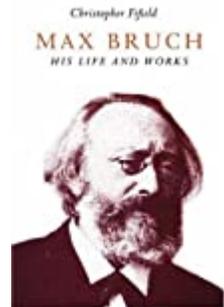




Christopher Fifield. *Max Bruch: His Life and Works.* Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2005. 399 pp. \$37.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84383-136-5.



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Forever in the Shadow of Brahms

Christopher Fifield is one of those rare practicing musicians who also write about music, in Fifield's case extensively. He has an affinity for musicians (Max Bruch, Kathleen Ferrier, Hans Richter) whose achievements, once widely acknowledged, look smaller the more time goes by and who are usually championed by reminding the reader, as teacher to a child with an attention deficit, of what they once were. Writing about such musicians, whether the overshadowed *Kleinmeister* or the formerly feted performer, is the musicologist's version of *Sunset Boulevard*. Lacking the *noire* decadence of Gloria Swanson in the starring role, such efforts rarely do more than provide the basic academic service of bestowing on some unfamiliar facts the relative immortality of hardcover. Still, because Fifield is himself a well-known conductor and hence a champion in an influential position, his reissued biography of Max Bruch (1838-1920), with its thorough account of all Bruch's published works, including lucid and helpful discussions of their strengths and weaknesses and an appendix on their availability in modern recordings and new editions, may also encourage renewed performance of the lesser known works. In Bruch's case, those would include pretty much every-

thing he ever composed, except for the two violin concerti (G minor and D minor), which one can routinely find tucked into concert programs between the main draws.

But this book ought also to encourage further consideration of the way musicologists approach the lives of their protagonists. The questions that this biography—well written and researched, sympathetic, eloquent in its defense of the worthiness of this life for biographical treatment—raises (perhaps more urgently for historians) have to do with Bruch's obscurity itself, the reasons for his success in his own time, the pathos of his growing sense of irrelevance, the energetic and largely unsuccessful efforts he and his children made to restore his significance, indeed, the very need for Fifield's biography at all. The life of Bruch represents an opportunity to bring musical culture and in particular the canon-building work of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into sharp relief, from the perspective of—let's face it—a loser, whose worthiness or unworthiness to be remembered is perhaps less interesting than the historical circumstances under which he flourished and was forgotten. Fifield's biography, because it is so fully documented and makes such

excellent use of Bruch's letters and other contemporary writings, helps us to understand the problem of canonicity but never challenges it, indeed implicitly adopts its narrative patterns. As a result, Fifield traps himself into portraying and defending this man *as* a loser in the race to immortality. He thus misses an opportunity to write another kind of biography, in which Bruch's considerable accomplishments would appear not forever in the shadow of Brahms but as a constitutive part of a vibrant musical culture that is now, alas or thank goodness, no longer ours.

The first sign of this trap comes with his framing of the narrative as one in which Bruch shows early signs of great musical gifts—if not quite a child prodigy, then at least a precocious young composer. First of all, we should note that the notion of artistic precocity, with its strong connection to *Budding Genius*, was itself one of the hothouse flowers bred by nineteenth-century artistic culture, and it reflected an awkward kind of compromise between convention-busting romanticism and family-centered biologism (consider Freytag's *Die Ahnen* [1873-81] or Mann's *Buddenbrooks* [1901]). Its *locus classicus* was of course Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, biographies of whom had begun to proliferate by the mid-nineteenth century, casting their shadow on the careers of many a nineteenth-century musician. Bruch, son of an unmusical Prussian chief of police in Cologne and a mother who was “musical through and through” (p. 18)—one could write a whole essay on the nineteenth-century attribution of musicality or lack thereof to an individual—had already by age fourteen been recruited to the Mozart legend, by which any young German boy who showed an early affinity for composition and musical performance must be compared to young Wolfgang. In 1852, Bruch was awarded the Mozart prize of the Frankfurt-based Mozart Stiftung and through it was able to study with Ferdinand Hiller, a highly cultured composer and music director with well-maintained connections to every musical center in Germany and beyond. By this time, Bruch had composed some instrumental works, and within a few years he composed an opera, several oratorios and several more instrumental works. Still sporting the Mozart halo, Bruch left Cologne in 1858 for the vibrant musical city of Leipzig. One would think this step minor, even in the nation of provincials, but nevertheless it was notable enough to occasion a farewell concert and much speechifying about his soon-to-be brilliant career.

Bruch did not do so badly for himself out in that wide world. Over the course of his long life, he continued to compose, pretty much unabated, producing by

the time of his death in 1920 scores of secular and sacred oratorios, songs and chamber works, three operas and three symphonies—about a hundred published works altogether. He held music directorships at courts (Koblenz and Sonderhausen) and in cities (Liverpool, Breslau and Berlin). He went on an American tour. He directed singing societies in a number of places, taught, advised and made money off the continuing sales and performances of his most popular works (though not from the G minor violin concerto, despite its overwhelming popularity—a matter of having naively sold its copyright for a small sum of money at an early stage in his career). But within the narrative structure of the almost famous composer, whose musical career had begun so auspiciously with the Mozart Prize, none of this was enough, neither to Bruch himself, who seems to have walked around in a constant low simmer of rage over slights to his reputation and inadequate appreciation of his musical gifts, nor to Fifield, who must, perforce, explain Bruch's own insecurities as well as the objective fact of the failure of his works to become canonical.

