

## E. von Dohnányi, Sextet, Op. 37



Dohnányi was born in Pozsony (Pressburg in German), Austria-Hungary (now Bratislava, Slovakia) on July 27, 1877. He was baptized Dohnányi Ernő Jenő Frigzes, but he used the German version of his name, Ernst von Dohnányi, everywhere outside of Hungary. Dohnányi began his musical studies with his father, an amateur cellist and professor of mathematics, and eventually he entered the Budapest Academy of Music as a student of piano and composition. A teacher of Béla Bartók and Sir Georg Solti, Dohnányi caught the attention of Johannes Brahms at the young age of 18 with his *Piano Quintet No. 1 in C Minor, Op. 1* (1895). At the invitation of Brahms' close friend and violinist Joseph

Joachim, Dohnányi taught at the Hochschule in Berlin from 1905 to 1915. From 1918 to 1944, he was Music Director of the Budapest Philharmonic - Orchestra, in 1931 he was appointed Music Director of the Hungarian State Radio Orchestra, and from 1934 to 1941, he was the Director of the Budapest Academy. As a world-renowned piano virtuoso, a leading conductor, a major composer and the Director of all three of Hungary's major music institutions, Dohnányi was perhaps the leading musical figure of his generation in Hungary.

As the Nazis took control of Hungary, gradually at first in 1941, and then completely with an overnight invasion in March 1944, Dohnányi lost nearly everything that had taken him a lifetime to build. First, in 1941, he resigned as Director of the Academy in protest of the anti-Jewish laws that came into effect following the treaty between Hungary and Germany of that year. Then in the spring of 1944, the Nazis insisted that he dismiss all Jewish musicians from the Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra. He refused, and on May 11, he responded by disbanding the entire orchestra. Around this same time, his son Matthew, a Captain in the Hungarian Army, was captured by the Russians and died in captivity due to typhus or possibly starvation. His other son Hans, the father of well-known conductor Christoph von Dohnányi, was executed for collaborating in a plot to assassinate Hitler. On November 24, 1944, Dohnányi escaped from the heavily bombarded Budapest on the back of a truck along with his soon-to-be third wife Ilona Zachár and her two children from a previous marriage. For six months he lived in Vienna until the Russian bombardment began there, and for the next three years, he lived in Neukirchen, Austria far away from the battlefronts. The war ended in May of 1945, one month after he moved to Neukirchen.

As a "Displaced Person" from an enemy country, life in Neukirchen was very circumscribed and unpleasant, despite the beautiful surroundings. Things got worse in October of 1945 when the BBC World Service ran a story accusing Dohnányi of being a war criminal who collaborated with the Nazis. The allegations were quickly disproved and by December 20, Dohnányi received a letter from the Hungarian Minister of Justice stating that he was not considered to be a war criminal and he was not listed on any such official lists. Despite being cleared by the U.S. Military and the Hungarian government, this outrageous rumor persisted, spread and followed Dohnányi for the rest of his life and even after his death. Dohnányi's travel was restricted and he had only limited conducting and concert engagements under the auspices of the Allies. At this point, Dohnányi tried to emigrate to various countries including Denmark, England, Canada, United States and Australia, but his efforts were thwarted at every turn. The false allegations, claiming that he was a Nazi collaborator who had handed

over Jewish artists to the Gestapo, had spread everywhere. (The report was completely false, and there never was a case brought against him.) He then contacted a former concert agent of his who lived in Argentina. The agent immediately offered him concerts and arranged for him to settle there with Ilona and her children. Despite continuing financial hardship, and numerous problems with visas, Dohnányi and Ilona finally set sail on March 10, 1948, for a new life in a new land. His debut concert in Buenos Aires was a big success, but immediately afterwards, the ugly rumors surfaced and he quickly found it difficult to perform there as well. Faced with diminishing concert prospects in Argentina, he accepted a position as Music Director of a new music school in Tucumán. Then in November, Dohnányi left for a concert tour of the United States. Although the false accusations followed him there too, he enjoyed the tour nevertheless. In her biography of Dohnányi, Ilona later wrote, "He enjoyed meeting people, teaching enthusiastic and talented youngsters, and giving concerts. Above all, however, he enjoyed the comfort, high standard, and security of the American way of life." It was at the end of this tour, on February 17, 1949, that Dohnányi and Ilona married in a private ceremony in New York. The following week they flew back to Argentina. While initially excited about the prospects of his new job in Tucumán, the reality of the living conditions, the lack of financial support for the school's goals, and growing conflicts with the school's Dean led Dohnányi to accept the third of three offers he now had from universities in the United States. This was not an easy decision for him, because there was a large Hungarian community in Argentina to which he had become very attached. He lamented, "In a way, Argentina has become a second Hungary to me. When I leave, I shall have the feeling that I have left Hungary forever." In October 1949, Dohnányi left Argentina for Tallahassee, Florida where he taught piano and composition at Florida State University School of Music for the next eleven years.

Dohnányi and Ilona became United States citizens in 1955. His students at FSU included prominent American composer Ellen Taaffe Zwilich and his grandson, Christoph. He continued to concertize and record to the end of his life, conducting a concert at FSU just three weeks before he died. Then on January 21, 1960, at the age of 82 and in excellent health, he went to New York for what, as fate would have it, were to be his final piano recording sessions. The life of Ernst von Dohnányi, which was so triumphant in youth and so hard, painful, and humiliating in the twilight of his life, ended on 9 February 1960 at 10:40 P.M. in the Madison Avenue Hospital.

Dohnányi wrote the *Sextet Op. 37* during his recovery from a thrombosis that immobilized him for several months shortly after he became Director of the Budapest Academy in July of 1934. The premiere of the *Sextet* took place on June 17, 1935 with Dohnányi at the piano. The *Sextet* is quite symphonic in its scale and sound. The music clearly shows the influence of Brahms, Johann Strauss, and late 19th century Vienna, with some 1920s and 30s popular and humorous jazz elements superimposed. Dohnányi's post-romantic flavour sports a wide palette of harmony, rhythm, melody and sweeping romanticism similar in some regards to the music of his contemporary film composer Erich Korngold. The *Sextet* is even more distinctive, with a strong first movement prominently featuring the horn, and a slow movement which builds up powerfully, before the two lighter movements which follow. The delicately pointed Scherzo leads to an exuberant finale, with jagged cross-rhythms, comic false entries and deliciously surreal waltz-references. It is played breathtakingly fast, with the waltz parodies wittily highlighted, and the fun of the final 'wrong-key' cadence nicely pointed under the direction of the cellist.