

BRUCH'S DIE LORELEY: A NEW LEASE OF LIFE

by Christopher Fifield

When Mendelssohn died in 1847, he left unfinished the setting of a libretto to his opera Die Loreley. This libretto - a revenge drama in which the heroine barter the power of love - had been written by Emmanuel Geibel (1815-84), a poet of considerable renown in his time, and a member of a group centred on Bettina von Arnim. Mendelssohn was a very reluctant composer for the theatre; having written an Ave Maria, a chorus for grape harvesters and the finale of Act I, he laid the work aside and death intervened.

The libretto was published in 1860 and read by the 22-year-old Max Bruch, who enthusiastically set about composing the music for the opera. Three years earlier his Op.1 had appeared, a setting of Goethe's text Scherz, List, und Rache, which had very successful performances in Cologne as a one-act opera. Bruch had made a considerable impact on the German musical scene when, as a boy of 14, he had won the coveted Mozart Foundation Scholarship from Frankfurt and used his award to study with Hiller, Reinecke and Breidenstein in his native Rhineland. Piano works, songs, two short choral works and his two string quartets followed his Op.1 before he began work on the setting of Geibel's text. This he did without asking the permission of the librettist, who much to Bruch's surprise refused to allow the composer to publish his as yet unfinished opera, saying that 13 other composers had also been refused the poet's blessing.

Bruch sought the help of all possible contacts, including Mendelssohn's brother Paul, to try and persuade Geibel to change his mind, but to no avail. Then at the beginning of 1862 he travelled to Munich at the invitation of Count Ludwig von Stanlein, who arranged for the young composer to meet Geibel and play the 'shortest and simplest bits of the opera - he is not very musical and might be frightened off by the more complicated parts'. All ended well, and the young Bruch left clutching the paper on which was written the longed-for permission. By the end of the year the work was complete and it now remained to find a venue for the first performance.

At first this was sought in Munich, but politics were against Geibel as a north German at the Court of Bavaria, and the Court Conductor, Franz Lachner, had no interest in Bruch. Not so his brother Vincenz,

Kapellmeister in Mannheim, to whom Bruch turned not only for the staging of his opera but for instruction in both instrumentation and conducting technique, both of which he was in time to master. The young composer showed his gratitude by dedicating the work to his mentor.

After the successful premiere on June 14, 1863, the work received further performances in many German cities, and further afield in Prague and Rotterdam. In 1887 the theatre director Staegemann revised the work by contracting the four acts to three for performances in Leipzig. Although this version was made with Bruch's permission, he was unhappy with the results and discouraged its use in further performances. It was not until 1916, however, four years before his death at the age of 82, that Die Loreley was staged once more. This happened in Strasbourg where Hans Pfitzner was music director. Pfitzner had long admired the work ('along with Don Giovanni, Der Freischütz and Hans Heiling') and as soon as he found himself with the power to conduct works of his choice, he was determined to stage Bruch's Op.16.

Bruch was the most conservative of composers, for as the river of music's development flowed past him during his long life, so he stayed on the banks with his roots firmly planted in the soil of mid-19th century German music. The influence of Hiller and other teachers of his youth stayed with him throughout his life, and it was natural for him to be wholly supportive of Brahms and equally opposed to Wagner and his adherents. The music of Die Loreley is derivative of Beethoven, Mozart, Weber and Spohr, the last two most noticeable in Act II, the Rhine Spirits' scene, recalling the Wolf's Glen scene from Der Freischütz and the visit by Faust and Mephistopheles to Sycorax and her witches in Spohr's Faust.

Bruch is essentially a composer of melody; his harmonic language, particularly in his youthful work, is sometimes naive and even crude in attempts at modulation. What is most effective is the choral writing, and it was as a composer of oratorios and shorter choral works that his fame was to spread. The work is skillfully orchestrated, with much emphasis on the woodwind writing, yet with a curious lack of percussion (a few cymbal strokes in the Rhine Spirits' scene).

Like Mendelssohn before him, Bruch did not have a happy or successful relationship with the theatre, and only one further opera appeared. This was called Hermione (Op.40, 1871) and was based on A Winter's Tale, but it did not enjoy the success of Die Loreley, a work worthy of revival and which one hopes will generate an interest in Max Bruch on the 150th anniversary of his birth in two years time.

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Christopher Fifield was the conductor of University College Opera's British premiere performances of Die Loreley (directed by Malcolm Hunter, Bloomsbury Theatre, London, February 1986) and is writing a critical biography of Max Bruch to be published by Gollancz in 1988.