The explanation he comes up with, not surprising given how the narrative began, is that, first of all, Bruch never did fulfill the promise of his youth; second, he had an exact contemporary who did (Johannes Brahms); and third, he actively resisted the trends of the time, which were Lisztian and Wagnerian. By resisting the Wagnerian flow, by preferring a well-shaped melody to a daring harmonic development, by failing “to adapt to the startling changes which were taking place around him” and staying behind “to defend the bastion of mid-nineteenth-century Romanticism” and “fly the flag of Mendelssohn and Schumann,” he condemned himself to becoming “an increasingly isolated figure and an equally embittered one” (pp. 12-13). The visible sign of this marginalization was Bruch's lifelong wanderings, “forever traveling, forever worried about money, forever weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of either being a free lance artist or having a permanent position” (p. 55).

Fifield's explanations for the disappointing trajectory of Bruch's career are convincing and well supported by a richly documented narrative of his relationships with fellow musicians, patrons and employers, as well as illuminating but brief discussions of the reception of his work. Still, one could imagine altering the emphasis, away from history's unforgiving judgment and especially away from Bruch's own constant dissatisfaction with his life. Instead of focusing, ultimately, on what Bruch was not or what he failed to become—not Wagner, a lesser version

of Brahms or Schumann or Mendelssohn—one could explore more fully the undoubted success that his compositions enjoyed among large swaths of the German music-loving, music-practicing public. An intriguing model would be Siegfried Kracauer's 1937 attempt at the "biography of a society," *Jacques Offenbach und das Paris seiner Zeit*, an account (only quasi-fictional) of the artist *in situ*.^[1] Kracauer tried to analyze Offenbach's "genius" as "a feel for congruency." "Just at the time he [Offenbach] was making his first public appearances," Kracauer writes, "the Paris that was to adopt him as its own, the Paris of the Boulevards, was coming into being. His environment leaped to meet him, and he kindled his genius on it. Such a fortunate coincidence might be described as luck, but luck of that kind is an attribute of genius."^[2]

In Bruch's case, we might still hesitate to use the concept of genius, and Bruch's acclaim was never as overwhelming as that enjoyed by Offenbach. Yet the reasons for even that are worth considering, for Bruch's work was embraced in a musical culture that had no Paris but dozens of smaller cities, each with their orchestras and opera societies and above all their amateur music associations, starting with the enormous mixed-voice choirs and blossoming out into dozens of active performing and practicing groups of music enthusiasts in every city and town. This was the culture that had developed in the decades before Bruch's birth, in which his mother's "through and through" musicality had expressed itself, and this was the culture that "leaped to meet him," not only in his precocious, Mozartian stage but throughout his life. Works like *Frithjof* (1864), an oratorio based on a thirteenth-century Icelandic saga which the Swedish poet Esaias Tegner had reworked as an epic poem in 1820, were rapturously received by the public: "[i]ts success can be measured by the deafening applause after each scene, and the recall of the composer by the public three times at the end, and further by the verdict and good wishes of the orchestra during the rehearsals, confirmed to me by verbal reports from eyewitnesses and by the famous soloist," warbled one reviewer after its first performance in Vienna (p. 54). With its hearty male voice chorus, its melodic female and male solos and its "straightforward and splendid" (Bruch's musical mother's words) character, *Frithjof* offered a wholly un-Wagnerian glimpse of Valhalla. Nor did the advent of the *Ring* in 1876 make any difference to the continuing popularity of *Frithjof* among members of the German music-loving public. Bruch went on to compose dozens more

such works that could and were snapped up by amateur and professional choruses and that ranged eclectically across time and nationality for their content—to mention just a few, *Die Birken und die Erlen* (1859; songs of the German forest for male chorus, female chorus and various soloists); *Salamis: Siegesgesang der Griechen* (1868; for soloists and male chorus); *Normannenzug* (1870; unison male voices and solists); *Odyseus* (1872; another huge success, written for soloists and mixed chorus); and a series of heroes from *Arminius* and *Achilleus* to *Gustav Adolf* and *Leonidas*.

Fifield does not entirely avoid discussion of the social and cultural context for Bruch's tireless composing, but his remarks are scattered and often superficial—the old chestnut of Bismarck awakening a slumbering nationalism gets offered up a few times but without much conviction or interest. Fifield says enough about context to suggest that his final judgment on Bruch, that he displayed a "failure to adapt" to a changing musical world, represents only a partial truth. A reviewer should not chastise a book for not being something else, and the return of Fifield's excellent biography to the ranks of books in print is very welcome indeed. Yet to quote Kracauer again, the key to understanding the "enigma of his oeuvre," which in Bruch's case might be crudely put as the enigma of our near complete inability to understand the appeal of a secular oratorio based on the Norman conquest, is to explain it "rationally from the standpoint of his surroundings."^[3] That is perhaps a task for the historian, and it could be a fascinating one.

Notes

[1]. The work, much criticized at the time by friends like Adorno for its failure to deal with the music in any meaningful way, is now available in translation. See Siegfried Kracauer, *Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of his Time*, tr. Gwenda David and Eric Mosbacher, with foreword by Gertrud Koch (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2002). Max Bruch told a family anecdote about Offenbach in his unpublished *Childhood and Youth on the Rhine*: "One day a small, nimble businessman appeared in my father's office with a tall boy, and said, 'Allow me, dear honoured Chief of Police, to introduce my son to you, he plays the cello very beautifully—a great talent—now he must go to Paris'" (Fifield, p. 18).

[2]. Kracauer, *Offenbach*, pp. 14, 91.

[3]. Kracauer, *Offenbach*, p. 13.

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