



You are here: [Home](#) » [Music](#) » A Lamb, a Book, and the Apocalypse at Bard Summerscape, August 22, 2010

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Franz Schmidt's *Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln* (1935-1937), *The Book with Seven Seals*

Christiane Libor, *soprano*

Fredrika Brillembourg, *mezzo-soprano*

Thomas Cooley, *tenor*

James Taylor, *tenor*

Robert Pomakov, *bass-baritone*

Kent Tritle, *organ*

The Bard Festival Chorale, James Bagwell, *Choral Director*

The American Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Leon Botstein, *Music Director*



THE LAST JUDGMENT
And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life. ... Revelation 20: 12

Gustave Doré's The Last Judgement

Tonight's much-anticipated and touted performance of little-known Austrian composer Franz Schmidt's *magnum opus*, *Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln* (The Book with Seven Seals), was nothing short of startling, and more than a bit revelatory. Being fashioned as a dramatic oratorio, the mystifying and unsettling text of *The Revelations of St. John the Divine* becomes, in Schmidt's hands, a terrifying and sensational virtuosic musical juggernaut. It was clear from Leon Botstein's program notes that this evocatively dramatic work is one of his favorites; in his program notes, he wastes no time in dubbing it one of the twentieth-century's greatest choral works.

Undoubtedly, few in attendance had ever heard this work before, except perhaps for those who witnessed the U.S. premiere nineteen years ago, which was also under the enthusiastic baton of Mr. Botstein. Thus, comparisons are difficult: one must take tonight's performance as both a rarity and a labor of love. It is a work that boldly depicts the mysterious and horrific unfolding of the Revelations in a high-definition immersion of orchestral and choral color. Schmidt somehow manages to breathe modernism into his tonal Leviathan without cliché, without any clear affinity to Berg, Schoenberg, Mahler, Hindemith, Strauss, or Debussy, and without any other simple musical reduction. That doesn't mean that *Das Buch* doesn't sport derivation and influence. However, the discretely applied modernist elements are elusive in their pedigree. Dissonance and bitonality frequently underscore the dark frisson of the text. Its stylistic eclecticism (almost encyclopedically inclusive) dazzles: Bach, Mendelssohn, Schütz, Bruckner, Berlioz, and even Elgar are suggested in Schmidt's work. Mr. Botstein's orchestra played with an incisiveness that riveted one for the nearly two hours of the performance. The choir, asked to portray at different times the terrified voices of Mankind in the midst of pestilence and war, a Greek chorus witnessing the Apocalypse (in horse-galloping rhythms), or the shrill avengers demanding the Last Judgment, was given a herculean task unlike anything heard before at Bard. James Bagwell, the choral director, is someone who inspires the best from his singers. During intermission, Mr. Bagwell confessed to me that preparing *Das Buch* was something of an ultimate challenge for him. Without doubt, chorus members were the real stars of tonight's work: as the link between the evangelical reflections of the soloists and the jaw-dropped thrall of the listeners, their virtuosity in executing Schmidt's contrapuntal tapestry and arresting declamations, unmercifully driven like the wild spectral beasts that are evoked, was a preternatural accomplishment.



Composer, Franz Schmidt

It is a work of great effect – a quality that thrills, but at times disappoints, when Schmidt falls into risible literalism. The pictorial evocation of the Four Horsemen and the grim splendor of the Last

Judgment were potent. Baroque elements (owing much to Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*), fugal writing, creepy orchestral effects, spectral organ solos, and moments of earth-shattering grandeur made an ultimate indulgence for our present Age of Anxiety. Schmidt's adherence to the heterogeneous and irrational was a sign of the times in Germany and Vienna in the late 1930s. It is impossible to forget that the achievements of rational thought (the upending revolution of relativity and quantum physics) and clear-headed analytic thought that had created a disturbing new Age of Reason (and Materialism) stood contemptuously side by side with the ravages of greed, industrialization, and economic hardship in the wake of World War I. During the writing of *Das Buch*, Moritz Schlick, the founder of the Vienna Circle, was murdered. His *Wiener Kreis* had been a bastion for modernist intellectuals who sought truth through clarity and reason. However, forces crying for the return of the irrational sought transcendental answers to our existence that had eluded the seeming elitism of science. So, philosophical underpinnings had begun to change. The cryptic, symbolic, and expressionistic were seen both as a counterbalance and an inevitable consequence. Beginning in the 1920s, artists turned back to Nietzsche, and forward to Husserl, and then, in particular, to Heidegger: thinkers who rebelled against both the analytical and the idealism of the past. New reasons for existence were sought: from Heidegger's existentialist thought, in his highly influential *Sein und Zeit*, life's motto would be "Ours is not to Reason or to See, Ours is but to Do and Be." By turning to *The Book of Revelation*, Schmidt was, I believe, turning away from the Enlightenment and towards the poetically opaque. The irrational is never more grandly on parade than in this cryptic appendage to the New Testament. Yet, obscurity seems contrary to the very definition of "Revelation," or "uncovering," also related to the Greek *Ἀποκάλυψις* – Apocalypsis – and even *λόγος* – logos (making clear, or making manifest). However, the "clarity" is not attained by human reason. The ever-elliptical symbolism of the God's Scroll of Judgment, the Seven Seals affixed to the scroll, the creatures at God's throne, and the birth of the New Jerusalem through an eschatological battle, for some, are narratives of Biblical babble, and for others a divine *poesis* and prophecy providing keys to the mankind's future.





