

DLA Doctoral Dissertation Theses

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Techniques and Motifs used to Illustrate the Text in Franz Schmidt's
Oratorio *Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln*

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I. Research Preliminaries

My doctoral dissertation examines the oratorio *Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln* (The Book with Seven Seals) by Franz Schmidt, a music composer little known in Hungary. In 2008, when as a choral director I became acquainted with the work, I was surprised to discover only two Hungarian-language studies had been written on it. Máté Mesterházi's *Cantus vitae, Cantus mortis* and Péter Laki's *Schmidt Ferenc, Ernst von Dohnányi és a Budapest-bécsi útelágazás* [Ferenc Schmidt and Ernst von Dohnányi and the divergence of Budapest and Vienna] were helpful in the early stages of my research. Mesterházi and Laki both write about Schmidt's Hungarian roots and his transformative experiences while living in Pozsony [Bratislava]. Both draw parallels between Schmidt and his fellow composer Dohnányi. Mesterházi analyzes the "Alleluia" movement through the lens of Hungarian, German, and Slovak influences on Schmidt.

At first the composition and its text, the Book of Revelation, which has rarely been set to music, attracted my attention. Nicolas Harnoncourt's recording (with the Vienna Philharmonic) and the conductor's comment ("an incredible text set to incredible music") heightened my interest. In his comments on the score ("Einige Bemerkungen"), Schmidt wrote, "To the best of my knowledge, I am the first to have experimented with creating a unified composition for the entire Revelation of John."

Preparing the *The Book with Seven Seals* for performance involved a long and difficult period of rehearsals, during which I carried out in-depth analysis of the piece. The composer organized the stages of the Apocalypse into centuries and employed technical devices that for me were new and innovative. All this helped in meeting the challenges of performing the oratorio. Although the performance of the *Book with Seven Seals* in the 2003 Budapest Autumn Festival met with unfavourable criticism, I decided to advocate its continued performance in Hungary. After two successful concerts in Austria, with the help of my colleagues, I managed to have the work performed in June 2008 at the Bartók + Europe International Music Festival in Miskolc.

II. Sources

Inspired by the two Hungarian-language studies on Schmidt, I requested more literature on the subject from Máté Mesterházi. Thus seven years ago, with Mesterházi's assistance, the Music Academy's library acquired several essays and other studies published by the Franz Schmidt Society, which I used during the course of my research. A primary source for the first chapter of my dissertation was the *Apokalypse*, published by Carmen Ottner, which examines several musical scores composed for the Book of Revelation and other eschatological texts. Markuss Grassl's *Das Jüngste Gericht im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert* and Ulrich Konrad's *Apokalypsis cum figuris musices. Musikalische Annäherungen an die Offenbarung Johannes* helped me to place the main subject of my thesis in context.

In the second chapter of my dissertation, I used several sources dealing with the 19th-century musicalization of apocalyptic texts, including Wolfram Steinbeck's "*Eine edlere Apokalypse*". Zu Spohrs Oratorium "*Die letzten Dinge*", Wolfgang Dömling's *Weltuntergang und Musikfest. Friedrich Schneider und sein Oratorium "Das Weltgericht"*, and Gerhard J. Winkler's *Himmlisches Jerusalem wilhelminisch- Joachim Raff's Oratorium "Welt- Ende- Gericht- Neue Welt."* I was aided in outlining the structural organization of the oratorio by the analyses found in Schmidt's *Einige Bemerkungen zum Text des Oratorium "Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln"* and Philip Weller and Robert Pascall's "*Vom Standpunkte des tiefreligiösen Menschen und des Künstlers*": *Textverarbeitung und rhetorisch- szenische Darstellung in "Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln" von Franz Schmidt*. As the title of Weller and Pascall's work suggests, Schmidt himself provided the key points with which to approach the oratorio.

In my analysis of the musical motifs used to illustrate the text I relied on Walter Obermaier's edition of Gerhard J. Winkler's *Anmerkungen zu Schmidts Oratorium "Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln"*. During the course of my work the Bible and the collection of texts assembled by members of the Budapest Youth Chorus were indispensable. Among my secondary sources were monographs on the composer: Carl Nemeth's *Franz Schmidt. Ein Meister nach Brahms und Bruckner*, Norbert Tschulik's *Franz Schmidt*, and *Die Autografische Skizze Franz Schmidts*, an excerpt from the composer's autobiographical writings, published by Otto Brusatti.

