

SOMM
RECORDINGS



FRANZ SCHMIDT

THE BOOK WITH SEVEN SEALS

JULIUS PATZAK · OTTO WIENER

HANNY STEFFEK · HERTHA TÖPPER · ERICH MAJKUT · FREDERICK GUTHRIE

GRAZ CATHEDRAL CHOIR

MUNICH PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

ANTON LIPPE

SYMPHONY NO.4

VIENNA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

RUDOLF MORALT



FRANZ
SCHMIDT
1874-1939



CD 1

Symphony No.4 in C major (1933)

| | |
|--|---------|
| | [47:06] |
| 1 Allegro molto moderato – Passionato – | 14:57 |
| 2 Adagio – Più lento – Adagio – | 14:46 |
| 3 Molto vivace – | 7:29 |
| 4 Tempo 1° un poco sostenuto – Passionato – Tempo 1° (Allegro molto moderato) | 9:52 |

Vienna Symphony Orchestra, Rudolf Moralt conductor

Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln (1937) · *The Book with Seven Seals*

Aus der Offenbarung des hl. Johannes · *From the Revelation of Saint John the Divine*

Part One beginning

| | |
|--|--------------|
| | [32:21] |
| 5 "Gnade sei mit euch" (John) | 4:37 |
| 6 "Ich bin das A und das O" (Voice of the Lord) | 2:02 |
| 7 "Und eine Tür ward aufgetan im Himmel" (John) | 3:56 |
| 8 "Heilig, heilig ist Gott der Allmächtige" (solo quartet · chorus · John) | 5:50 |
| 9 "Und ich sah in der rechten Hand" (John · solo quartet) | 5:39 |
| 10 "Nun sah ich, und siehe, mitten vor dem Throne" (John · chorus) | 6:05 |
| 11 Organ solo | 4:09 |
| Total duration: | 79:27 |

CD 2

Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln

Part One conclusion

| | |
|--|---------|
| | [30:16] |
| 1 "Und als das Lamm der Siegel erstes auftrat" (John · chorus) | 2:14 |
| 2 "Und als das Lamm der Siegel zweites auftrat" (John · chorus) | 6:16 |
| 3 "Und als das Lamm der Siegel drittes auftrat" (John · solo bass · soprano & alto duet · chorus) | 4:11 |

| | | |
|---|--|------|
| 4 | "Und als das Lamm der Siegel viertes auftrat" (<i>John · tenor & bass duet</i>) | 3:47 |
| 5 | "Und als das Lamm der Siegel fünftes auftrat" (<i>John · chorus</i>) | 3:45 |
| 6 | "Und es wurde ihnen einem jeglichen gegeben ein weißes Kleid" (<i>John · Voice of the Lord</i>) | 2:43 |
| 7 | "Und ich sah, dass das Lamm der Siegel sechstes auftrat" (<i>John · chorus</i>) | 7:17 |

Part Two

| | | |
|----|---|-----------------|
| 8 | Organ solo | [48:01] 3:12 |
| 9 | "Nach dem Auftun des siebenten der Siegel aber" (<i>John</i>) | 2:55 |
| 10 | "Ein Weib, umkleidet mit der Sonne" (<i>John</i>) | 3:36 |
| 11 | "Und sie gebar einen Sohn" (<i>John</i>) | 2:10 |
| 12 | "Im Himmel aber erhob sich ein großer Streit" (<i>John</i>) | 6:16 |
| 13 | "Und als die große Stille im Himmel vorüber war" (<i>John · solo quartet · chorus</i>) | 11:31 |
| 14 | "Vor dem Angesichte dessen, der auf weißem Throne saß" (<i>John</i>) | 4:48 |
| 15 | "Ich bin das A und das O" (<i>Voice of the Lord</i>) | 5:08 |
| 16 | "Hallelujah!" (<i>Chorus</i>) | 4:12 |
| 17 | "Wir danken dir, o Herr" (<i>Male chorus</i>) | 1:56 |
| 18 | "Ich bin es, Johannes, der all dies hörte und sah" (<i>John · chorus</i>) | 2:14 |
| | Total duration: | 78:19 |

John: Julius Patzak *tenor* · Voice of the Lord: Otto Wiener *bass*

Solo Quartet: Hanny Steffek *soprano* · Hertha Töpfer *alto*

Erich Majkut *tenor* · Frederick Guthrie *bass*

Franz Illenberger *organ* · Graz Cathedral Choir

Munich Philharmonic Orchestra, Anton Lippe *conductor*

If most concertgoers today were asked to list the greatest symphonic composers of the 20th century, it is doubtful that the name of Franz Schmidt would be included or even considered. Yet in his time he was revered in Austria as their leading composer as well as an elite teacher, cellist, and pianist.

