Spirituality in the Concert Hall: Reflections on the Music of Anton Bruckner

by

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If the spirit of Protestantism finds superlative musical expression in the works of Johann Sebastian Bach, then perhaps the same claim could be made for the spirit of Catholicism in the music of Josef Anton Bruckner (1824-1896). Though not as popularly celebrated as his German predecessor, the music of Bruckner is equally sincere and just as moving in its evocation of Christian spirituality. And just as Bach's music is able to transcend its historical context, so too the music of Bruckner, though located in a particular time and reflective of the aesthetic trends of its moment, continues to speak in a relevant and inspiring manner.

This impression of Bruckner's music was recently confirmed in a concert given in January of 2003 by the New York based American Symphony Orchestra. In a program entitled "Bruckner's Journey," artistic director Leon Botstein led the orchestra in a fine execution of two of Bruckner's early works (although Bruckner was already in his forties at the time of their composition), namely the Mass in F minor and the First Symphony. From a retrospective point of view, both works reveal a man in progress, confident but still developing his own voice, desperately aware of an imposing musical tradition behind him that he seeks to both emulate and take to a new level.

The performance of the Mass and the symphony exposed listeners to the two main aspects of Bruckner's oeuvre, the generally religious choral works and the nine symphonies. In this way the program provided a helpful insight into the craft of Bruckner's music, and a wonderful reminder of why he is still worth listening to today.

In the Mass, key features of Bruckner's spirituality are found that characterize his music in general. One is his expression of the human condition. Bruckner was deeply aware of the precariousness of human existence, how humanity finds itself bound in by both the finitude of secular existence, and by its unworthiness before the sacred reality. This is beautifully expressed, for example, in his treatment of the words "Thou that takest away the sins of the world, have mercy on us" in the Gloria. The choir sings nearly unaccompanied, bereft, as it were, of all support. With faint, pleading lines in the high strings, the choir repeats imploringly for grace and assurance. Miserere nobis! In a day when North American Christian spirituality eschews perhaps too great a degree of presumption and self-assurance, Bruckner's music reminds us, in the old words of the great Protestant divine Jonathan Edwards, that "if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless Gulf, and your

healthy Constitution, and your own Care and Prudence, and best Contrivance, and all your Righteousness, would have no more Influence to uphold you and keep you out of Hell, than a Spider's Web would have to stop a falling Rock." Bruckner was aware of this condition, and his music captures this spider's web of human existence.

Secondly, there is expressed within Bruckner's music a deep note of Marian piety. The lyrical highlight of the entire Mass occurs at the "Et incarnates est" of the Credo. Here Bruckner, if one may so put it, romances the Virgin as the tenor soloist, accompanied with solo viola and violin obbligato, relate the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Blessed Mother. It is a moment of poignant tenderness in an otherwise muscular exposition of the Creed. Bruckner will continue with this sense of devotion with a motet setting of the Ave Maria and his treatment of similar texts.

But if Bruckner is so aware of the abyss around which self-confident Man treads, and of the motherly warmth provided in the image of the Virgin, he is finally aware of the truthfulness of the Gospel, and of its triumph in the world. This is expressed in his strong, forthright presentation of the Mass text. The utter transparency, the compete lack of any trace of irony, characterize not only this but all of Bruckner's works. This alone makes listening to Bruckner's music a refreshing and edifying experience.

The Mass, along with his other choral works, including two other Mass settings, a Requiem, as well as motets and other choral pieces, most notably the magnificent Te Deum for chorus and large orchestra, express the obviously Catholic aspect of Bruckner's music. Many of these works are still in the active repertoire, and some of them are simply among the best settings of these texts that exist.

It is with his mid-life turn to the symphony, which became his almost exclusive artistic medium, that Bruckner produced the works for which he is most popularly associated. In Bruckner's hands the symphony as a musical convention takes on new depth of meaning. While clearly taking musical cues from Hayden, Beethoven and Schubert, Bruckner instills a uniquely religious significance into the symphonic format. With Bruckner, the symphony is transformed into an ascent narrative, beginning in mystery and uncertainty, moving through considerations of both the beauty and suffering of the world, conversely smiling and weeping with it, but always concluding with a victorious arrival, a conquering of a challenging mountain peak.

