

Symphony No. 4 in E-flat major, “Romantic,” by Anton Bruckner

The majority of Bruckner’s eleven symphonies underwent significant revision at the composer’s own hand at various times during his lifetime, and the Fourth is no exception. Directly after completing the first version of his Symphony No. 3 in d-minor in late 1873, Bruckner began work on a new symphony, which would become the Fourth and the only symphony given a subtitle – “Romantic” – by the composer himself. The Fourth was in fact Bruckner’s *sixth* symphony in sequence of composition and the first to be written in a major key. This first version of the Fourth was finished in November 1874, but Bruckner was unable to arrange for a premiere performance. The Vienna Philharmonic took the new symphony into rehearsals, but ended up rejecting it as “unplayable” – much to Bruckner’s chagrin.

Thus, in 1878, it underwent the first major revision in which it received a completely new Scherzo, the “hunting scene,” and a new Finale, the “Volksfest” or “Folk Festival.” After this stage of the work’s evolution, Bruckner returned once again to the Fourth in 1879/1880 with a complete rewrite of the Finale. It is in this version that the Fourth received its premiere on 20 February 1881 under the baton of the distinguished conductor Hans Richter and that we hear in today’s concert. Unlike the first performance of the earlier Third, which was a public disaster for Bruckner, the premiere of the Fourth under Richter was favorably received by audience and critics alike. It should be noted that during Bruckner’s lifetime, this work and the later Symphony No. 7 were his two acknowledged symphonic successes, gaining multiple performances throughout Europe, and also reaching both England and the United States.

In his Symphony No. 4 Bruckner appears to reflect bucolic experiences of the Austrian countryside, as evidenced from the descriptive titles he gave various sections after the fact, including “Scene from the Hunt” for the Scherzo, “Dance Tune played during the Picnic” for the Trio and, of course, the overall title of “Romantic” placed on the manuscript title page. Even so, it would be beside the point to place too much importance on such extra-musical associations beyond the composer’s willingness to satisfy requests for “a program” for his newest symphony. Considering his symphonic legacy as a whole, it is clear that Bruckner wrote *absolute music*, very much in the aesthetic of his great predecessor Beethoven; and that the *Romantic* Symphony, much like Beethoven’s *Pastorale*, stands as pure music irrespective of any program of literary or visual descriptions attached at a later date.

The first movement, marked simply “Bewegt, nicht zu schnell” (“With movement, but not too fast”) is in Bruckner’s typical sonata form, with three main themes introduced in the exposition. Just as the trumpet plays a pivotal role in the opening of the Third, the French horn introduces the wide-ranging first theme of the Fourth over a shimmering string tremolo in the key of E-flat. A contemporary of Bruckner, the Viennese critic Theodore Helm who admired, and befriended, the composer, wrote that Bruckner described this music as follows: “...medieval city – dawn – from the castle towers sound the early morning calls – the gates open – the knights ride

forth on their proud mounts – the magic of the forest receives them, with forest sounds and bird calls...”

The horns, along with the rest of the brass, will dominate the entire symphony, usually deployed in blocks of sound much like stops drawn on a pipe organ – the characteristic technique of an organist and one that Bruckner absorbed at an early age playing the pipe organ in various churches. Also in the massed brass, we first hear the signature “Bruckner Rhythm” which alternates duplets and triplets (“One, Two – One, Two, Three – One, Two”) and reappears at various times throughout the symphony.

The second theme in D-flat Major is labeled by Bruckner as the “Gesangs-Periode” (“Song Period”) and changes the mood from one of monumentality to more subdued lyricism: “forest murmurs,” in the composer’s description. The third thematic group in B-flat Major returns to powerful statements in the brass, with the movement ending in repeated French horn calls that reprise the opening theme, once again in a resplendent, *fortissimo* E-flat.

The second movement Andante, a “funeral march,” is marked “quasi Allegretto” to emphasize that its slowish tempo *not* be allowed to drag. In this movement the legacy of Schubert’s symphonic writing is notable.

The so-called “Hunt” Scherzo, marked “Bewegt” (“With movement”), was newly composed for the 1878 revision of the Fourth Symphony. Here, the Bruckner-rhythm is proclaimed *fortissimo* in a (for the musicians, literally!) breathtaking *tour de force* for the full orchestral brass. Before the reprise/repeat of the Scherzo, a brief Trio relaxes into a bucolic, folk-like Ländler, or country dance.

The monumental Finale begins with a B-flat Minor *ostinato* in the strings, out of which emerges the dramatic first theme in the woodwinds and brass. As the movement progresses, recollections of the Scherzo appear in the horns, as the music intensifies to a *fortissimo tutti* statement in the full orchestra, pealing forth in unison with great force. Although the performance version used this evening is Bruckner’s revised score of 1878/80, as edited by Leopold Nowak, one significant orchestral effect at this initial climax – a spectacular cymbal crash – is added from the first published edition of 1889.*

The further elaboration of the movement includes once again a lyrical “Song Period” in the strings, redolent of a walk in the countryside along with woodwinds imitative of birds chirping about. After the third theme group, Bruckner proceeds through his own individualistic development and recapitulation of these materials, with reappearance of the “Bruckner Rhythm” and noble chorales in the brass. Complex counterpoint leads finally through a lengthy crescendo into the movement’s Coda. The closing pages restate the Fourth’s opening theme in a radiant, affirmative E-flat Major, bringing Bruckner’s masterpiece to a powerful and triumphant conclusion.

*Cymbal crashes are found in several scores from Bruckner's late period, including the Seventh and Eighth Symphonies and his final completed work, *Helgoland*. In the instances of the Seventh and Fourth, there is scholarly disagreement as to the source of the idea of added percussion – quite possibly the conductor – but without question Bruckner embraced this effect in both versions of the Eighth Symphony and *Helgoland*, so it is not unreasonable to conclude that he liked it once he heard it in performance. And given that this use of the cymbal in the Fourth Symphony originates in this period of Bruckner's compositions, it should not be judged *a priori* as “un-Bruckner” as was the case in Nowak's edition.

As mentioned above, Bruckner's Fourth was – and remains – one of his most popular and accessible works. As a result, many fine recordings are available on compact disc and Internet download. For those who would like to do further listening, I would like to recommend three in particular as outstanding: Bruno Walter with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra (Sony); Karl Böhm with the Vienna Philharmonic (Decca); and, for the most modern multichannel surround sound, Herbert Blomstedt with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra (Querstand).

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