

Othmar Schoeck (1886 - 1957) : a great Swiss composer

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A great Swiss composer

Switzerland has produced many prolific composers. Arthur Honegger (1892–1955) and Frank Martin (1890–1974) at least achieved international stature, and it is probably no coincidence that these two famous composers spent important years of their lives and formative development outside the frontiers of their own country. Heinrich Sutermeister achieved international success as a composer of operas. Yet, of all Swiss composers, the most independent and highly individual composer and personality is without doubt Othmar Schoeck (1886–1957).

During his lifetime Schoeck never lacked attention, certainly not in the Germany of the twenties and thirties, but the main significance of his works was limited to Alemannic Switzerland. Born in Brunnen on the lake of Lucerne, the son of a landscape painter, Othmar Schoeck spent almost his whole life in Zurich. He conducted the symphony concerts of the St. Gallen concert society from 1917 to 1944. Important first performances of his operas were held in Dresden and Berlin. The highly-praised Austrian première of *Penthesilea*, a stage work according to Kleist, given at the 1982 Salzburg Festival, could well have set the signals for greater international appreciation of his work.

Schoeck's presence today

Othmar Schoeck does not have to be rediscovered in Switzerland today, for there are not many composers of his generation who are so fully accepted here, on a 100th anniversary, as he. Not for him did the «post-mortem phase of obscurity» set in after his death in 1957 – this phenomenon so often observed, which can all at once threaten even the most highly-extolled of artist-musicians. No, Schoeck's presence has remained constant in many performances over the last three decades. Since 1959 the Othmar Schoeck Society



has existed to consolidate their efforts by its active commitment to the perpetuation of his living afterlife. All Schoeck's works are available in print, separately, and a complete edition is planned. Many of his compositions are also obtainable on some twenty disc recordings, and important new productions such as *Lebendig begraben* (on Gottfried Keller's poem cycle) and the opera *Massimilla Doni* are planned for the near future. For years, Schoeck has been a rewarding subject from the musicological viewpoint. He does not have to be «acquired» by a younger generation, but he should perhaps be differently assessed. However, the present-day phase of nostalgia, of recontemplation,

of a new appraisal of received values could well be highly propitious for the reception of Schoeck's world of sound.

Almost from the beginning, Schoeck stood between the times: for the traditionalists he was too daring; for the modernists, far too retrospective. However, with the changed attitudes to the latter part of the 19th century, the cliché of the «Last of the Romantics» could well give Schoeck's music a new radiant energy of its own. It is true that as a composer of songs he is not easily translatable and his hundreds of *lieder* were hardly suited to wider international diffusion. As with hardly any other Swiss composer of his generation and our time, Othmar Schoeck is distinguished, and distinctive, for his strong attachment to his native country.

The field of tension

Like many another artist, Schoeck felt the strained relationship between «province» and «world». It was not that he by any means wished to creep away to his own fireside but, as a person and as an artist he went through his greatest experiences at home rather than abroad.

Today, consciousness of one's own ideas, their restriction to a narrower, more intimate realm, need no longer be looked upon as a disadvantage. Today in film, literature and the fine arts young Switzerland is willing and glad to be reminded of its roots and forefathers. We are only waiting, then, for the day when Schoeck's music will be extolled world-wide, at international festivals and elsewhere, for its «Helvetianism» – a Swissness which is manifested not only of course in *Lebendig begraben*, *Ghaselen* and *Sommernacht* (to Gottfried Keller's poem) but also in very many *lieder* and songs for the piano. ●

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