

**Franz Schmidt** (1874 – 1939) was born in Pressburg, now Bratislava, a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and died in Vienna, a citizen of the Nazi Reich by virtue of Hitler's Anschluss which had then recently annexed Austria into the gathering darkness closing over Europe. Schmidt's father was of mixed Austrian-Hungarian background; his mother entirely Hungarian; his upbringing and schooling thoroughly in the prevailing German-Austrian culture of the day. In 1888 the Schmidt family moved to Vienna, where Franz enrolled in the Conservatory to study composition with Robert Fuchs, cello with Ferdinand Hellmesberger and music theory with Anton Bruckner. He graduated "with excellence" in 1896, the year of Bruckner's death. His career blossomed as a teacher of cello, piano and composition at the Conservatory, later renamed the Imperial Academy.

As a composer, Schmidt may be seen as one of the last of the major musical figures in the long line of Austro-German composers, from Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Bruckner and Mahler. His four symphonies and his final, great masterwork, the oratorio **Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln** (The Book with Seven Seals) are rightly seen as the summation of his creative work and a "crown jewel" of the Viennese symphonic tradition. *Das Buch* occupied Schmidt during the last years of his life, from 1935 to 1937, a time during which he also suffered from cancer – the disease that would eventually take his life. In it he sets selected passages from the last book of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation, tied together with an original narrative text. Although *Das Buch* fits squarely within the tradition of oratorio stretching back to Bach and Handel, and including such 19th-Century symphonic choral works as *Ein deutsches Requiem* and the Verdi *Requiem*, it is unique in its taking the full scope of St John's *Apocalypse* as its broad musical canvas: the vision of St John the Divine, in which the Voice of God proclaims that He is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, who will reveal those events of the end times to come. Over the course of the oratorio, Schmidt introduces vision of the throne of God in Heaven; the 24 Elders; the sea of glass; the Book of Life, sealed with the Seven Seals; the Lamb of God; the breaking of each of the Seals, and the riding forth of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse; etc. It is especially noteworthy that Schmidt manages to extract a dramatically consistent and self-contained story from the multifaceted narratives and convoluted theology of Revelation that fits the format of a roughly two-hour musical event.

The substantial musical forces wielded by Schmidt are as follows: first, the Evangelist, St John – a demanding, virtually non-stop narrative role for a Heldentenor; second, the Voice of God, a bass *arioso* heard at the beginning and end of the oratorio; third, the chorus, which along with the Evangelist is a continuous presence throughout, carrying the dramatic action of the oratorio in music of unparalleled passion, power – and great difficulty – including several imposing choral fugues; fourth, a quartet of SATB soloists; fifth, the pipe organ, which in addition to participating as a member of the orchestra, also appears in dramatic solos; and sixth, the full symphony orchestra itself, which in Schmidt's masterful scoring provides a vividly colorful counterpoint to the words.

The premiere was given in Vienna on 15 June 1938, with Oswald Kabasta conducting the Vienna Symphony and the Chorus of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde. Ever since its premiere, *Das Buch* has been in the standard repertory of German-speaking countries, despite its formidable performance challenges. The first American performance was in Cincinnati on 7 May 1954 with Julius Patzak in the tenor lead and Josef Krips conducting the Cincinnati May Music Festival. The first recording of the complete score – a rather poor mono "air check," alas – came from the August 1959 Vienna Festival, with the brilliant tenor Fritz Wunderlich singing the role of St John and Dimitri Mitropoulos conducting. This recording from 1962 is the first-ever stereo production under studio conditions and features the distinguished Austrian tenor Julius Patzak (not coincidentally a student of Franz Schmidt) in his finest role.