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THE Arts



JOSHUA BRESLIT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Notre Dame From left, the singers David Pershall, Corey Bix and Lori Guilbeau with the American Symphony Orchestra at Carnegie Hall.

From a Forgotten Composer, A Familiar Romantic Story

It is often clear why works that arts organizations might describe as forgotten gems have gathered dust. But Franz Schmidt's two-act opera "Notre Dame" proved a worthy find during a vibrant concert performance by the American Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Leon Botstein, on Sunday afternoon at Carnegie Hall.

The music of Schmidt, who was born in 1874 in what is now Bratislava, Slovakia, was overshadowed in his lifetime by that of late-Romantic composers, including Mahler. Schmidt's lush idiom, like Zemlinsky's, was deemed dowdy in early-20th-century Vienna, and Schmidt's reputation was later tainted by his support for the Nazis.

Schmidt's music has recently been championed by conductors including Franz Welser-Möst and Fabio Luisi, but has rarely been performed outside Austria or Germany. The composer was a fine pianist and cellist who studied composition with Bruckner in Vienna and was principal cellist in the Vienna Court Opera under Mahler's baton. His Hungarian heritage can be discerned in his score for "Notre Dame," which had its premiere in Vienna in 1914.

Based on the Victor Hugo novel, with a libretto by Leopold Wilk, the work certainly has plenty of operatic ingredients: a beautiful Gypsy, a hunchback, a scorned spouse, love-struck ad-

mirers, suicide and attempted murder.

Grandly symphonic, the lush Romantic score, which at times echoes Brahms, Strauss and Wagner, features stirring orchestral interludes, swirling strings, vivid melodies and hefty Brucknerian choruses, sung with panache here by the Collegiate Chorale.

Various leitmotifs appear throughout, including liturgical music with organ for the Archdeacon, and rippling harp passages for Esmeralda, the kind and innocent Gypsy whose charms cause the downfall of her admirers and her own death. The orchestra sounded in fine form, playing with a vigor and polish that conveyed all the dramatic arcs of this colorful piece.

Some lengthy Wagnerian monologues are less effective, and there is an overlong love duet between Esmeralda and the officer Phoebus. But a cast of strong singers helped make the case for this neglected work.

The rich-voiced baritone Stephen Powell sang with power and authority as the Archdeacon, and the bass Burak Bilgili performed expressively as Quasimodo. Lori Guilbeau wielded her lovely soprano to fine effect as Esmeralda. The baritone David Pershall, the tenors Robert Chafin and Corey Bix, and the alto Tami Petty also sang well.

Perhaps, as with the Zemlinsky operas revived by Mr. Botstein, audiences will soon be able to enjoy a staged production of "Notre Dame."

**VIVIEN
SCHWEITZER**
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