ASPECTS OF BRUCKNER'S SYMPHONIC OEUVRE

To understand Bruckner's symphonic compositional development it is necessary to consider not only the canon of the nine symphonies but two which lie outside the nine, the Symphony in F minor, often referred to as the Study Symphony and also the Symphony in D minor, often referred to as the Zero Symphony. Of these, the latter is the more important of the two. (The Overture in G minor could also be included, since it is in sonata form.)

Form is the most important aspect in the symphony. The early Study Symphony sticks closely to the forms of Bruckner's predecessors particularly sonata form. However during the course of his compositional development Bruckner often modified the form itself in many cases adding a third subject group often in octaves. It is as if he found that the restraints of this form were holding back his creativity; he felt that when necessary he had to burst its bounds. Sometimes he went as far as the merging the development and recapitulation, thus creating a bipartite structure rather than the tripartite structure of the typical classical sonata form. At times an extended coda could almost become another section in itself. With the merging of the development and recapitulation and an extended coda, in a way the tripartite structure was reformed. A good example of this is the first movement from his Sixth Symphony. The coda is often a mighty summing up of the previous musical material. The finale of the Seventh Symphony is an example of reverse sonata form not only to be found in this work but also in Bruckner’s Quintet.

Often his music is in blocks of sound rather than well defined melodies. From the Second Symphony movements in sonata form have three rather than two subject groups in well defined keys. The second subject group, often referred to as the song period, often contains elements of counterpoint where the lyrical theme is passed from one instrument to another; this is strikingly so in the first movement of the Ninth Symphony. By contrast the third subject group is usually in octaves. The three subject groups are disparate, somewhat like giant jig saw pieces, which are brought together or contrasted in the development section.

These blocks often go from fortissimo to pianissimo and reverse quite suddenly, there being no gradual moving from one dynamic to the next.

A prominent feature in his symphonic output is his use of the chorale recalling the music of Palestrina and the vocal polyphony from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. His roots also go back to Bach, Beethoven and Schubert. He would have been familiar with these composers from his stays in the monastery at St Florian. His chorales are always original, he never borrowed from others. The use of the chorale is particularly prominent in the Fifth Symphony.

Some have complained of the general pauses particularly in the first version of the Second Symphony sometimes referred to as the Symphony of Pauses, and those found in the Third Symphony. I would not describe them as simply pauses but pregnant pauses. I think Bruckner once said that he had to take a breath before saying something important. The pauses demark the structure.

Bruckner's material is usually flexible and therefore capable of development. Motives are often derived from contrapuntal themes, and are often subject to contrapuntal techniques such as fugue, inversion, stretto, augmentation, etc. This is evident in his Fifth Symphony, a cornucopia of counterpoint, never to be repeated. At times there is so much contrapuntal activity in this work that one gets a sense of overload, especially in the scherzo. There is a strong relationship between the themes within a symphony. In most of Bruckner’s symphonies there is a triumphant restatement of the main theme of the symphony at the conclusion of the finale.

Climaxes are often built up by using sequential repetitions, where the same musical material is repeated several times, but each time at one or more tones higher. Also the values of the notes are often halved, thus adding to the tension leading to a climax. There is just one true climax in each movement.

Later symphonies often recall themes from his early symphonies. He is not reluctant at using themes from his other works such as the Te Deum, and his Masses. Very occasionally he uses material from Wagner; a well known example being the first version of the Third Symphony, sometimes called the Wagner Symphony. Such insertions are seamless.

Generally the slow movements use the song form ABABA, the most noticeable exception being that in the Sixth Symphony which is in sonata form. The first appearance of themes A and B are fairly straight forward; at their reappearance they are expanded.

There is a strong dance element in much of his work. He was known to have played the violin at folk festivals. Some of these folk melodies take us back to Upper Austria. The scherzos suggest peasant dancing, whereas the trios are by contrast quiet Ländler. Note particularly the combination of the chorale and the polka in the finale of the Third Symphony.

In the past some have critiqued Bruckner's finales. It is true that Bruckner had doubts about some of them, hence the revisions, notably the Second, Third and Fourth. This is a long and complex matter, and this is hardly the place to discuss the matter. All one can say with any certainty is to advise the potential listener to listen to all the versions.

The way Bruckner uses harmony becomes more and more advanced. Dissonances and unusual modulations pave the way to the twentieth century. That of the Ninth Symphony is the most advanced—note the jarring discord at the climax of the adagio. Listen to a version for two pianos, where the dissonances become more apparent due to the percussiveness of the piano.

An important aspect of Bruckner’s symphonic oeuvre is periodicy. This is not an easy concept to understand. It concerns the grouping of bars. He found that his early symphonies sometimes contained bars that did not naturally fall into groups of four or multiple groups of four. To remedy this involved cutting out of a bar or adding an extra bar where possible; where this was not possible, passages had to be recomposed. This was often a hard and arduous task.

Bruckner’s music has been described as being objective. This is implies that it is cold. His music is certainly not passionate in a sentimental emotional sense, but it is certainly not cold. I find this critism difficult to comprehend. How can this be? Listen to the recapitulation in the first movement of the Sixth Symphony; and who cannot but be moved by the quasi-funeral march in the second movement of this symphony? I would suggest that his music is transpersonal even transcendent—'it takes you out of yourself'. There is nothing sentimental about Bruckner's music. It contains depth, hard to define. Some prefer the word lofty to describe his music. Take whichever metaphor works for you. It suggests another world, a world of darkness and light, even at times a world of demons and angels. His symphonic music is surely a spin off from his deep Catholic faith. Note quotations from the Masses and the Te Deum in his symphonic oeuvre, where light overcomes the forces of darkness.

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