of the interview 'Rott was really beyond help and had fallen into the power of his harsh fate: his illness, caused by quite separate physical and spiritual factors, had already been brewing for some time'.<sup>10</sup>

Mahler entered the Vienna Conservatory in September 1875 and it was probably there that he first met Rott. In 1876–7 and 1877–8 the two students studied composition with Franz Krenn (1816–97) and in summer 1878 both entered the composition competition. Mahler was awarded a first prize for a piano quintet movement but Rott was unsuccessful. The work he submitted was almost certainly the first movement of his Symphony in E major (Nowak no.35)<sup>11</sup> which the conservatory jury dismissed with laughter. Bruckner is reported to have commented: 'Sirs, don't laugh, you will hear great things of that name'.<sup>12</sup> One of Alma Mahler's anecdotes apparently refers to the same event:

[Mahler] won the first prize for composition. His fellow student and friend, Hans Rott, an extraordinarily gifted musician, was unsuccessful. Mahler went home and told them proudly of the prize he had won. His mother wept tears of indignation and said: 'All the same, Rott's work was better than yours'. It was just like his mother.<sup>13</sup>

Undeterred by this failure Rott completed the symphony in June 1880 and intended to enter it, together with a string sextet (Nowak no.42), for the Beethoven Competition in 1880. He also hoped that the work would be performed by the Vienna Philharmonic and played it through for Hans Richter, who was at that time conductor of the Philharmonic concerts, on 14 October 1880. Richter complimented the composer but did not accept his symphony for performance.

It was this ill-fated symphony, on which Rott had pinned so many of his hopes as a composer, that particularly interested Mahler in later years. In his youth Mahler was immensely impressed by Rott's talent. He seems to have talked about Rott to his wife and three of his early biographers, Paul Stefan, Richard Specht and Natalie Bauer-Lechner: all four refer to the otherwise long-forgotten Hans Rott in their writings about Mahler. But his commitment to Rott's memory went beyond such reminiscing. In summer 1900 he took the symphony with him on vacation. He looked through the score with the possibility of a performance at a Vienna Philharmonic concert in mind and commented to Natalie Bauer-Lechner:

What music has lost in him is immeasurable. His First Symphony, written when he was a young man of twenty, already

soars to such heights of genius that it makes him – without exaggeration – the founder of the New Symphony as I understand it. It is true that he has not yet fully realised his aims here. It is like someone taking a run for the longest possible throw and not quite hitting the mark. But I know what he is driving at. His innermost nature is so much akin to mine that he and I are like two fruits from the same tree, produced by the same soil, nourished by the same air. We would have had an infinite amount in common. Perhaps we two might have gone some way together towards exhausting the possibilities of this new age that was then dawning in music.<sup>14</sup>

It is not clear whether Mahler came to any decision about performing the work: in April 1901, following a serious illness, he resigned the conductorship of the Philharmonic concerts.

It was as a composer that Mahler made manifest his admiration of Rott's symphony, incorporating into his Second, Third, Fifth and Seventh Symphonies explicit references to material from his friend's magnum opus (exx.2a–h). In a conversation with Natalie Bauer-Lechner Mahler gave a clue to the significance of these quotations.

If the jury of the Conservatoire . . . had awarded me the Beethoven Prize of 600 guilders for *Das klagende Lied*, my whole life would have taken a different course . . . Instead, however, Herr Herzfeld got the first prize in composition, and Rott and I went away empty-handed. Rott became depressed, went mad, and died soon after. And I was condemned for good to this hellish life in the theatre.<sup>15</sup>

Mahler was wrong, which from a psychological point of view makes his account even more interesting: he and Rott never competed in the same Beethoven competition.<sup>16</sup> This faulty memory is revealing. The incorporation of musical ideas from Rott's symphony into Mahler's symphonies takes on a double significance: as an expression of Mahler's grief and despair at his friend's tragic fate and as symbols for his own frustrations and bitterness. The fact that these quotations are all derived from one work is also significant because Mahler had been involved in the initial failure of the symphony at the conservatory competition in 1878. His mother's words perhaps articulated Mahler's own assessment of his role in the affair. So the quotations and the abortive plan for a performance in some sense may have been an attempt to atone for an injustice to which Mahler felt he had contributed.

