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## Mystery in Bruckner's Eighth Symphony

by Daniel J. Heisey

Anton Bruckner said, “my Eighth is a mystery.”<sup>1</sup> Bruckner (1824–1896) was a deeply religious man, a devout Roman Catholic for whom the word mystery had a distinctly Christian sense and meant not an insoluble conundrum but a contemplative dimension to the spiritual life. Even for people who are lukewarm about Bruckner as a composer, it has become standard procedure to see religious fervor in Bruckner's music in his nine symphonies as well as in his more obviously religious pieces such as his *Te Deum*. One of the students at the conservatory where Bruckner taught Gustav Mahler described Bruckner as “a curiously mediocre figure,” and in our day Mahler's work does tend to overshadow that of the old professor.<sup>2</sup>

In this essay the premise is that even if one were to regard Bruckner and his music to be mediocre, his claim to mystery, to mysticism in his music, is worth exploring. Let us take Bruckner at his word and accept that his Eighth Symphony in C Minor, first performed in 1892, is a mystery and therefore, in a Christian sense, also mystical. However to do so, we must consider his explanations that the glistening first notes of the Adagio derived from looking too long into a young lady's eyes; that the bold, even ominous, opening of the Finale refers to an official meeting of three European emperors. What Bruckner seems to be saying is that worldly events intrude upon and thus inform the spiritual life.<sup>3</sup> His Eighth can remind us that mystical phenomena require a physical context and so this symphony can further serve to reflect or represent the mysterious pilgrimage through this world to the next.

Lest confusion arise over what is meant by the mystic essence we have in mind, the definition proposed by Monsignor Romano Guardini (1885–1968) may suffice. “The word ‘mystic’ has been greatly abused,” he noted, and he clarified it by saying, “It stands for a definite experience



<sup>1</sup>“Meine Achte ist ein Mysterium,” quoted in Benjamin M. Korstvedt, *Bruckner: Symphony No. 8* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Gustav Mahler, *Letters to His Wife*, ed. Henry-Louis de la Grange et al., tr. Anthony Beaumont (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 168. For Mahler and Bruckner, see Jonathan Carr, *Mahler: A Biography* (Woodstock and New York: The Overlook Press, 1997), pp. 21–23. See also Alex Ross, “The Stone Carver,” *The New Yorker* (August 1, 2011), 74.

<sup>3</sup>For the programmatic aspect of Bruckner's Eighth Symphony, see Werner Wolff, *Anton Bruckner: Rustic Genius* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1942), pp. 124–126; Sigmund Spaeth, *A Guide to Great Orchestral Music* (New York: The Modern Library, 1943), p. 245; see also Korstvedt, *Symphony No. 8*, pp. 49–53.

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of God and of things divine. This experience may be accompanied by different manifestations, auditory or visual; but these are only byproducts which may even contain some element of risk.”<sup>4</sup> Just as some mystics have conveyed their experiences in words or painting, Bruckner used music to articulate the numinous adventures of his inner life.

### INTERPRETING BRUCKNER

A protégé of Mahler, Bruno Walter, referring to conductors, declared: “Without the religious and spiritual elevation of the interpreter, the most musically perfect performance of Bruckner’s Eighth will not come up to the composer’s intentions.”<sup>5</sup> One supposes Walter meant that he had fulfilled those intentions, and one surmises that he aimed his criticism at contemporaries such as Karl Böhm. Of all Walter’s peers, Böhm seems most open to a critique of musical perfection minus spiritual elevation. When addressing the old rule for conductors, “Play only what’s printed,” Erich Leinsdorf pointed out that so obedient to that maxim was Böhm that in some of his recordings of Mozart, “you can even hear the misprints.”<sup>6</sup>

The exalted claims of Bruno Walter notwithstanding, the truth is stated plainly by another of Walter’s contemporaries, Werner Wolff: “There are as many interpretations of the Eighth as there are writers about it! All of them tried to find a meaning above and beyond their own powers of expression.”<sup>7</sup> Wolff was also a conductor son of the founder of the Berlin Philharmonic; as a boy he had met Bruckner, the elder Wolff having invited the composer to his home for dinner.

