

GUSTAV MERKEL

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Yet another forgotten composer who wrote mainly organ music and therefore church music who many will say deserves to be forgotten. Church music and sacred music is despised by society.

I have struggled with Merkel's organ sonatas because of their difficulty and I must confess that they are somewhat Teutonic.

Gustav Adolf Merkel was born in Oberoderwitz near Zittau, Germany on 12 November 1827. His father was a musician and a church organist and his son displayed an early talent but his father had reservations about his son taking up a musical career. When his father died of severe gout Gustav felt free to pursue a career in music and his father's successor, a man called Dressler, arranged for the boy's musical education with Friedrich Kotte who took over the organists post. In 1854 Merkel entered the teaching training seminary at Bautzen after studying privately with Kotte. He lived near Kotte who accepted him as a member of his own family.



In Bautzen he studied with C E Hering, theory, composition, violin and piano and the student became very fond of the 'old man' and dedicated his Fugues Op 8 to him. The pupil also conducted the College choir and orchestra.

He had to earn a living and took up a teaching post at the orphanage of Neustadt-Dresden in 1848.

Dresden was an exciting place to live in. Wagner and Schumann were there and Liszt visited. They all influenced the sensitivity in Merkel.

In 1849 he became a member of the Dreyssig Singing Academy where he learned the masteries of Bach, Mendelssohn and others. The director was Johann Schneider the organist of the protestant church. Merkel became a close friend of the troubled Robert Schumann who wrote a motet for the choir.

Merkel became a teacher at the Burgerschule in Dresden in 1851 but this only lasted about two years. He took up private pupils to support himself and his mother and resumed serious studies with Schneider and Julius Otto, director of music at the Frauenkirche and piano with Friedrich Wieck. Schumann helped Merkel with composition as did K G Reissiger, the Court Opera conductor.

It was in 1858 that Merkel obtained his first organists post at the Orphanage Church. He gave organ recitals and that year married his finance, Anna and he won a composition prize which made him known. This was his Organ Sonata in D minor, Op 30. New compositions came thick and fast.

He fathered a son and a daughter as the first additions to his family.

In 1864 he applied for two organists posts but was initially unsuccessful. One was Catholic and Merkel was a Protestant and the other was under the rigid direction of the Crown.

However he did take on the post at the Catholic Hofkirche in August 1864 after the tragic death of his elder daughter some weeks before.

By 1865 he had health problems with a severe throat illness. He kept working until 1873 when his health almost completely collapsed. He took private pupils for the organ at the Conservatoire and composed a mountain of music. His Organ Sonata no 5 took six days to write.

In his last year he was pleased to welcome many visitors from the UK and the USA. He was awarded the Knights Cross, First Class from the State of Saxony for his services to music and his work on the Lutheran hymnbook.

Pain drove him to have operations on his throat and neck. His son, Johannes died of glandular fever at the age of 15 in 1875.

Merkel suffered severely and died in Dresden on 30 October 1885. He was almost 58 years of age. He was buried in the churchyard of Holy Trinity Church.

His main contributions to music were his nine organ sonatas all in minor keys and numbers 2 to 9 were written in the space of 19 years.

- 1 in D minor Op 30 for four hands
- 2 in G minor Op 42 of 1866
- 3 in C minor Op 80 dedicated to Julius Rietz
- 4 in F minor Op 115 of 1878
- 5 in D minor Op 115 of 1878
- 6 in E minor Op 137 of 1880
- 7 in A minor Op 140 of 1880
- 8 in B minor Op 178
- 9 in C minor Op 183 of 1885

He is an interesting composer not worthy of neglect and still admired by discerning organists

PDF of [Organ Sonata no 4](#) and [Barcarolle for piano](#)

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