Because of its inherent qualities and because of its Mahlerian connections the E major Symphony is the work by Rott most likely to attract interest today.<sup>17</sup> But during his short life Rott composed music in a wide range of genres: song, choral music, opera, orchestral music, piano music (no organ music has been discovered) and chamber music. His last completed composition, unfortunately destroyed

<sup>10</sup> 'Oesterreichisch-Ungarische Revue', *Die Musik*, iii/10 (1903–4), 280f

<sup>11</sup> See Banks, op cit, 248f for the relevant arguments

<sup>12</sup> A. Göllerich: *Anton Bruckner: ein Lebens- und Schaffensbild* (Regensburg, 1936), iv/1, 446

<sup>13</sup> A. Mahler: *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters* (London, 1973), 8

<sup>14</sup> N. Bauer-Lechner: *Recollections of Gustav Mahler* (London, 1980), 146

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, 116

<sup>16</sup> see K. Blaukopf: *Mahler: a Documentary Study* (London, 1976), 158, 162

<sup>17</sup> A scholarly edition of the work is being prepared by the present writer.

Ex. 2

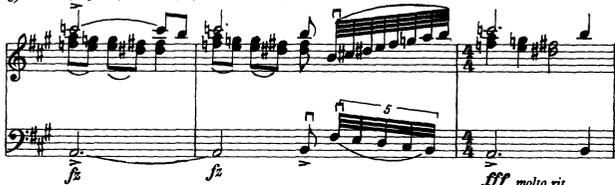
a) Rott: Symphony in E major, third movement



b) Mahler: Second Symphony, third movement, b212f



c) Rott: Symphony in E major, second movement



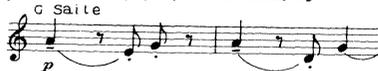
d) Mahler: Third Symphony, first movement, b364 (transposed down a 4th)



e) Rott: Symphony in E major, third movement



f) Mahler: Fifth Symphony, third movement, b136f



g) Rott: Symphony in E major, first movement



h) Mahler: Seventh Symphony, fifth movement, b50f



during his insanity, was the string sextet intended for the Beethoven Prize. The most interesting of Rott's surviving chamber works is the String Quartet in C minor (Nowak no.44). The only information about this work is that contained in the musical sources, and these give a confused picture requiring interpretation.

It seems that the quartet was conceived as a five-movement work. An autograph score of three movements is extant containing: '3. Satz, Scherzo', '4. Satz, Menuett', and '5. Satz, Finale'.<sup>18</sup> The Finale also survives as the last of three movements in a set of MS parts.<sup>19</sup> It seems likely that the first two movements in the latter source ('Einleitung zum 1. Satz, Sehr langsam' leading to 'Schnell und feurig'; and '2. Satz, Adagio') are the two movements missing from the score. Neither source is dated (though Nowak suggests '1879/80') but stemmatic evidence suggests that the score is the earlier. It is not clear whether the three-movement version represents Rott's final thoughts on the structure of the work rather than an abbreviated version prepared only for a specific occasion. Whatever the reason for their preparation it is unlikely that the parts were ever used in a performance: although there are numerous performing indications (tempo markings, bowing, phrasing, dynamics etc) in the

two upper parts, in the viola part these are fewer and in the cello part only the Adagio is annotated. Moreover, the parts bear no performers' markings. Evidence of an earlier stage in the work's evolution is provided by sketch material for the '1. Satz' and '2. Satz' in the parts and the '3. Satz' in the score. The coexistence of sketches for the Adagio and the Scherzo on the same bifolium<sup>20</sup> confirms the supposition that the Adagio is indeed the slow movement missing from the autograph score.

Stylistically the quartet reflects something of the range of influences to which Rott, like his contemporaries Mahler and Wolf, was exposed in Vienna during the 1870s: Schumann and Wagner in the first movement, Bruckner in the Adagio, Mendelssohn in the Scherzo and Bach in the Finale. The quartet displays evidence of a vital and wide-ranging musical imagination which, regrettably, never attained full maturity.

There will be no international conference, inauguration of a complete edition, or concert series to mark Rott's centenary. But perhaps by the time of the sesquicentenary of his birth, audiences and scholars will have been able to judge for themselves why the best of his music made such a deep impression on Bruckner and Mahler.

<sup>18</sup> Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Mus. Hs. 28.369

<sup>19</sup> Mus. Hs. 28.371. All except the first movement in the Violin II part are autograph.

<sup>20</sup> Mus. Hs. 28. 370