Why is he not afforded the same status as one of the greats to be mentioned alongside Mahler, Schoenberg, or Richard Strauss? A partial answer is the period of the Nazi absorption of Austria into the Third Reich and Schmidt's perceived association with the occupiers. While it is not my task (or intention) to prove or disprove the stories and innuendos, let me note that there is ample evidence from his contemporaries and friends that he was not complicit in espousing Nazi ideology. The worst that can be said is that he was politically naïve.

Franz Schmidt was born in Pressburg (now Bratislava, Slovakia) on 22 December 1874 into a musical family. His mother, a pianist and student of Liszt, was his first (and Schmidt says, best) teacher. His next teacher was Rudolf Mader, who, in addition to being Professor of Piano at the Vienna Conservatory, was also organist at the Domkirche in Pressburg. His close association with Mader at the organ convinced him at the time "that the organ was the grandest and most perfect revelation of music" (in later years Schmidt would compose a substantial corpus of organ works). Subsequent studies with the young organist at the Franciscan monastery, Father Felizian, gave him "the deepest and most enduring influence of my entire development as human being and artist" and the necessary knowledge and skill to pass the entrance examination to Bruckner's counterpoint class at the Vienna Conservatory.

Prior to his entrance into the Conservatory he had become disenchanted with the piano due to his studies with Theodor Leschetizky, whom he found musically lacking and demeaning. Leschetizky having told him that "someone with a name like Schmidt shouldn't become an artist". Disgusted, he vowed to "give up piano-playing completely!"; as we shall see, however, it would not be completely.

When the time came for him to enter the Vienna Conservatory as a counterpoint student Schmidt was told that it was impractical to study only a theoretical subject, but could choose it as secondary with a primary instrumental subject. He enrolled, he says, "without a moment's hesitation for the cello."

Unfortunately, at the beginning of the school year, Bruckner fell ill and Schmidt was transferred to the class of Robert Fuchs. As Fuchs was a follower of Brahms, their artistic sensibilities did not align. Schmidt left the class at the end of the first year and studied on his own while halfheartedly continuing his cello studies with Ferdinand Hellmesberger.

He did, however, progress enough to pass his final cello examination in 1896 “with excellence” and to earn a position in the orchestra of the Vienna Court Opera and, by extension, the Vienna Philharmonic; much to the astonishment of Hellmesberger who had pronounced him “not exactly gifted”.

After a honeymoon period as a member of this great orchestra, he said, “bitter drops began to fall into my goblet of joy.” Totally inadequate conductors began to show up who replaced “artistic authority with ‘severity’”. Schmidt’s colleagues, he felt, were not much better and he considered them to be no more than salaried slaves. Indeed, he says “... even in the world’s foremost orchestra real artistry is not at all required [...] purely mechanical precision and safety is the most important requirement...”

In 1897 Mahler became Director of the Vienna Opera Theatre. Initially it was a time of unparalleled splendor for the orchestra, but later also one of anxiety. Singers and conductors fled, as did two-thirds of the orchestra. Schmidt now found himself the most senior cellist in the section, and as such was appointed by Mahler to the principal chair.

By 1902 Schmidt had had his first success with the premiere of his Symphony No.1, winner of the 1900 Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde’s Beethoven Prize; this at the same time that Mahler was being noticed for his symphonies (of which Schmidt had a rather low opinion, at one point calling them “cheap novels”). The press tried to play one against the other but Mahler’s admiration of Schmidt’s imaginative cello-playing remained unchanged; initially, that is. Gradually, Mahler’s personal relations with Schmidt became “icily cold”. Even the conductors Franz Schalk and Bruno Walter made “disapproving, disparaging and spiteful comments” about his playing. This led to Schmidt’s refusing to sit in the principal chair (for which he never received commensurate pay), but also to a further 10 years, as he put it, of orchestral vegetation at the back of the section.

But change was coming. Since 1902 Schmidt had been professor of cello at the Conservatory of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, and when it was taken over by the state in 1912 his cello position was enlarged to include the chair of the piano department. Now he had the financial security to quit the orchestra and devote himself, once again, to the piano and composition.

