

Fritz Brun

Fritz Brun was born in Lucerne, Switzerland, on 18th August 1878. His father, a secondary school teacher, died when Fritz was eight years old. After early piano lessons, which enabled him to contribute to the family income with an engagement as a harmonium player at the Lucerne penitentiary church, Fritz continued to study theory under the organist Joseph Breitenbach. His subsequent piano teachers were Peter Fassbänder and Willem Mengelberg, the latter at that time a young musical director of the Lucerne City Conservatory. It was thanks to the composers Friedrich Hegar and Hans Huber that in 1897 Fritz Brun was granted a scholarship, allowing him to complete his musical studies at the Cologne Conservatory. There he studied composition and conducting under Franz Wüllner (who had also been Mengelberg's teacher) and perfected his piano technique under Max van de Sandt. Brun's First String Quartet was composed in 1898.

In 1901, after having declined a post as a piano teacher at the Zurich Conservatory, Brun settled in Berlin to work as a private "music maker" and teacher of Prince George of Prussia. This uncle of Emperor Wilhelm II, who at the same time acted as a friend and mentor to the young Swiss musician, owned a sizeable library covering various fields of interest. It was during his Berlin period that Brun composed his *First Symphony*, which, after having been read by Busoni, was performed in 1902 and was awarded the Paderewski Prize. After the Prince's death the following year, Brun travelled to London where, during a period of a few months, he survived as a private piano teacher and arranger of music-hall songs. Afterwards he returned to Germany, to teach the piano and music theory at the Dortmund Conservatory but, with the bankruptcy of this institution, he lost his job. Brun's *Piano Quintet* of 1902 was the last work he wrote outside his native country.

In 1903 Brun returned to Switzerland and settled in Bern. For six years he was engaged as a piano teacher at the local music school. In 1909 he was nominated chief conductor of the Berner Musikgesellschaft (Bern Music Society) and its ensemble, the Berner Stadtorchester (Bern Municipal Orchestra) and at the same time leader of the two choral societies, the Cäcilienverein and Berner Liedertafel. During his "conducting" Bernese years, his *Symphonies Nos. 2-7* were created and successfully performed. In 1912 Brun married Hanna Rosenmund, and from this union three children were born. In June 1941, after a memorable performance of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, Brun resigned from his post, but returned to Bern for occasional guest conducting and as a chamber music player. He had retired to his lovely Casa Indipendenza in Morcote, on the shores of Lake Lugano, in order to concentrate on writing music, principally the composition of his *Symphonies Nos. 8-10*. Fritz Brun died on 29th November 1959; his ashes were buried in Grindelwald, close to his beloved triptych of mountains, the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau, which had inspired him so frequently and which was among his favourite walking destinations.

Brun was a highly cultivated man who earned numerous honours and prizes. Among his friends were the Composers Hermann Suter, Hans Huber, Friedrich Hegar, Othmar Schoeck (the dedicatee of his *Second Symphony*) and Volkmar Andreae (Brun's fellow-student in Cologne), the conductors Hermann Scherchen, Artur Nikisch and Willem Mengelberg, the contralto Ilona Durigo, the sculptor Hermann Hubacher, and the German poet Hermann Hesse.

He was said to be of a very earnest and rather gruff character; his vehement outbursts of temper could suddenly give way to a benevolent, serene smile. This is just what we hear in his music. A writer with Freudian leanings would deduce that this may have arisen because the young Fritz had been sent to play in a penitentiary church, but it is more probable that his childhood experiences in general may have left some marks. But it is very understandable that a serious musician like Brun will have had many occasions to fight against ignorance, superficiality, amateurism and bureaucracy. These enemies, which also abound in the world of music, are enough to make strong and energetic personalities either more demanding than they are already, or simply frustrated. Listening to Brun's emotionally well-balanced symphonies, one feels that he could, at last, find his spiritual resting place.

These ten large-scale and demanding works make an overwhelming impression when we study, perform and listen to them over and over again.

The present writer does not hesitate to compare Fritz Brun to Wilhelm Furtwängler (who was eight years Brun's senior). This not only because of his similar artistic activities and eclectic, German symphonic-oriented musical language, but also because both became conductors after they had to postpone their initial plans to make their living as composers. Both Furtwängler and Brun wrote strong, almost autobiographical, self-analytical, sometimes hermetic symphonies, which only appeal to audiences with a feeling for rather tormented, uneasy musical dimensions, and are definitely not for the ears only. For these features, and for the fact that his music often describes nature and other titanic forces, Brun is also called a "Swiss Sibelius". In cases such as this, the listener has to open himself to dimensions that only music can reveal, more than any other form of art.

Brun's catalogue of orchestral works, apart from his ten Symphonies covering a period from 1901 to 1953, includes works as the symphonic poem *Aus dem Buch Hiob* (1906), *Symphonischer Prolog* (1942), *Ouvertüre zu einer Jubiläumsfeier* (1950) and *Rhapsodie* (1957, his last composition). For piano and orchestra there is a *Concerto in A major* (with symphony orchestra, 1946), a set of *Variationen über ein eigenes Thema* and a *Divertimento* (1944, 1954), both with strings. He also composed a *Concerto for Cello and Orchestra* (1947). *Verheissung* (1915), for mixed choir, organ and orchestra and *Grenzen der Menschheit* (1932) for male choir and orchestra are both settings of poems by Goethe. Three songs by Othmar Schoeck, from his Op. 20 and Op. 24, were orchestrated by Brun in 1917-19. Brun's chamber music output include four *String Quartets* (1898, 1921, 1943 and 1949, the latter inspired by themes from the inter-mission signals of Swiss Radio), a *Piano Quintet* (1902), two *Sonatas for Violin and Piano* (1920, 1951) and a *Sonata for Cello and Piano* (1952).

His vocal works include ten or so songs with piano accompaniment and an impressive collection of songs for unaccompanied or accompanied mixed, female or male choir, on texts by Goethe, Eichendorff, Uhland, Lenau, Mörike, Keller, some contemporary poets, or based on folk poetry. These were actually Brun's most frequently performed compositions and still appear on programs of choral societies today. Brun also collaborated expertly on various choral anthologies and collections of folksongs from the Canton of Berne. Swiss musicologist Willy Schuh has described Brun's musical style in a manner that has not been bettered: "To the listeners, his artistic world is not easily approachable. His works sound knotty and reserved at a first hearing, a struggle with the material and the form can be felt, and more than just perceptible sympathy and compassion: through a conscious build-up his individual and, with that, essential features of his musical language. Although it has traditional ties to the sound world of Brahms and Bruckner, it has something absolutely original to say, and in this case, also authentically Swiss." The sculptor Hermann Hubacher once wrote to Brun: "If one of your works is being played, I feel transposed to a world of your own, to a blossoming alpine meadow in between rumbling pieces of rock". And composer Peter Mieg took the view that "Brun's obstinate insistence on the form of the symphony and its way of treating musical thoughts does indeed appear as unique within Switzerland's musical life. This large-scale form is also a characteristic of his less numerous chamber music works."

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