What is true for writers is true for conductors: Each, will have his own interpretation. Without denigrating other legendary conductors such as Bruno Walter, it is worthwhile listening to Karl Böhm’s recordings of Bruckner’s symphonies because his literal approach and his precision combine to free an audience, even of one, of the concern of listening for a special interpretation by a conductor regarding himself as spiritually elevated. As Böhm himself said: “[F]or the most important thing is the *will of the composer* and the *work* which is being performed.”<sup>8</sup>

In addition to disapproval in some quarters for his literalism or pedantry, Böhm has also been criticized for accommodation and accepting prestigious conducting positions during the

<sup>4</sup>Romano Guardini, *Prayer in Practice*, tr. Prince Leopold of Loewenstein-Wertheim (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), p. 151.

<sup>5</sup>Bruno Walter, *Of Music and Music-Making*, tr. Paul Hamburger (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1961), p. 77. Compare with the statement by Wilhelm Furtwängler: “Certainly a work such as the Eighth cannot be imagined without the dual basis of a mystical and all-encompassing religious sense and also of a magnificent Baroque heroism,” quoted in Michael Tanner, ed., *Wilhelm Furtwängler: Notebooks 1924–54*, tr. Shaun Whiteside (London: Quartet Books, 1995), p. 188.

<sup>6</sup>Erich Leinsdorf, *Erich Leinsdorf on Music*, ed. Reinhard G. Pauly (Portland Ore.: Amadeus Press, 1997), p. 290; see also “Overview: Bruckner,” *American Record Guide*, 69 (May/June 2006), 54; see also Stephen Everson, “The Lovable Dictator,” *The Guardian* (October 2003), p. 19: “This lack of an obvious personal style was one of Böhm’s principal virtues,” 25.

<sup>7</sup>Wolff, *Bruckner*, 234.

<sup>8</sup>Karl Böhm, *A Life Remembered: Memoirs*, tr. John Kehoe (London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1992), p. 156; emphasis in the original. Originally published in Vienna in 1970. For Böhm’s friendship with Bruno Walter, see pp. 39–42.

Nazi regime, but when after the war Böhm would be asked why he did not emigrate, he made an uncomfortable yet practical point: “[A]t that time I had no invitations from the Met or from Covent Garden,” and he cited the need to support his family, noting that, “in the course of my work at Dresden, as in Vienna later, I had always proved on which side I stood.”<sup>9</sup> While he thus occupied an ethically difficult spot, “to Böhm’s credit was his aesthetically faultless and sometimes politically daring choice of repertoire.”<sup>10</sup> Even more to his credit is the fact that in Vienna during the Second World War, Böhm, a Roman Catholic, “secretly harbored a Jewish industrialist for a year and half while he continued conducting.”<sup>11</sup>

As this essay progresses, the reader may be helped by knowing that of various recordings of Bruckner’s Eighth, including ones by Bruno Walter (1941), Wilhelm Furtwängler (1944), and Günter Wand (1979), what I have focused on whilst writing this essay is that by Karl Böhm and the Vienna Philharmonic recorded for Deutsche Grammophon in 1977. Whereas Furtwängler and Wand used the edition by Robert Haas (1939) and Walter used the text published in 1892, Böhm used the edition by Leopold Nowak (1955).<sup>12</sup>

### INSIGHT FROM BALTHASAR

If one accepts that Bruckner’s Eighth is religious in nature, that it bears within it mystery and mysticism, one is right to ask what it can teach us about the spiritual life. Guardini’s definition of the mystical as “a definite experience of God and of things divine” poses the question of how others, especially people who are not musicians, may follow a mystery or a mystical experience expressed in music. For a pointer to pursuing that inquiry, we may turn to an insight by a Swiss Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988). He stands as a detached critic to the extent that he is summoned as a hostile witness, having been no admirer of Romantic music. What follows was not written with Bruckner’s symphonies in mind, yet it can apply to them, especially the mapping of the spiritual terrain of the Eighth.

