

Anton Bruckner was born on September 4, 1824 in the little upper Austrian town of Ansfelden. In the affairs of the town his parents were undistinguished; his father, a school-teacher, died when Anton was 13, at which time Anton became a choir boy at the superbly beautiful rococo monastery of St. Florian.

There, in the luxuriously pleasant tranquility of monastic life, much of his religious fervor was awakened, and became the point of spiritual return. The monastery of St. Florian, one of the beauty spots of Austria, had a highly cultivated musical environment. In such a milieu, Anton delved into the study of music. His first significant musical post outside the pleasant monastic confines was in Linz, where he became the Cathedral organist. During his tenure there, he frequently traveled to Vienna to study and in a period of six years developed remarkable facility as a composer.

As he discovered the music of Wagner, it became a dominating factor in his slowly maturing musical mind. But it was not until he had reached the age of forty that his prowess as a composer was realized. His first masterpiece was his Mass in D minor, followed by a prolific succession of works conceived in heroic dimensions.

Like so many musicians during those days, Bruckner moved to Vienna, where he became renowned as an organist and teacher, and his post at the Vienna Conservatory assured him of an adequate livelihood. It was there that he taught and profoundly influenced the young Mahler, whose impressionable mind took form under the unswervingly sincere master. Musically, their relationship is one of father and son, for Mahler, 36 years his junior, was Bruckner's student and became imbued with his pervading mysticism. Together they shared a yearning for grandiose expression and religious ecstasy but Bruckner's impregnation with Catholic color, pomp, and solemnity contrasts markedly with Mahler's Jewish pathos and almost elegiac tone.

It is a paradox that a man who dedicated so much of his life, his activities and his music to God should have become a subject of so much bitter controversy. But he was caught in the opposing camps of Brahms and Wagner followers.

Brahms himself had little use for Bruckner. He frequently made sarcastic remarks about him, and when he played fragments of his works for friends his attitude was always derisive. Playing tit for tat, Hugo Wolf, an ardent admirer of Bruckner, sloughed off the work of Brahms. As a critic Wolf, petulant and acid-tongued, referred to the Symphonies of Brahms as being "mole-like" and, in contrast, the symphonies of Bruckner as being like the summit of that mighty peak in Ecuador, Mount "Chimborazo."

Wolf and Bruckner met for the first time on Corpus Christi day in 1884 in the little town of Klosterneuburg near Vienna. They had shared a mutual admiration for each other's works, and Wolf eagerly set out to become Bruckner's proselyte. Writing in the Wiener Salonblatt on Dec. 28, the year they met, Wolf first took up the cause of Bruckner in the press. It was occasioned by the appearance of Bruckner's Symphonies in a four-hand piano edition. Emphasizing his originality, imagination, and capacity to write with grandeur, Wolf unhesitatingly compared him to Shakespeare and Beethoven.

In fact, he pronounced Bruckner's Symphonies to be the most significant since Beethoven, and regretted that this "rebel genius" seemed to be ostracized from the Vienna Concert Halls.

The following year, in May, 1885 — Wolf reviewed a performance of Bruckner's Te Deum and observed the "overwhelming" impression the work made on its hearers. During the following January, he reviewed his string quintet and found it an "artistic revelation."

Vienna was late in accepting Bruckner's 7th Symphony. Many other cities had heard it performed and had greeted it with some commotion: Munich, Hamburg, and Leipzig had listened and applauded. Wolf expressed his unbounded joy as Vienna opened its concert doors to his friend, but he chided his city for being so tardy. He sarcastically asked whether they should not have programmed the work earlier and for its own merits rather than because it had received acclaim and recognition elsewhere.

It was due to his 7th Symphony that Bruckner's fame began to spread. On July 29, 1886, Theodore Thomas introduced the work in Chicago. Following a performance of it in London in 1887, Bruckner became recognized by an enthusiastic band of English music lovers.

But when the Vienna critics heard it, they pounced on Bruckner with almost hysterical vehemence. They called it "unnatural — sickly — decayed", — one going so far as to state that Bruckner composes "like a drunkard". It took years for a dispassionate estimate to be found. Far from the Wagner-Brahms battle and far from Vienna itself, Lawrence Gilman writing in New York found that for a few, Bruckner "was and is at rare intervals, a seer and a prophet — one who knew the secret of a strangely exalted discourse, grazed the sublime, though his speech was often both halting and prolix . . . But sometimes, rapt and transfigured, he saw visions and dreamed dreams as colossal, as grandiose, as awful in lonely splendor, as those of William Blake."

