CD Reviews

Bruch

Arminius Op. 43

Hans Christoph Begemann (Arminius) *bass*, Michael Smallwood (Siegmund) *ten*, Ursula Ettlinger (Priestess) *alto*

Rheinische Kantorei
Göttingen Symphony Orchestra
Hermann Max *cond*

CPO 777 453–2 (2 CDs: DDD: 89 minutes)

Of 100 published works by Bruch, the vast majority were for voice, from solo song to large-scale oratorio. In fact it was this last for which his reputation in Germany and elsewhere rested for most of his life, though enjoying nothing like the fame he posthumously earned with his first violin concerto. The decade of the 1870s was a good time for Bruch to make the secular oratorio his own. Hitherto the industrial revolution in Germany had spawned factories, whose more philanthropic owners formed choral societies from their workforce, particularly after German unification. Instead of courts, factories became a place for play, while aristocrats lost their employer status to factory owners. Bruch worked in the industrial heartland of the country. His was an unsettled career; first he held an appointment at courts such as Coblenz and Sondershausen, or he freelanced in Bonn or Berlin, then went for three years to Liverpool followed by seven at Breslau, and finally settled in Berlin as an eminent professor of composition at the Berlin Academy. Ever the conservative, his position in musical politics was one of total opposition to the New German School headed by Liszt and Wagner. His harmonic language never took risks (unlike Brahms), while his music derived wherever possible from folk melody. Bruch is at his best when at his most lyrical; dramatic moments are filled with clichés such as upward and downward rushing diminished sevenths, overactive string writing and dense block chords of winds and brass.

Bruch took the religious oratorio inherited from Handel and Mendelssohn and secularized its subject matter. With the first two, *Odysseus* (1872) and *Arminius* (1875), he reacted to current events, the Franco-Prussian War and the unification of Germany. His heroes were the Prussian Emperor Wilhelm I and Bismarck, for whom he substituted heroic figures of the past, but refrained from dedicating *Arminius* to either, as he feared accusations of medal-hunting. He went on to compose *Achilleus* (1885), *Moses* (as political not spiritual leader) (1895), and *Gustav Adolf* (1898). The themes of *Arminius* are Freedom and the Fatherland as perceived in the Germany of 9 AD, when the Cherusci tribe led by Arminius defeated the Roman leader Varus in the Teutoburger Forest. Arminius's German name was Hermann (Bruch's original title was *Hermannsschlacht* – 'Hermann's

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Battle'), and the year of composition (1875) saw the dedication of a 57 metre-high memorial to him on the site, while this recording was based on a performance given to mark the 2,000th anniversary of the battle. Bruch was not just inspired to write it to a text by a 24-year-old secondary school teacher (Friedrich Hellmuth, under the pseudonym J. Küppers), he considered it 'a patriotic and national exercise'.[1]

The first performance, using unpublished material, took place on 4 December 1875 at the Concordia Hall in Barmen before a full capacity audience of 600.[2] Its reception was restrained, enthusiasm probably generated more by the celebrations than by Bruch's work. Barmen's theatre had burnt down a week earlier, and instruments were destroyed, as well as the venue changed. Bruch conducted, the title role was sung by Georg Henschel, and the chorus master was Barmen's music director Anton Krause. It resulted in changes (one chorus wholly replaced by another, and details added to the *Waldszene* to give more 'local colour'). More performances during 1876 at Elberfeld, Bonn and Bergisch Gladbach also received only polite applause, so further changes were made to produce a shorter first part, the total work being reduced from 22 to 19 numbers. The definitive performance took place in Zurich on 21 January 1877 (Georg Henschel singing both male solos to cover for the indisposed tenor) followed by publication by Simrock later that year. These changes were made against a backdrop of Bruch hearing (i.e. admiring) Verdi's Requiem at Cologne and attending (i.e. loathing) Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* at Berlin. A successful performance by the Breslau Singakademie under Bruch took place on 18 March 1884:

> The success was not just good, it was brilliant; Breslau presented me with a triumph which I had not expected in the least from this somewhat cool city. … The chorus was splendid: 130 sopranos, 200 altos etc. It was just like a Music Festival. … The large hall, which holds 2000 people, was completely sold out. … it was one of the most brilliant evenings of my life, and its resounding success has completely consolidated my present position.[3]

