

A brief overview of Löwe's arrangement of Bruckner's Ninth Symphony

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Abstract

For about three decades, the Symphony No. 9 in D minor by Anton Bruckner was only known in a version by Ferdinand Löwe which significantly distorted the harmonic and instrumental content of the work. This version is seldom heard today. The purpose of this paper is to give a better idea of how this version differs from Bruckner's original.

The Naxos Music Library recently made available the Orfeo label repackaging of Hans Knappertsbusch's "legendary" 1958 recording of the Symphony No. 9 in D minor by Anton Bruckner.

Orfeo and Naxos are upfront about the fact that this is the arrangement by Ferdinand Löwe, the only version in which the Ninth was known for the roughly three decades after the composer's death. This version has been dismissed as a "falsification" by such Bruckner experts as Robert Simpson.¹

But I had never before actually listened to this falsification. My first impression: Knappertsbusch delivers a powerful performance, marred only by the occasional passages that just sound completely wrong, as if a different composer tried to smooth over one of Bruckner's pauses without caring whether it sounded coherent or not.

Upon perusing the score, it became clear that the most pervasive changes made by Löwe are to the orchestration. It is as if Löwe looked at each bar one by one looking for something to change. Sometimes these changes are very difficult to notice in older recordings of lesser sound quality, though there is at least one change that might be difficult to notice regardless.

For example, in the first movement, Löwe takes the flutes out of measure 70, and the sixteenth note upbeat in the previous measure. In *The Technique of Orchestration*, Kent Kennan advises against using the flute in this low register, unless sparsely accompanied.²

So much to heart I have taken this advice in my own compositions that I consulted a flutist about a passage I wrote in which the flutes dip below the

¹*The Essence of Bruckner*, 2nd Edition. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd (1977): p. 194.

²From p. 71 in the 4th Edition: "The bottom octave is weak and somewhat breathy, ... Since little volume is possible in this low register, accompaniment must be kept light if the flute is to come through."

optimal register, though not quite as low as the D and E \flat that Bruckner takes them down to. In regards to my own composition, the flutist said that she could certainly make herself heard in that context.

But I didn't write a full brass section with eight horns for the flutes to compete with. In the context of Bruckner's Ninth, I seriously doubt the flutes can really be heard by anyone other than the closest neighboring musicians.

Nonetheless, Bruckner's calculation here was more likely psychological rather than technical: how does a player feel to be left out of the end of this mighty phrase? And if the flutist rehearses alone, he or she³ has a better sense of how the part fits within the flow of the music.

As if to make it up to the flutists, Löwe has the third flute double the violins for part of the fantastic ascending scale of measure 73, a scale that looks so ordinary on paper yet points forward to Robert Simpson and John Williams.

There are plenty more examples of Löwe taking Bruckner's contrasting orchestral groups and turning it into something more blended, generally adding woodwind color where Bruckner scored for strings only. Nor did Löwe generally consider a timpani alone sufficient transition.

Bruckner scored the Ninth for woodwinds in threes, eight horns (four of them switching to Wagner tubas), three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and strings. Löwe keeps this essentially the same, though he changes the third bassoon to a contrabassoon.

So far I have described changes that are much easier to notice with the score than with a recording. The first change that I really noticed when I first heard the Knappertsbusch recording was in the two measures before letter Q (letter M in the Nowak edition, measures 301 and 302 in either edition).

Bruckner wrote a measure and a half of silence before changing the pace to a lyrical *langsamer* (a tempo indication I got from Nowak, not Löwe, by the way). Löwe adds the third oboe and the first clarinet in unison in a short *espressivo* passage that is a pathetic attempt to create a smooth transition where Bruckner clearly just wanted silence.

What happens in measures 507 and 508 struck me as another pathetic attempt at a transition the first time I heard it. But what Löwe actually did here was take what the woodwinds play in those two measures and transfer it to the strings.

