

## Psychiatry in music

### Hans Rott: 'Brahms had stored dynamite on board!'

Martina Ballerio and Enzo Emanuele 

Austrian composer Hans Rott's (1858–1884) life and artistic legacy have gained significant attention and admiration recently. At just 16 years of age, Rott unveiled his compositional prowess with his debut piece, *Symphony for Strings*, in 1874. Later that year, he joined the prestigious Vienna Conservatoire, where he refined his organ skills under avant-garde composer Anton Bruckner, whose unconventional style contrasted with Johannes Brahms' traditional classicism. Rott then studied composition in Vienna alongside Gustav Mahler, immersing himself in a musical environment distinct from Brahms' 'pure music'.

In 1878, Rott faced a series of significant setbacks. In October, he lost his organist position at Vienna's Piarist Church, which had a heavy impact on his finances. Relying solely on private music lessons and loans, Rott struggled financially. Amidst these hardships, he fell in love and sought stable employment in Vienna, hoping to secure financial stability before marriage. Eager to make a mark on Vienna's musical scene, in 1880 Rott showcased his *Symphony in E major* – an expansive, hour-long *magnum opus* that foreshadowed the brilliance of Mahler's symphonies – entering it into the prestigious Beethoven Prize competition, aiming to establish a flourishing career in Austria's capital. In a perhaps naive and impulsive bid to guarantee his success, Rott took it upon himself to personally present his symphony to Brahms, a prominent member of the prize committee. Tragically, the encounter proved devastating for Rott as Brahms harshly dismissed his *magnum opus*, callously asserting that he possessed no talent and should relinquish any aspirations in the realm of music. Brahms' dismissal of the *Symphony in E major* dealt a crushing blow to Rott, who harboured deep resentment towards the renowned composer.

Facing financial constraints, Rott reluctantly accepted the position of musical director for a choral society in Mühlhausen, Germany, a city located about 700 km from his cherished Vienna. While moving to Germany by train, Rott's mental condition experienced a drastic shift when he menacingly wielded a firearm at an unsuspecting fellow traveller, whose only action was igniting a cigar. Rott's delusion led him to believe that Brahms had planted dynamite on the train, and the lit cigar would trigger a catastrophic explosion. The incident revealed how Rott perceived Brahms as a persistent, threatening presence in his life.

A few months later, Rott was admitted to a psychiatric asylum, where he would spend the final 4 years of his tragically short life. Plagued by severe depression, Rott ultimately succumbed to tuberculosis at the age of 25. Unlike Brahms, but in agreement with Bruckner, Gustav Mahler greatly admired Rott's music, deeming him a genius and the pioneer of the new symphony as he perceived it. Unquestionably, Rott's deeply moving life narrative embodies timeless motifs, including artistic ingenuity, emotional turmoil, vulnerability and death.

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Royal College of Psychiatrists

The British Journal of Psychiatry (2023)  
223, 574. doi: 10.1192/bjp.2023.117