

## FRIEDRICH GERNSHEIM

David C F Wright DMus

Friedrich Gernsheim (17 July 1839–10 September 1916) was a German composer, conductor and pianist. Sadly, he has become known as the poor mans' Brahms which is unfair. There are some similarities with the music of Brahms but there were many composers of his time who lived under the shadow of Brahms who had created an idiom admired by many and, not just in Germany, but further afield as in the music of Parry.

Gernsheim's music, particularly in the symphonies, is noted as being affectionate, warm and lyrical, pleasant and fresh usually without sentimentalism.

He was born in Worms and given his first musical training at home under his mother's care, then, from the age of seven, studied under Worms' musical director, Louis Liebe, a former pupil of Louis Spohr. Friedrich's father, a prominent Jewish physician, moved the family to Frankfurt am Main in the aftermath of the year of the revolution, 1848, where he studied with Edward Rosenhain, brother of Jakob Rosenhain. Friedrich made his first public appearance as a concert pianist in 1850 and toured for two seasons, then settled with his family in Leipzig, where he studied the piano with Ignaz Moscheles from 1852. He spent the years 1855–1860 in Paris, meeting Gioachino Rossini, Édouard Lalo and Camille Saint-Saëns.



His travels afterwards took him to Saarbrücken, where, in 1861, he took the conductor post vacated by Hermann Levi. Thereafter he moved to Cologne, where, in 1865, Ferdinand Hiller appointed him to the staff of the Conservatory (his pupils there included Engelbert Humperdinck and Carl Lachmund).

Gernsheim then served as musical director of the Philharmonic Society of Rotterdam, 1874-1890. In the latter year, he became a teacher at the Stern Conservatory in Berlin, and, in 1897, moved there to teach at the Academy of Arts, where he was elected to the senate in 1897.

He was a prolific composer, especially of orchestral, chamber and instrumental music, and songs.

Some of his works tend to Jewish subject-matter, notably the Third Symphony, The Song of Miriam. His earlier works may show the influence of Schumann, and from 1868, when he first became friendly with Brahms, a Brahmsian influence is very palpable. Gernsheim's four symphonies (the first of which was written before the publication of Brahms' First Symphony) are interesting examples of the reception of Brahmsian style by a sympathetic and talented contemporary. Gernsheim's last works, most notably his *Zu einem Drama* (1902), show him moving away from that into something more personal.

His Opus 1 was the Piano Sonata in F minor. It is an accomplished piece and should be taken up by pianists. The first movement is thoughtful and has a religious feel, perhaps in accordance with his Jewish faith. The second movement is a lively scherzo in F while the finale has the religious feel again with some big chords and a simplistic ending

The first of his four violin sonatas is his Opus 4 and dates from 1864.

Opus 6 is his Piano Quartet no 1 in E flat which lasts just over half an hour. It is a very attractive work and not trammelled by Teutonic dullness. It is vital, often sparkling and very well conceived. It is, by

far, superior to many chamber works readily available on disc. It is an uplifting piece and would be universally admired if known.

The String Quartet no 1 Op 9 was the first of four string quartets which were admired in his lifetime.

A break from instrumental and chamber music is seen in Salamis Opus 10 for male chorus and orchestra. It was dedicated to his friend Max Bruch and is set in 39 pages of full score. The battle of Salamis was in 480BC between Greeks and the Persian Empire ruled by Xerxes.

The first of his sonatas for cello and piano is his Opus 12.

A fine Piano Concerto set in C minor was allocated as Opus 16. It plays for half an hour and is well written with the usual virtuosic elements ; it is melodic and immediately accessible although it lacks the stature of Liszt and Rachmaninov. However, it is better than many concertos available on commercial CDs.

The Variations for piano Op 18 was dedicated to Adrienne Picard of Paris. The 16 bar theme is a simple choral type theme with fourteen variations and a return to the theme which is extended and elaborate.

A spate of chamber works followed with the Piano Quartet no 2 Op 20, the String Quartet no 1 Op 25 of 1875, the Piano Trio no 1 and the String Quartet no 2, also of 1875.

By now, he felt he could undertake a symphony and his Symphony no 1 was completed in 1875 and is his opus 32. It has been claimed to be heavily influenced by Brahms' Symphony no 1 but that took 21 years to compose and was not finished until 1876, the year after the completion of the Gernsheim's Symphony no 1 in G minor. It lasts about 40 minutes and is in four movements. The work is strong, lyrical and melodic. The scherzo hints at the scherzo of Beethoven's Symphony no 7 and the finale is rather full of clichés but, nonetheless, it is a very attractive symphony.

His Violin Concerto no 1 in D Op 42 was dedicated to Saraste and is rooted in D major. It has three movements : Allegro non troppo with an interesting cadenza, Andante affettuoso which hovers between A major and F sharp major and the finale is marked Allegro energico e con brio and is back in the key of D.