Bruckner had expressed in his music his personal credo; one that embraced at all times the reverent phrase "credo omnipotentem deo." For such belief he needed a vast architecture; his themes became long, drawn out in a manner similar to those of Wagner. He thought in terms of vastness, in terms of endless time. That others might be limited in their attention span did not occur to him. But he realistically suggested when a conductor complained of the unending length of a movement, that he cut it considerably. There are frequent comparisons made between the quite stupendous dimensions of a Bruckner work and a Gothic Cathedral — a comparison which seems carelessly inappropriate. His spirit is more akin to that of the men who, limited by the masonry of the Austrian and Bavarian rounded roofs, drew heavens of rolling clouds and infinite space into which the worshippers below could look up to a painted infinity. Bruckner, too, tried to let his audiences wander into a musical world of such seraphic nature, and he often succeeded.

The Bruckner Symphonies follow the Schubertian four movement form; usually an imposing first movement followed by an Adagio; a scherzo which betrays its Austrian peasant heritage; and a full imposing final movement. In his slower

melodies Bruckner's song-like flow is not unrelated to the "Lied" as Schubert sang it.

The Seventh Symphony was begun in 1881 and completed in 1883. It was dedicated to Wagner's young patron, "His Majesty, the King, Ludwig II, of Bavaria, in deepest reverence."

The first movement, *Allegro moderato*, E Major, 2-2, was completed December 29, 1883. As it begins the opening theme played by cellos and horn is heard over the tremolo of the violin: a subsidiary theme then enters played by clarinets, violas and the cellos. As the principal theme re-enters in fuller orchestration one senses that Bruckner's feeling for organ registration has dictated the scoring. Boston's late Philip Hale found the secondary theme to be "one of complaint". It is announced by the oboe and clarinet, and contrasts markedly with the preceeding theme. At a later point Bruckner inverts this secondary theme and gives it to the violins. In the recapitulation the principal theme quietly reenters, later, inverted, it is given to the violins and flutes; the secondary theme now in E minor is played by the clarinet. The movement builds in a mighty crescendo to heroic proportions, and the climax is reached in an elaborate coda.

The second movement, *Adagio, sehr feierlich und langsam* (very solemn and slow) is in the tragic key of C sharp minor. This movement unquestionably represents one of the highest points of Bruckner's creativity. Although the entire symphony is dedicated to Wagner's patron, the Adagio was intended as a tribute to the master himself. It may have been in homage that he introduced the Bayreuth tubas in this movement and also in the Finale of the Symphony. Bruckner revered Wagner and in a letter to his pupil Felix Mottl, he wrote: "One day I came home and felt very sad. It is impossible, I thought, that the Master should live much longer. And then the C sharp minor Adagio came to me." In another letter to Mottl, who was rehearsing a performance of the work, Bruckner wrote: "Please take a very slow and solemn tempo. At the close, in the Dirge (In Memory of the death of the Master), think of our Ideal."

The Scherzo, *sehr schnell* (very fast) A minor, 3-4, was completed October 16, 1882. The raging buoyancy and peasant-like verve contrasts strongly with the Trio which is marked *etwas langsamer* (somewhat slower). The theme of the Trio is drawn from an inversion of the Scherzo theme. In this movement Bruckner deftly establishes his kinship with Beethoven.

The Finale, *bewegt, doch nicht schnell* (moving but not fast), E Major 2-2, is in rondo form. Hugo Wolf found it a "hard nut" to crack, but once broken, revealed a "sweet kernel" inside. It begins with a joyous theme given to the violins with woodwinds adding their characteristic colors; the second theme is hymnlike with an Austrian flavor. Here sonorous outbursts and healthy climaxes reveal telltale markings of Bruckner's peasant background: his kind of awkwardness contrasts refreshingly with the too-polished or over refined approach that characterized the work of many of his contemporaries. Those seeking in their music broad sweeping grandeur, soaring spirit, thunderous fury and mystical heights may find that Bruckner is their man.

Notes by OLIVER DANIEL