

An unsung hero whose time has come (again!)

Hands up all those who have heard of **Friedrich Gernsheim**? Yes, I thought so! Unless you are a sad case like me, who looks hard for these rarities, you almost definitely wouldn't have chanced across him.



Photo of the composer Friedrich Gernsheim, 1892

The reason that he is a name lost to music is through no fault of his own or his music. The fact is that he happened to be German and Jewish. Under the Nazi regime all Jewish music, old and new, was banned and, if found, destroyed – added to which the composer's name would be deleted from musical history. Even dear Mendelssohn suffered this fate but, as his music was internationally known, scores survived. Not so for Herr Gernsheim who died in 1916. His music was destroyed and his name nearly eradicated from music history. Thankfully many of his scores survived in attics and library backrooms or cellars, and today his music is making something of a comeback.

He was a close friend and colleague of Brahms but was no slavish follower of Brahms's style. Gernsheim's music is rich, with wonderful melodies that stay in your head long after hearing them. The harmony twists and turns and – although of its time – is unique and bold. His style is life affirming and warming. Recently I have been re-acquainting myself with a couple of his major works, which I would highly recommend; fortunately they are available in recorded format.

His *Symphony No.1 in G minor Opus 32* is bold, and does suffer slightly from Brahms's influence, but was actually considered one of the great symphonies of its age. It's a work that reveals more of itself on each listening – so much so that you can become almost obsessed with its beauty and originality. Gernsheim wrote four stunning symphonies in all and, although the other three show more individuality and skill, it is always No 1 that intrigues me and draws me back, despite – or maybe because of – its imperfections.

The other work I'd highlight is a chamber piece. Gernsheim was in his element when writing for the combination of piano and strings, producing Piano Trios, Piano Quartets and Piano Quintets. It is *Piano Quartet No.1 in Eb Opus 6*, an early work, that to my ears is not just his finest composition but probably one of the 19th centuries finest pieces of piano and string writing.

Debatably it ranks alongside Schubert's "*Trout Quintet*", or the works of Beethoven, in scope and depth. Every movement has two contrasting themes that balance precisely and perfectly. Each melody is sublime; especially the opening movement's first theme (once heard I challenge anyone not to go around whistling it for days afterwards!); and the development of each is thorough but never slavish to logical argument. The music transcends its boundaries easily and the music becomes timeless and of no specific age – a rarity found also in Chopin.

So if you marvel at Mendelssohn or swoon at Schumann or are beguiled by Brahms (or just want something a little different) – then do give this unsung master a little of your time. Take a listen, and then listen again, then ... But be warned: soon you too will be hooked!