In 1906 he completed his first opera, *Notre Dame* (not performed until 1914), and in 1913 his Second Symphony. In 1921 he finished composing his second opera, *Fredigundis*, and in 1928 his Third Symphony (which, in a competition sponsored by the Gramophone Company, won a special prize for the best new Austrian composition).

While his symphonic output is clearly in the structural mold of Schubert, Brahms, and Bruckner, his harmonic language, while showing influences of Strauss, Mahler, and early Schoenberg, is clearly his own. Once one becomes familiar with his style, his voice is instantly recognizable.

We now come to the works on these discs; the first recordings of both the Symphony No.4 in C major (1954) and the monumental cantata, *The Book with Seven Seals (Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln)* (1962).

Symphony No.4 was composed in a time of great personal tragedy: the death of his only daughter Emma in 1932. It is cast as one continuous movement but is easily heard as containing four distinct sections. The work starts with a theme in the solo trumpet that is so harmonically vague that first-time listeners must surely think they've entered the world of the Second Viennese School. Not until the 24th measure, when we hear Schmidt's unique harmonization, do we begin to realize that we clearly have not. This now fully illuminated theme sets the foundation for the whole work. It appears throughout, with the exception of the 2nd section, and is the glue that binds the symphony together.

The second section, "A requiem for my daughter", begins with a poignant cello solo that is surely Schmidt's own voice from his own instrument and forms the emotional center of the whole work. A funereal dirge midway through brings the section to an emotional climax. A final cello solo punctuated by muffled timpani leads to the 3rd section, a fugal scherzo that includes statements of the opening trumpet theme set against the scherzo's opening motif. However, the grief of the previous section is never far away. The quartet of horns, in counterpoint, ushers in the final section, which is in essence a recapitulation of the first section.

When we reach the final trumpet theme, we've come full circle. But an intervening world of deep emotion and experience has transformed it and we hear it with new ears. Schmidt described this theme as "the last music one takes with one into the hereafter, having been born and lived one's life under its auspices".

Hans Pfitzner called this symphony "nearer perfection than Bruckner, more honest than Richard Strauss, and more original than Reger". The premiere was given on 10 January 1934 with Oswald Kabasta conducting the Vienna Symphony Orchestra in the Vienna Musikverein.

Schmidt's failing health in the years following the composition of his Fourth Symphony (he suffered a near fatal heart attack in July 1936) prompted him to turn his thoughts to a major religious work. He eventually decided on a setting of eight chapters of the last book of the New Testament, *The Revelation of St John the Divine*, in Martin Luther's translation. One also wonders how much the shadow of impending world disaster helped draw him to this subject; surely the feeling of the time was that mankind was living on the edge of a volcano.

In the foreword to his score Schmidt wrote, "As far as I know, mine is the first attempt at a comprehensive setting of the Apocalypse. When I took on this huge task, it was clear to me that the prerequisite for this was to bring the text into a form that retained everything essential, if possible, and at the same time bring the most essential dimensions of the work into a size that could be comprehensible to the average human brain."

The work is not through-composed, as is typical of late Romantic dramatic works, but is constructed of clearly defined sections in the great oratorio tradition. Following the Prologue in which St John intones “Grace be unto you”, we hear the Voice of the Lord proclaiming himself the Alpha and Omega. There follows a series of tableaux that depict, in Part One, the opening of the first six Seals and the appearance of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and their visitation on the earth of war, pestilence, famine and death. Part One ends with a choral fugue that is unique in the literature for the harmonic complexity it imposes on the chorus.

Part Two opens with an organ solo (the second of two) that precedes the opening of the 7th Seal and the great silence in heaven. Here, providing respite from the preceding turmoil, Schmidt paints a pastoral scene of “a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet” who is to bear a son. But this is followed by a martial episode depicting the Archangel Michael casting the dragon and his followers onto the earth. More pestilence and destruction are followed by the sounding of seven trumpets (trombones in Schmidt’s score) announcing more global catastrophes. This scene culminates with a monumental quadruple choral fugue that surely must be one of the pinnacles of late Romantic counterpoint.

As in the beginning, the Voice of the Lord proclaims himself the Alpha and Omega. There follows the ecstatic chorus, “Hallelujah”, that crowns the oratorio in blazing heavenly glory. This, however, is not the end. An unaccompanied male chorus intones a solemn hymn of devotion in the style of Gregorian chant. The scene now reverts to the beginning, with St John proclaiming himself witness to all these things, followed by the final choral “Amen”.