In his volume of aphorisms Balthasar wrote:

<sup>9</sup>Böhm, *Life Remembered*, 58. For his version of his punishment after the war, see pp. 107–112.

<sup>10</sup>Michael H. Kater, *The Twisted Muse: Musicians and Their Music in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 64. For the appropriation of Bruckner’s music into the National Socialist agenda, see: Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 2007), p. 316; also Erik Levi, *Mozart and the Nazis: How the Third Reich Abused a Cultural Icon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 17.

<sup>11</sup>“In the Wrist,” *Time* (October 28, 1966), 98. For efforts by Austrians to hide Jews, see Martin Gilbert, *The Righteous: The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2003), pp. 193–197.

<sup>12</sup>For Karl Böhm’s preference for the Nowak editions, see Böhm, *Life Remembered*, p. 64. For the scholarly conversation about the various editions of Bruckner’s symphonies, see Benjamin Korstvedt, “Still Searching for Bruckner’s True Intentions,” *The New York Times* (July 10, 2011), Arts and Leisure, p. 19; see also Korstvedt, “Bruckner Editions: The Revolution Revisited,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bruckner*, ed. John Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 121–137; Deryck Cooke, “(Joseph) Anton Bruckner,” *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1980), 3:360–362. See also: Stephen Johnson, “Bruckner’s Eighth Symphony,” *Gramophone* (September 1996), 36–38; “Overview: Bruckner,” *American Record Guide*, 69 (May/June 2006), 52–53. For a table listing these recordings (Böhm, Furtwängler, Walter, Wand) and others, see Korstvedt, *Symphony No. 8*, 100–101: Chapters 5 and 6, as well as both appendices, analyze the three versions of this work (1887, 1890, 1892).

First of all, the ascent: nothing is pure enough for us; we can no longer bear what is ambiguous and facile (Wagner then Beethoven). In order to be able to breathe, we need the crystalline atmosphere without the miasmas of earth (*The Art of the Fugue*). For a second we soar through the highest sphere into the empyrean (Mozart). There we encounter the divine child, Wisdom, who takes us by the hand and leads us back down the ladder. In the end she makes us hear the echo of her eternal melody even in the cacophony of our disc-players and tape-decks.<sup>13</sup>

The reason we may take Balthasar's musical analogy for the spiritual quest as relevant to Bruckner's Eighth, a work comprising Classical and Romantic elements, is that here, Balthasar, transcending historical chronology, sketched for us the spiritual theme of ascent and descent. He imagined the Romantic tension of Richard Wagner leading us to the Baroque splendor of Johann Sebastian Bach, then a celestial glimmer through the Classical genius of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, whereupon holy Wisdom guides us through it all again.

With this image, Balthasar offered a variation on the classic tripartite outline of the path, or way, of Christian spirituality: purgative, illuminative, unitive. Balthasar seems to say that in this life, union with God is fleeting, really but a passing impression, and spiritual growth seems to be frustrated as one must then again undergo purgation and seek further illumination. Thus the journey towards holiness and heavenly union with God is an ongoing process requiring repeated renewal. While spiritually Bruckner had inherited a strong sense of penance and devotional prayer, musically he owed debts to his great Germanic predecessors and his Eighth follows just such a trajectory as proposed by Balthasar.

## BRUCKNER'S EIGHTH

Begun in 1885, the Eighth was completed two years later during a time when Bruckner was most concerned with "his work and his relationship with God."<sup>14</sup> They were for him perennial cares, and those priorities helped to compel his repeated re-writing of the Eighth and his other musical works. He produced three versions of his Eighth, each now with its partisans. Bruckner was obsessive about many things, and the constant revision of his scores has left musicologists with lifetime projects of deciphering what he intended. With the Eighth, the mystery of his relationship with God seems to have been the main point.