Albrecht Dürer's The Dragon with Seven Heads from the Apocalypse of St. John

For Schmidt's audience in the 1930s, the drawing of analogues from the Apocalypse to contemporary Germany and Austria must have been a profound exercise. The steady encroachments of Nazism in its most fervent and rhetorically blossomed state had to have been on the minds of Schmidt and his audience. Choral societies promoted the early Germanic masters (like Bach and Schütz), but did so as a thinly veiled gesture to co-opt their heritage for a confessional crutch during a period of complicity with the thugs on the horizon. How *Das Buch* made sense to its audience, and in what ways Schmidt's effective *Grand-Guignol* was an intended commentary, can only be conjectured. It is disturbing, though, to think of why Schmidt was drawn to the eschatology during these years and of what contemporary groups he saw as forces for good or evil. Was Schmidt playing into the angst as sported by Nazi propaganda, or was he warning the pious and good of a very real tribulation at the hands of barbarians? Those questions constantly nagged at me throughout the concert.

Part of the feeling of alienation comes from Schmidt's decision to focus on the Revelation as a narrative tale, rather than an exegesis. In the plot we have a host of frightful characters (like the beast with seven heads and ten horns) and a steady crescendo of events – the successive opening of the Seals – that create tension and wonder. Schmidt brilliantly and effectively exploits the text by a score of great heterogeneity: homophonic narratives are juxtaposed with dissonant organ solos; wildly contrapuntal sections (quadruple fugues!) dwell alongside chant-like monodic passages. There were, as well, beautiful vocal duets. Harmonically and texturally, the piece never sits still. The eerie effects with brass and percussion left one feeling unnerved.



Albrecht Dürer's Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

The opening fanfare outlines a tritone – an interval of three whole tones – and is a reminder of both the Trinity and, in traditional Renaissance theory, the “devil in music.” Also, a whole tone series lacks a putative beginning or end, thus emphasizing the opening words of the Lord, “I am the Alpha and Omega,” which was sung by bass-baritone Robert Pomakov. His richly dramatic voice enhanced the Wagner festival last year, and his lordly timbre was one of the evening’s most memorable performances. Evangelist and narrator Thomas Cooley was given the most challenging part, one that clearly “makes or breaks” such a long oratorio. His impeccable tone, articulation, and expressivity were winning; I could not imagine a better performance. Tenor James Taylor, heard earlier that day in a work of Hanns Eisler, had an attractive and perfectly controlled high register that contrasted well with Mr. Cooley’s earthier sustained narratives. German soprano Christiane Libor, also heard in Berg’s *Der Wein*, is a tremendous talent: her beautiful voice, strongly projected and focused, complemented her expressive concentration and engrossing stage presence. American mezzo-soprano Fredrika Brillembourg joined Ms. Libor in *Das Buch*’s most beautiful moment, a duet that follows the opening of the Third Seal. This lament for two beautiful female voices was reminiscent of Bach’s “So ist mein Jesus nun gefangen” from the *St. Matthew Passion*. With the opening of the Sixth Seal, the barrage of earthquakes, fire, falling stars, and floods inspired Schmidt’s Bosch-like canvas of fugues, choral declamations and whispers, galloping rhythms, near atonal organ solos, and general sonic chaos. Only when the Seventh Seal is opened does Schmidt return to a purely triadic and pastoral affirmation of the tonal. After this respite, the Seven Trumpets herald the great Celestial Battle with more colorful illustrations sustained by some of the finest brass playing I’ve ever heard from the ASO. After extended and highly contrapuntal choral sections proclaiming God’s dominion, the raising of the dead, and the casting of those into the Lake of Fire, there is a return to Mr. Pomakov’s reverberant, and now so assuring, “I am the A and the O.” A grandiose Hallelujah with full ensemble is immediately followed by a quiet, contemplative plainchant of Thanksgiving. Finally, the opening fanfare returns, Mr. Cooley’s “I am the man, John,” and a grand “Amen” closes the oratorio.

Schmidt’s choice of the Bible’s most arcane scripture for such a monumental and prodigious setting naturally makes one wonder about a discrepancy between reach and grasp. It is clear, however, that *Das Buch* is one of the most *effective* choral works of the past century. It has an immediacy that rivals Orff’s warhorse, *Carmina Burana*, exceeding it in both depth and musical wizardry, but lacking the appealing, albeit more superficial, glister. The poetic obscurities inherent in John’s text, along with the socio-political context of Schmidt’s setting, make *Das Buch* all the more alluring, and all the more unsettling. The pure conviction and virtuosity of the ASO, Mr. Botstein’s vision, the Bard Festival Chorale, and Mr. Bagwell’s hard work have graced Schmidt with a real musical resurrection. I’m sure I’m not alone in eagerly seeking a CD performance. For repeated listening, perhaps, Apocalypses are best enjoyed at home.



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