

HANS PFITZNER (1869-1949)

Hans Pfitzner was born in Moscow of German parents, and taken to Germany at an early age. His music is purely German in that it is difficult to imagine its being conceived by a mind of any other nationality. Beyond that, he betrays, in his maturest work, little or no resemblance to the music of his immediate contemporaries.

Such opinion of his music as has been expressed outside his native country would appear to have begun with his earliest work and stopped there. He is considered, even by many Germans and others, as praise by the former and blame by the latter, to have his roots firmly in Schumann and Wagner, with a strain of mysticism to leaven the mixture which is, presumably, Pfitzner himself. This impression could be obtained only from a knowledge confined to the Violoncello Sonata, Op. 1, and then only in relation to Schumann, and *his* most superficial side. In this Sonata we have an excellent clue to one side of Pfitzner's mind, but only one. The material is quite untypical of the real Pfitzner but the technique of expression, particularly tonally, is mature, although the work was written while he was still studying at the Frankfort Conservatoire. This sure technique, with the accent on tonality, as subtly handled as by the master from whom he learnt it, Schubert, is one of the main witnesses to the unique and constant development of Pfitzner's work. Through the chamber-works it grows, from the Piano Trio, Op. 8, through the Op. 13 String Quartet, declared by Mahler to be a masterpiece, and the Violin Sonata, to the supreme height of the Piano Quintet and the C sharp minor String Quartet. From the Sonata point of view it is, with Reger, one of the two supreme demonstrations of the potency of the tremendous tonal revelations disclosed by Schubert. From the rhetorical, or static, viewpoint, it works wonders in his slow movements, even, in that of the Piano Quintet, achieving a supra-personal independence of mode in that music which is all peace and hard-won tranquillity is expressed in what is normally one of the blackest of minor keys.

If he has the technique with which to express, he has material well worthy of the means. With him, as with all the greatest composers, technique, and especially tonality, is one with spiritual power. He belongs to no school or clique, unless it be the unbroken line of sane creative worship of God, from whom music came. He has been called a reactionary, and so he is, as indeed are all men—some react from truth and some react to it. To the latter class belongs Pfitzner.

He has been a pungent controversialist, and there has been no lack of accusations of bad temper levelled against him. But some of the arguments he has had to contend with from men such as Busoni and Berg are puerile enough to make any man lose his temper.

And now he is dead, with the comfort of de-Nazification. Ultimately, he is seen as the more serious kind of revolutionary, who has seen far enough ahead to know when to swing backwards—out of this comes his depth and serenity, his conflict and his assured peace, and it is this primarily which will, when racial conflicts have died down, ensure his immortality, for human beings will always have need of such rich testimony.

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