A few comments about his musical technique may help explain how Bruckner achieves this effect for the listener. We could begin by considering the element of form. In terms of both his religious choral works and, in particular, the orchestral music with which he is most identified, Bruckner adopted and basically remained true to received musical forms. To the sonata-allegro form of the symphonic tradition, however, Bruckner added new episodes, introduced daring harmonic relationships, and stretched the form through feats of thematic development. In doing so, Bruckner nearly doubled the length of the concert performance of the symphony, and thus heightened the demands upon

the listener. To listen appreciatively to Bruckner is to enter into an arduous journey with him.

Bruckner's development of the symphonic form is particularly captured in his adagios, or slow movements. From the romance-like interludes of the earlier symphonic tradition, Bruckner constructed miracles of contemplative and worshipful magnificence. Here, the suspension of hurried modernity is most completely achieved, and Bruckner's melodic and improvisational gifts are fully displayed. The spirit of the Kyrie is transformed into pure orchestral expression.

Bruckner's musical language is characterized by both short, pregnant motifs and long, lyrical lines, by signature octave leaps and broad, sustained chorale-like passages. Bruckner's was the art of juxtaposition and improvisation, placing opposites in direct contact, taking ideas and inverting them. Bruckner saw the symphony as the vehicle in which he could best express his perception of the world, a world where both the sacred and secular were drawn together and drawn toward heaven. As one commentator observes, "It is just as natural for him to employ the cadence of his motet 'Ave Maria' in the adagio movement of his symphony as it is to confront a merry polka melody in the finale with a chorale in the background."

Bruckner also enlarged the scope of the concert orchestra, with woodwind doubling and augmentation of the brass section, especially in his last three symphonies. Bruckner wields these forces to impressive effect, characteristically alternating between shimmering pianissimo string passages with shattering brass entrances, or combing the two sonorities into some of the greatest orchestral crescendos in the literature.

The outcome of these stylistic techniques is the communication of a religious sensitivity and a personal self-effacement that are the hallmarks of all of Bruckner's music. Absent is the theatricality of Wagner, from whom Bruckner learned much but with whom there could not be greater personal contrast. Absent also is the strained self-assertion that characterizes Romanticism in any age. Rather than "I have to be me," it is "I want to love Thee" that is expressed in Bruckner's works. And it is this aspect of Bruckner's music, this attitude, couched though it is in the musical idioms of the late Romantic Period, that transcends the historical moment and expresses Christian spirituality across time, perhaps more so now than before.

Many people are put off, even intimidated, in their initial contact with Bruckner's music, in much the same way as some are put off by their initial contact with Roman Catholicism. Like certain aspects of Catholic liturgy and theology, Bruckner's music is complex, densely textured, and lengthy. It does not yield itself to casual encounters. Bruckner's music is usually an acquired taste, almost requiring a kind of aesthetic conversion, especially for those accustomed to more familiar, "listener-friendly" fare. Appreciating Bruckner requires attention, repeated listening, respect for slow development, and above all, patience. For many, a satisfying introduction to Bruckner is

found in the rustic exuberance of the Fourth Symphony, or in the exquisite lyricism of the Seventh. For those oriented toward vocal music, the Mass in F Minor, or the plainsong inspired Te Deum, are great places to begin.

It is often said that Anton Bruckner's symphonies are like cathedrals of sound. There is truth in this analogy. Like the architectural foundations of a great cathedral, the symphonies rely on certain structural patterns that support the whole edifice, giving rise to elaborate and ornate development. Cathedrals are the creation of sacred space, wherein humans assume their proper significance before the reality of God. Bruckner's music can have a similar effect upon the listener. In cathedrals, common elements of light and sound are captured and reconfigured through the interaction with the structure and content of the building. The same effect is true in Bruckner's handling of musical elements. In a great cathedral, the worshipful are drawn toward something beyond the structure and beauty of the building. This too is true in Bruckner's case. Like a great cathedral, Bruckner's music irresistibly eventuates in only one direction – up.