Although Bruch insisted *Arminius* was no *Gelegenheitswerk* (written for an occasion), he regretted its disappearance in later years. Clearly exhilaration in the country eventually dissipated and took *Arminius* with it, but there were other reasons. It had been preceded three years earlier by his far better work, *Odysseus*, which had more orchestral colour and choral variety, while the soloists had far more grateful parts. The priestess in *Arminius* has nothing similar to Penelope's 'Weaving Aria', while the *Heldenbariton* Arminius (unlike Odysseus) has *no* aria at all, just recitatives and *arioso* sections. The chorus in *Arminius* has a big role, absent in only seven numbers, but most of it is block chords of hymn-like homophony, with just one welcome fugue. The orchestra only plays a prominent role in the introduction to the Forest scene (a poor imitation of Forest Murmurs from *Siegfried*), the organ thunders much, but regrettably there is no harp, normally a Bruch favourite. Otherwise the poor strings must work hard for little reward. Considering current activity further south in Germany, and Bruch's

[1] Letter to his publisher, Simrock, 3 Feb. 1876. Max Bruch Archiv, Musikwissenschaftliches Institut, University of Cologne.

[2] '*Arminius*, Oratorium von Max Bruch', *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* 52 (29 Dec. 1875): cols 817–21.

[3] As Breslau's music director 1883–90. Letter to Simrock 21 March 1884. Max Bruch Archiv, Musikwissenschaftliches Institut, University of Cologne.

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aversion to it all, it was bad timing in 1876 to be using such characters as Wotan, Siegmund, Freia and the Valkyrie. The work was performed in the USA at least five times during the 30 years 1883–1912, but Natalie Macfarren's translation hardly helped: 'Sigambrians all, men of mighty arm, ye Chaucians and Frisians, I call on all from th'Hercynian wolds to the shores of the wide-rolling sea, the home of the storm'.

Here, the conductor Hermann Max keeps it all moving and directs a cleanly responsive, if too distantly recorded, Göttingen Symphony Orchestra, but Hans Christoph Begemann (a bass, whereas Bruch calls for a *Heldenbariton*) 'hits' notes (*sfp*) instead of singing through them, losing both texture and line; Ursula Ettlinger is a mezzo-soprano not a contralto, so her lower register lacks richness and lustre; Michael Smallwood uses his voice, more lyrical than *Heldentenor*, with care and, in his death scene, sensitivity. The Rheinische Kantorei is too refined in quality. Bruch had choruses of 500 in mind when he wrote such works, whereas, according to the CD booklet, this choir numbers between 16 and 32. This works well in the three-part ladies' chorus accompanied by strings and three horns, but elsewhere the Romans and Cherusci were a rougher bunch than this. Criticisms aside, this recording is very welcome.

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Rossini

La gazzetta

Cinzia Forte (Lisetta) *sop*, Bruno Praticò (Don Pomponio) *bar*, Pietro Spagnoli (Filippo) *bass*, Charles Workman (Alberto) *bar*, Agata Bienkowska (Madame La Rose) *mezzo sop*, Marisa Martins (Doralice) *mezzo*, Simón Orfila (Monsů Traversen) *bar*, Marc Canturri (Anselmo) *bar*

Orchestra Academy of the Gran Teatre del Liceu
Intermezzo Choir
Maurizio Barbacini *cond*

Opus Arte OA0953 D (2 DVDs: LPCM stereo: 155 minutes)

Sung in Italian with English, French, German, Spanish and Catalan subtitles.

Gioachino Rossini and Giuseppe Palomba's *La gazzetta* (1816) is a rollicking comedy of mistaken identities, disguises and witty wordplay. Neapolitan merchant Don Pomponio advertises his daughter Lisetta's hand in marriage in the local newspaper to find her a husband efficiently. Lisetta is already in love with the innkeeper Filippo, but Don Pomponio dismisses him as an unworthy match for his daughter. When the first suitor, Alberto, arrives, he mistakes Doralice for the advertised woman and falls for her. He then announces to Don Pomponio that he wants to marry his daughter, and comedic confusion ensues.

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