The first performance of *The Book with Seven Seals* was given by Oswald Kabasta conducting the Vienna Symphony Orchestra (now the favoured orchestra of the new regime) and the Singverein der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in the Vienna Musikverein on 15 June 1938, three months after the Anschluss. It marked the 125th anniversary of the foundation of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, to which it was dedicated.

The performance of his *summum opus* was a triumph for Schmidt, but unfortunately not for his legacy. The Nazis had taken notice and had been aware of his stature as the leading composer in Austria. He was then presented with an offer he couldn't refuse: a commission for a cantata on NSDAP texts entitled *German Resurrection (Deutsche Auferstehung)*. He called the state's commission "a diabolical liberty that will probably finish me off". To his credit he left it unfinished, but that couldn't keep him from being associated with the Nazis when one of his students completed the work and had it performed, for the first and last time, under Schmidt's name.

With the time he had left he composed the Quintet in A major for piano (left hand), clarinet and string trio, intended for Paul Wittgenstein.

Franz Schmidt did not live to see the apocalypse he had depicted. He died suddenly on 11 February 1939 at his home in Perchtoldsdorf, 15 miles outside Vienna.

The unfortunate association of Schmidt's name with the Nazi regime persisted for decades after his death, as it still does to some extent today. However, since the latter part of the 20th century a growing number of prominent conductors (Neeme, Paavo & Kristjan Järvi, Franz Welser-Möst, Fabio Luisi, and Semyon Bychkov, to name a few) have begun to present his music to world-wide audiences. Hopefully this increased exposure will now allow Schmidt's name to be added to the list of the greatest symphonic composers of the 20th century.

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Reference:

Franz Schmidt Autobiographical Sketch: The Music of Franz Schmidt, Vol. 1 The Orchestral Music, by Harold Truscott, 1984, Toccata Press



LANI SPAHR – audio restoration engineer, producer and annotator – has garnered critical praise from *Gramophone* (“There are historic releases that make the grade because they are just that – ‘historic’ – and there are releases that make history because they are musically overwhelming. This set is both.”), BBC Radio 3, *BBC Music Magazine*, *Fanfare*, *The Sunday Times*, MusicWeb International, *Diapason*, *Classical Source*, *International Record Review*, and many others.

In 2016, BBC Radio 3 presented an hour-long documentary about his stereo reconstructions for *Elgar Remastered* (SOMMCD 261-4). His work can be heard on SOMM Recordings, Music & Arts, West Hill Radio Archive, Naxos, Boston Records, and Oboe Classics, and he has worked for Sony/France on historic restorations of the recordings of George Szell. In 2020, he was awarded an Honorary Membership of the Elgar Society for his work on the recorded legacy of Sir Edward Elgar.

Formerly a leading performer on period oboes in the US, he was a member of Boston Baroque and the Handel and Haydn Society Orchestra of Boston. In addition, he has appeared with many of North America’s leading period instrument orchestras, including Tafelmusik, Philharmonia Baroque, Tempesta di Mare, Apollo’s Fire, Washington Bach Consort, the American Classical Orchestra, Boston Early Music Festival Orchestra, Mercury Baroque, and many others.

Also a modern oboist, he was the principal oboist of the Colorado Springs Symphony Orchestra, the Colorado Opera Festival, the American Chamber Winds, and the Maine Chamber Ensemble and made his European solo debut in 1999 playing John McCabe’s Oboe Concerto with the Hitchin Symphony Orchestra in England.

He has served on the faculties of Colorado College, Phillips Exeter Academy (New Hampshire), and the University of New Hampshire Chamber Music Institute. He has toured throughout North America, Europe, and the Far East on period and modern oboes and has recorded for Telarc, Linn, Koch, Naxos, Vox, MusicMasters, L’Oiseau-Lyre, and Musica Omnia.

German sung text with English translation available
at somm-recordings.com/sevensealslibretto



First release (Symphony): [Epic] LC 3164
Recording (MONO): Musikverein, Vienna, 7 September 1954
Producer: Us van der Meulen

First release (Oratorio): [Amadeo] AVRS 5004/05 (2xLP)
Recording (STEREO): Stefaniensaal, Graz, January 1962

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Franz Schmidt in 1927, the year of his appointment as Rector of the Imperial Academy of Music and the Performing Arts (Vienna Conservatory).

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Austrian tenor Julius Patzak (in the role of St John)

Photo: Scherl;

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