

**WOYRSCH Symphony No. 2 in C, op. 60. *Hamlet Overture*, op. 56 • Thomas Dorsch, cond; Oldenburg St Theater O • CPO 777744 (61:33)**

Felix Woyrsch (1860–1944) rang a bell, just not the one I had in mind. A distant recollection of Woyrsch’s Symphony No. 1 in C Minor sent me searching the “W’s” in my collection, and sure enough, there it was, but not on Cpo, as I surmised it would be. Once that label latches onto an obscure composer, one can usually expect, for better or worse, an exhaustive, if not exhausting, succession of follow-up releases; so it surprised me to find that it was MDG that recorded Woyrsch’s First Symphony with Miguel A. Gómez-Martínez leading the Hamburg Symphony Orchestra as long ago as 1995. That CD, by the way, was reviewed by David Johnson in *Fanfare* 19:2.

Except for a hard-to-come-by Aulos Musikado disc of Woyrsch’s piano music performed by German pianist Rolf Plagge, I know of no other recordings dedicated exclusively to the composer’s works. Yet based on the opus number of his Second Symphony on this disc, it would appear that his output is not inconsiderable. If Cpo is true to form, I suspect we’re about to have a Woyrsch field day, for there are five more symphonies where the first two came from, a number of symphonic poems and overtures, a violin concerto, at least one string quartet, a string sextet, a piano quintet, oratorios and choral works, and at least three operas.

Woyrsch is yet another composer that can be identified as part of the extended Brahms circle, a group of admirers and followers that included the likes of Herzogenberg, Julius Röntgen, Richard Wetz, Friedrich Gernsheim, Franz Schmidt, Wilhelm Berger, and Felix Weingartner, among others. And like most or all them, Woyrsch was not above, or beneath, dipping his pen into the inkwells of Liszt and Wagner.

By all accounts, the essentially self-taught Woyrsch led a relatively quiet, uneventful life, holding various conducting and organ posts in and around Hamburg and eventually Altona (today a suburb of Hamburg) where he founded the musical organization that would become the Hamburg Philharmonic. Besides his admiration for Brahms, Woyrsch’s self-study led him to an appreciation of the great Renaissance polyphonists, an interest he shared with Brahms. He is quoted as saying, “I studied counterpoint with Palestrina, Gabrieli, Lotti, Lasso, Sweelinck, Schütz, Hassler, and Eccard, and often sat silently at the feet of the great Sebastian Bach. I learned composition from Beethoven, Mozart, and Haydn; I also owe much to Schubert and Schumann, as well as [to] the more recent masters, Brahms and Wagner. I learned orchestration from Berlioz...” And he goes on, failing to credit few great composers.

So what does this all add up to in the hearing of Woyrsch’s music? Well, the first thing I can tell you is that while his earlier C-Minor Symphony was definitely in the cast of Brahms, his second go at a formal symphony, the No. 2 in C major, completed in 1913, will come as a shock if you’re expecting it to sound like Brahms. Frankly, it’s kind of a mishmash of styles, but happily an engaging one, which even note author Andreas Dreibrodt observes is as much a contrast to Woyrsch’s First Symphony as Brahms’s Second is to his First.

I have no idea if Woyrsch may have heard some of Strauss’s tone poems, but there are more than a few suggestions here and there of Strauss’s coy and flippant wind passages in *Till Eulenspiegel*—that sort of backhanded flip-off—and the trumpet fanfares and alarms in *Ein Heldenleben*. A few bars of Liszt, Wagner, and even Berlioz pass by—Woyrsch wasn’t kidding when he said he learned orchestration from Berlioz; ghosts from the *Carnival* and *Corsair Overtures* skitter bemusedly across the page as if befuddled at finding themselves summoned to this strange séance.

It's hard to know Woysch's intentions. Did he mean for his symphony to be a lighthearted musical joke, or did he think he was being serious? We can only judge the results, which, to these ears, sound like the musical equivalent of an animated cartoon strip in which practically every 19th-century composer has a frame or two juxtaposed in incongruous, incoherent ways, and in which no theme or motive is developed for more than a few seconds at a time.

The prognosis improves with the slow movement, a lovely lyrical idyll, which begins by channeling Schumann and ends in a climactic peroration worthy of Bruckner.

The third movement adopts the the pastoral, easy-going, folksy Scherzo model of the type heard in Brahms's Second Symphony, but Woysch's melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic content sound nothing like Brahms.

Woysch's finale may be the best of the symphony's four movements, at least in terms of his staying on point (mostly) and pressing forward with his musical argument. But the concluding bars are an all-too-obvious and rather embarrassing attempt to cut and paste together the triumphant endings of Brahms's Second Symphony and Beethoven's Fifth.

According to the album note, Woysch's C-Major Symphony was enthusiastically received at its premiere by audience and critics alike. Its success, however, was shortlived. The First World War broke out within months of the premiere, and by the time the war was over, much had happened to alter Europe's musical landscape. Woysch was undeterred. He went on to write five more symphonies, but by then no one was paying attention anymore. I have no idea what Woysch's later works are like, but since he lived until almost the end of the Second World War, it's interesting to speculate what he made of Schoenberg, Webern, Hindemith, Poulenc, Milhaud, Stravinsky, Bartók, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Messiaen, and the early experiments of the various avant-gardists, assuming he heard them. It must have been unsettling for an autodidact never exposed to the diversity of students and ideas one experiences in a major conservatory setting and who never ventured far from his provincial home in Altona.

The final version of Woysch's *Hamlet Overture*—apparently, he worked on it for a number of years, making several revisions—reached completion in 1912. Without question, the overture is a far more interesting and satisfying work than the symphony. Perhaps freed from the strictures of sonata-allegro form and responding instead to a literary narrative, Woysch's natural instinct for the dramatic on a grand scale took flight. The score is brilliantly orchestrated and the music gripping and descriptive in ways that reminded me of Tchaikovsky's own *Hamlet Fantasy-Overture*.

Annotator Dreibrodt finds in Woysch's *Hamlet* "traces of everything that had taken place in music history up to the time the work was written." I don't think he means that literally, for one would seek in vain for traces of Hildegard von Bingen or Vivaldi, but if what he meant was a cornucopia of 19th-century styles and techniques, I would agree. Dreibrodt even identifies passages in whole-tone scales reminiscent of Debussy. Whatever influences may have exerted themselves upon Woysch's overture, it's a thrilling piece worthy of taking its place among the orchestral fantasy-overtures and tone poems of Liszt, Tchaikovsky, Dvořák, and Sibelius.

This is only my second encounter with the Oldenburg State Theater Orchestra—in 32:5, I reviewed another Cpo CD of works by Albert Dietrich featuring this same ensemble—and my first with conductor Thomas Dorsch. The orchestra is fantastic, possibly one of Germany's best kept secrets, and Dorsch whips the players up to a fiery but controlled frenzy in the overture.

Woysch's Second Symphony is a bit of a curiosity that still has me scratching my head, but it may make more sense on further listening. The *Hamlet Overture*, however, is masterpiece

material and well worth the price of the disc. Outstanding performance and recording. Cpo does it again. Recommended. **Jerry Dubins**