III. Method

I felt it was important to balance analyses of Schmidt's oratorio with examinations of the *Book of Revelation* and other oratorios based on the text. I directed my research to the musicalization of texts related to the Apocalypse and the Last Judgment, beginning with the birth of the oratorio in the 17th century and closing with the premiere of Schmidt's composition and the end of World War II. Without aiming for completeness, I strove to compare the musical tableaux of Schmidt's composition to the more than 300 years of oratorio production.

I contrasted the sort of musical illustration we find in Schmidt's *Book of Seven Seals* to Jean Francaix's composition *Apocalypse selon Saint Jean* and Frank Martin's *In terra pax*. In my dissertation I tried to highlight Schmidt's use of devices reminiscent of those used by the pioneers in the great German tradition and his new approach to presenting the visions of the Apocalypse. I made a particular effort to demonstrate his skills in creating tension. In the chosen movements I studied his use of tonal connections to illustrate the text with respect to orchestration, dramatization, form, and the theory of harmony. Schmidt's use of symbols, which faithfully follows the text of the Book of Revelation, also receives attention. For several reasons I chose to focus on the opening of the five seals. The literature on Schmidt's oratorio thus far has dealt little with the seals, although they reveal more clearly Schmidt's style which is full of contrasts, yet also contains an abundance of subtle shifts.

IV. Results

My discovery of Schmidt's grandiose oratorio and the musical treatments of the Book of Revelation – the most unusual of the books of the Bible – led me to write my dissertation. I attempted to attract attention to Schmidt's oratorio by briefly summarizing the history of oratorical treatments of the Apocalypse, since such a summary would highlight the originality of Schmidt's work. My dissertation places greater emphasis on the study of musical

depictions of Biblical calamities than other studies to date. As my research shows, Schmidt presents to us the details of the visions of the Book of Revelation in an exploratory manner. I followed and continued Gerhard J. Winkler's analysis when I highlight Schmidt's inventive concept. Through the lens of conductor and choral director I attempted to accentuate the multi-functionalism of the chorus and the vocalists. The recurring motives and other themes in *The Book of Seven Seals*, in contrast to other studies, are demonstrated with examples from music history, especially with details from the oratorios by Jean Francaix and Frank Martin. In the appendices to my dissertation I collect the motives, themes, and other characteristic elements into groups. My goal is to draw greater attention to a composer who is three-quarters Hungarian, so that his master work should take its deserved place in the repertoire of oratorios performed in Hungary.

V. Documentation

1st programme: Franz Schmidt: Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln
20 October 2008, Friedenskirche, Linz

Featured:

Junge Philharmonie Salzburg

Budapest Youth Choir (choral director: Gerenday Ágnes)

Vasas Art Ensemble Vass Lajos Choir and Chamber Choir (choral director: Csaba Somos)

Bernhardt Berchtold - Johannes (tenor)

Radu Cojocariu - Voice of the Lord (basso)

Brigit Heindler (soprano)

Monika Waeckerle (alto)

Sebastian Fuchsberger (tenor)

Werner Bind (basso)

Conducted: Elisabeth Fuchs

2nd programme: Franz Schmidt: Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln
21 October 2008, Elisabethkirche, Salzburg

Featured:

Junge Philharmonie Salzburg

Budapest Youth Choir (choral director: Ágnes Gerenday)

Vasas Art Ensemble Vass Lajos Choir and Chamber Choir (choral director: Csaba Somos)

Bernhard Berchtold-Johannes (tenor)

Radu Cojocariu - Voice of the Lord (basso)

Brigit Heindler (soprano)

Monika Waeckerle (alto)
Sebastian Fuchsberger (tenor)
Werner Bind (basso)
Conducted by: Elisabeth Fuchs

3rd programme: Franz Schmidt: Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln
Bartók + Vienna 2009, International Opera Festival, Miskolc
11 June 2009 House of Arts, Miskolc

Featured:
Miskolc Symphonic Orchestra
Budapest Youth Choir (choral director: Ágnes Gerenday)
Vasas Art Ensemble Vass Lajos Choir and Chamber Choir (choral director: Csaba Somos)
Drummond Walker - Johannes (tenor)
Johannes von Duisburg - Voice of the Lord (basso)
Zita Váradí (soprano)
Lúcia Megyesi Schwartz (alto)
Tibor Szappanos (tenor)
Krisztián Cser (basso)
Dániel Erdélyi (organ)
Conducted by: László Kovács