So the first oboe, instead of chromatically mostly descending from G \flat (in measure 505) to D \flat , instead gets cut off at E \flat and some of the first violins pick up the line on F \flat at measure 507. I see this as a failed attempt to force on Bruckner a way of splitting melodies among instruments that comes quite naturally to Beethoven⁴ but does not generally make sense in the context of Bruckner's inspiration.

The most egregious change in the first movement, in my opinion, is one of harmony. The grindingly dissonant and apocalyptic E \flat s in measures 559 to

³I have considered the pronouns very carefully: we're almost certainly talking about a man in Bruckner's time, likelier a woman in our time.

⁴Early on in his Third Symphony, to give one famous example.

563 are still present in the horns and trumpets, but Löwe changes them to more consonant intervals in the flutes, oboes, clarinets and violas, thus greatly lessening the impact of this passage. The Ebs are important because they come from the principal theme of this movement and have consequences in the finale.

The way Löwe adds quadruple, triple and double stops to the strings in the last three measures of the first movement harks back to early Bruckner, or maybe even Michael Haydn. Though on first hearing this might seem more a matter of textual emphasis rather than textual alteration.

The first time I heard the Knappertsbusch recording I thought that Löwe had also made a harmonic change to that sneaky chord from the oboes and clarinets that starts off the Scherzo.

Löwe did redistribute the notes and spell them different in transposing them for the clarinets, using flats rather than sharps,⁵ but this is not enough to explain the almost fluffy sound Knappertsbusch draws from the oboes and clarinets. Still, Knappertsbusch delivers on the stormy violence for the battering passages of the Scherzo.

There is a very strange addition in the Trio, in that Löwe adds clarinets and bassoons sustaining a chord for a little over four measures in a couple of different spots. Set *mezzo piano* and *dim. sempre*, I actually wondered if Löwe had added a soft tam-tam crash here, suggesting perhaps familiarity with Mahler. Löwe does not add any percussion, but his idea to use clarinets and bassoons to suggest the tam-tam is as brilliant as it is out of place here.

The Nowak editions of Bruckner's Symphonies generally have *da capo* repeats for the Scherzos.⁶ But for the Ninth Symphony, Löwe actually writes out the reprise of the Scherzo. I have not reviewed this bar by bar, but it seems to me like it's a literal repeat with the only difference being that the rehearsal letters go into "double letters" (Aa, Bb, Cc, etc.).

If this is case, it's something that really only matters to the musicians, and to a much lesser extent to those following along with the score. There is a trade-off here: on the one hand, less experienced players tend to get confused about *da capo* repeats, and confusion can arise in rehearsal even with more experienced players; but on the other hand it is more efficient to mark up a passage just once and not worry about whether it needs to be marked up again when it recurs.

The rehearsal letters in the Adagio in Löwe's edition seem to be the same as in the Nowak edition (I have not checked them one by one), but Löwe certainly makes changes of orchestration here, too, like reassigning a sustained chord from the Wagner tubas to muted violas and cellos shortly before letter E, or using the second violins to double a clarinet line shortly before letter G.

The change in the Adagio that almost every expert comments on is the anguished complete thirteenth chord that Löwe softens: Bruckner's $G\sharp^{13}$ chord in third inversion becomes Löwe's $G\sharp^9$ chord in third inversion. Adding a *forte pianissimo* in the following measure is a very minor overstep by comparison.

The way to the coda is still very tortured and dramatic, but by changing the

⁵A very trivial detail: Löwe spells "Klarinetten" with a C.

⁶This is certainly the case for all the Symphonies after the Third.

complete thirteenth chord almost to a harmless seventh chord, it becomes even easier to accept the ensuing coda as a serene conclusion to the whole Symphony.

In the final bar, Löwe shows his own bit of psychological rather than technical calculation by having the contrabassoon reinforce the second tenor tuba and the “regular” tuba on the low root position E. At pianissimo, it very subtly changes the sonority to give a slightly stronger impression of finality. As evidenced by the 1958 Knappertsbusch recording, the Audience is compelled to clap even sooner than they would with any other edition.

