

## **Ernst von Dohnányi: A Musical Renaissance Man**

Among the dominant figures in Hungarian music during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, pianist, composer, and conductor Ernst von Dohnányi still is regarded as the most versatile musician to emerge from that country since Franz Liszt. Born in Bratislava in 1877, he first took piano and violin lessons from his father and then learned rudiments of music theory from a local church organist who was a family friend. By the time he entered the Budapest Academy in 1894 for further instruction in piano and composition, he already had composed a Mass, a string sextet, three string quartets, and several songs and piano pieces. In 1895 Brahms himself organized the Vienna premiere of Dohnányi's Piano Quintet in C minor, Op. 1, and in 1899 his Piano Concerto, Op. 5 won the Bösendorfer Prize for piano composition. In the meantime, in 1898 he made his performing debut in London under the baton of Hans Richter; his astounding skills at the keyboard earned him wide recognition throughout the musical establishment.

Having received his diploma from the Royal Academy and briefly continued his piano studies, he concertized extensively in Europe and the United States over the next decade. After a stint as professor of piano at the Berlin Hochschule (1905 to 1915), he returned to Budapest as director of the Royal Academy, hoping to reverse the tendency of Hungarian musical talent to seek green pastures elsewhere in Europe. In committing himself to the cause of then lesser-known Hungarian composers such as Bartók and Kodály, he changed the landscape of Hungarian music forever. These years were busy indeed: in addition to his own activities as a composer and as a professor of piano at the Budapest Academy, Dohnányi maintained a hectic performance schedule including more than 100 annual appearances in Budapest alone.

During the 1920s, having been ousted from the academy in 1919 by the new fascist regime, Dohnányi conducted the Budapest Philharmonic, was guest lecturer and conductor at American universities, and served as director of piano and composition at the renamed Franz Liszt Academy in Budapest. From 1931 he was music director of Hungarian Radio, and from 1934 again conducted the Budapest Philharmonic. However, when the Second World War erupted, Dohnányi resigned from the Academy rather than conform to its anti-Semitic demands. He also refused to dismiss members of the Budapest orchestra on racial or religious grounds, and eventually disbanded the Philharmonic to avoid such action. Nonetheless, after 1945 his influence under the prewar regime was held strongly against him by the Russians, and he left as a political exile, his music being banned in Hungary for more than ten years. He taught in Argentina and in 1949 accepted a position as composer-in-residence at Florida State College in Tallahassee, becoming a United States citizen in 1955. He

continued to perform and conduct on a limited basis until his death in New York City in 1960.

Although his reputation as one of the century's greatest pianists is secure, Dohnányi's fame as a composer has lessened. He forged a Brahmsian style that reflected little interest in the folk music that inspired Bartók and Kodály. While his output includes entries in virtually every genre (including three operas and five symphonies), it is his masterful chamber music, particularly the three string quartets and two piano quintets, which remains vital to the repertoire. **The Modigliani Quartet has chosen his String Quartet No. 3 in A minor as the closing work in their program on April 18, 2015, in the Briarcliff High School auditorium.**