Agrippina Op 45 is scored for mezzo, chorus and orchestra and is about the wife of the Emperor Tiberius. Her brother was Caligula and she later married her uncle Claudius. She was a beautiful and a scheming woman with many affairs and lived in a time of many deaths and assassinations.

The Symphony no 2 in E flat Op 46 dates from 1882 and is in four movements lasting half an hour. The opening allegro is rather tame. In fact, the symphony does not wake up until the finale which is worth waiting for.

Op 54 was Symphony no 3 of 1887 entitled Miriam or the Song of Miriam, the sister of Moses. It lasts half an hour and is generally very successful. Occasionally, it seems to lose its way but the four movements are compelling and gives the listener a satisfying experience. It is a rewarding work and should be in the repertoire of our finest orchestras. In contrast, there is a plethora of sub standard music played regularly and which is available on several CDs while fine works like this are not taken up. In one movement there is a strong hint of Mendelssohn, a fellow Jew, but none the worse for that since Mendelssohn is an underrated composer.

The last of his symphonies is the Symphony no 4 in B flat Op 62 of 1895 which has four movements: Allegro, Andante sostenuto, Vivace scherzando e energico and Allegro spirit e con gracioso. It was

published by Simrock in 1896. It is a superb piece with wonderful melodies, magnificent orchestration and is completely satisfying. It has the feel good factor and is an excellent Romantic symphony. It is vastly superior to many such symphonies regularly broadcast and available on commercial CDs. Its neglect is a gross injustice.

A very fine piano work is the Fantasie and Fugue Op 76 which begins Andante patetico and is certainly not easy to play and somewhat reminiscent of Beethoven's Op 22 sonata, also in B flat. There are moments of virtuosity and power and the work is eminently pianistic. The fugue is in G minor has a straightforward theme. It calls for large hands stretching tenths and double octaves but the work is impressive and there is, among other things, a good command of modulation. It is a colourful and rewarding work.

The succinct Cello Concerto in E minor. Op 78 enjoyed much success in earlier times and has recently been taken up by some prudent cellists such as Alban Gerhardt. It tends to be very slightly slushy but it is melodic and a worthwhile piece.

#### Major works

Symphony no. 1 in G minor, op. 32, 1875  
Symphony no. 2 in E• ó major, op. 46, 1882  
Symphony no. 3 in C minor ('Miriam' or 'Mirjam'), op. 54, 1887  
Symphony no. 4 in B• ó major, op. 62, 1895

Piano Concerto in C minor, op. 16

Violin Concerto no. 1 in D major, op. 42  
Violin Concerto no. 2 in F, op. 86  
Fantasy Piece for violin with orchestra, op. 33

Cello Concerto in E minor, op. 78  
Zu einem drama, op. 82  
Divertimento, op. 53

String Quartet no. 1 in C minor, op. 25  
String Quartet no. 2 in A minor, op. 31, 1875  
String Quartet no. 3 in F major, op. 51, 1886  
String Quartet no. 4 in E minor, op. 66  
String Quartet no. 5 in A major, op. 83  
Piano Quartet no. 1 in E• ó, op. 6  
Piano Quartet no. 2 in C minor, op. 20  
Piano Quartet no. 3 in F major, op. 47, 1883

Piano Quintet no. 1 in D minor, op. 35  
Piano Quintet no. 2 in B minor, op. 63, pub. ca. 1897  
String Quintet no. 1 in D major, op. 9  
String Quintet no. 2 in E• ó major, op. 89  
String trio op. 74.

Violin sonata no. 1 in C minor, op. 4, pub. ca. 1864  
Violin sonata no. 2 in C, op. 50, pub. ca. 1885  
Violin sonata no. 3 in F, op. 64, pub. ca. 1898  
Violin sonata no. 4 in G, op. 85

Piano trio no. 1 in F, op. 28  
Piano trio no. 2 in B, op. 37

Cello sonata no. 1 in D minor, op. 12  
Cello sonata no. 2 in E minor, op. 79  
Cello sonata no. 3 in E minor, op. 87

Piano sonata in F minor, op. 1

Fantasy and Fugue for Organ, op. 76

Introduction and Allegro appassionato, op. 38

Salamis, for men's chorus and orchestra op. 10  
Nibelungen wiederfahrt, op. 73  
Nornen wiegenlied, op. 65  
Agrippina, op. 77

Of these works, the symphonies, the cello concerto, the first cello sonata, the piano trios, two of the piano quartets, the two piano quintets, the violin sonatas, and the second string quartet have to date been recorded. They are worth investigating.

(1746)

---

© COPYRIGHT David C F Wright, DMus 1988, revised 2012 – This article or any part of it, however small, must not be copied, quoted, reproduced, downloaded or altered in any way whatsoever nor stored in any retrieval system. Failure to comply is in breach of International Copyright Law and will render any offender liable to action at law.