As for the finale, we know that Löwe had two bifolios in his possession which John A. Phillips has labeled 20F and “21”. Not much to go on for a finale that would have probably taken forty or so bifolios. Josef Schalk had the majority of the known bifolios, but I can only guess to what extent he shared them with Löwe.

Considering only the material we know to have been available to Schalk and Löwe, it would have been clear that this wasn’t just a bunch of incoherent sketches with too much of an indecipherable personal shorthand, but an emerging score clearly intended to be seen by someone else, such as a copyist who would then have prepared a neat copy for a conductor’s use.

Of course Bruckner did not actually complete the finale. But could the public really be told that although Bruckner had come close to setting down a complete musical narrative for the finale on paper, the finale couldn’t be presented because someone had neglected to properly secure Bruckner’s estate?

Even if Löwe did see the bifolios Schalk had, given the nature of his reworkings in the completed movements, he would perhaps have decided that filling in those gaps, and composing a coda practically from scratch,⁷ went far beyond what he had done in the preceding three movements.

Thus it was much easier to let the public think that the only available material for the finale consisted of a few random sketches only the original composer could make any sense of.

It was well known in Bruckner’s circle that the composer had suggested using the *Te Deum* as finale. On February 11, 1903, after conducting the three completed movements of the Ninth Symphony in his rearrangement, Löwe proceeded with the *Te Deum* in its original version.⁸

Later on Löwe decided that the Ninth is “complete in its incompleteness,” and that remained a dogma long after Löwe’s edition was almost universally rejected as invalid.

Thanks to the efforts of various musicologists, we can now hear for ourselves what Bruckner was getting at. None of these are perfect representations of what Bruckner had at the time he died. But any of them is better than pretending

⁷There are some cryptic sketches which some people say are sketches for the coda, but others disagree. Nevertheless there are plenty of clues as to what this coda would have been like.

⁸I choose not to infer anything from the fact that Löwe did not include the *Te Deum* in his edition of the Ninth, given that the *Te Deum* had already been published. The nonsense about the D minor/C major clash would not need to be mentioned if it weren’t still popping up in prestigious sources like the New York Philharmonic programme notes.

that nothing of the finale exists.

To hear Löwe's version of the Ninth, most choices inevitably involve Hans Knappertsbusch. There are recordings by Charles Adler and Josef Krips, but you can't beat Knappertsbusch for the proliferation of repackagings of his 1950 and 1958 recordings.

The MP3 album that I bought of the 1958 recording also comes with two orchestral excerpts from Wagner's *Siegfried* and it costs the same or about the same as other MP3 albums that include only the completed three movements of the Ninth.

Given how fast Knappertsbusch takes the three completed movements (makes Carl Schuricht look like a slowpoke), I recommend adding to the playlist Ari Rasilainen's performance with the Deutsche Staatsphilharmonie Rheinland Pfalz of Nors Josephson's completion of the finale, which barely takes 14 minutes, giving a total timing of almost 65 minutes.

In 1958, Knappertsbusch was quite alone in preferring the Löwe edition. This can be readily verified thanks to John Berky's very thorough discography of Bruckner's orchestral music.

Carl Schuricht and Bruno Walter preferred Orel. And the Nowak edition, which came out in 1951, was starting to gain momentum with recordings by Hermann Abendroth, Eduard van Beinum, Jascha Horenstein, Eugen Jochum, Joseph Keilberth and Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt. After that Carl Schuricht preferred the Nowak edition.

And now the 2000 edition by Benjamin Gunnar Cohrs has more distinct recordings than the Löwe edition, including recordings by conductors who choose to ignore the finale completion by the team Cohrs worked in.

It is quite correct for conductors today to prefer any edition made after 1930 over Löwe's. But if we wish to have a fuller understanding of the early history of reception of this music, we must not ignore Löwe, who on the one hand helped Bruckner's popularity by making his music more palatable to his contemporaries, but was also responsible for various misconceptions about Bruckner.