To return to the observations of Werner Wolff, we see that he took it as evident that Bruckner's Eighth is essentially a religious composition. Wolff wrote that, "Mystery is the distinctive characteristic of the beginning."<sup>15</sup> That beginning is rich with chromatic harmonies, the shimmering strings and majestic winds are aloft on a series of descending triads into rarefied

<sup>13</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Grain of Wheat: Aphorisms*, tr. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), p. 37; elsewhere in that volume (p. 89) Balthasar described Wagner as "repulsive." See also von Balthasar, *My Work: In Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), p. 10. Balthasar had the works of Mozart committed to memory: Peter Henrici, "Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Sketch of His Life," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, ed. David L. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), pp. 8–9; see also von Balthasar, "Tribute to Mozart," *Communio*, 28, no. 2 (Summer 2001), 398–399.

<sup>14</sup>Elisabeth Maier, "A Hidden Personality: Access to an 'Inner Biography' of Anton Bruckner," in *Bruckner Studies*, ed. Timothy L. Jackson and Paul Hawkshaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 48.

<sup>15</sup>Wolff, *Bruckner*, 234.

spheres, yet only three minutes into the eighty minutes of Bruckner's Eighth and suddenly there is a strong dissonance as all the brass enters. It is unexpected and unsettling, but this ambiguous start serves to take the music in a new direction. It is as jolting and unnerving as the shrill crescendo of the strings a few seconds into Wagner's "Entrance of the Gods into Valhalla," from *Das Rheingold*.

Then Bruckner resumes the soaring chords, starting over and building upwards to the glorious conclusion to the Allegro. One way to see that dissonance is to consider how in the spiritual life, especially early on, everything seems to be going so well, grace upon grace, and then out of the blue things go awry, days or weeks or more of unplanned dissonance, blessings in disguise leading one unawares to new possibilities, perhaps even to new heights. As Balthasar would say, Wisdom must take us by the hand and make us start all over again.

*In Bruckner's lifetime, mainstream critics, appalled by the lurid iconoclastic vision of Wagner, denounced Bruckner as a cultural vandal.*

Unlike his other symphonies, Bruckner's Eighth places the Scherzo before the Adagio. The Scherzo begins with a bouncy, jovial theme, and Werner Wolff related that Bruckner claimed here to be depicting *Deutscher Michel*, "German Michael," an ebullient and laddish sort of fellow personifying the Germanic character.<sup>16</sup> This figure from German folklore adds a comic or lighthearted element to the symphony, just as those elements sometimes occur in one's daily life, often in the midst of the obscure ups and downs of the spiritual life.

After almost two minutes, the romping German Michael theme gives way to a more sedate Trio. For his slower movements Bruckner relied on the example set by Beethoven, especially with his Third (Eroica) and Ninth Symphonies. When analyzing the Trio of the Scherzo, Wolff wrote that, "The atmosphere is one of heavenly serenity."<sup>17</sup> Almost as in a dance, the rollicking theme of German Michael and the sweet serenity of the Trio alternate, one undulating or flowing into the other. The Scherzo ends with the foot-stomping rhythm of German Michael in the triumphant.

Next, the Adagio begins with strings slow and soft reminiscent of the opening notes for those Wagnerian gods entering Valhalla. In music, Bruckner was strongly influenced by Wagner, although it is difficult to imagine two more unlike characters: the pious, reticent bachelor and the amoral, assertive adulterer. As an unnamed critic for *Time* magazine put it: "Bruckner's pietistic musical world is completely foreign to Wagner's erotic emotionalism."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Wolff, *Bruckner*, 126. For the German conception of their happy-go-lucky yet boyishly confident national character before the First World War, see Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 311–312.

<sup>17</sup>Wolff, *Bruckner*, 238; see also Korstvedt, *Symphony No. 8*, 38–39.

<sup>18</sup>"Peasant Symphonist," *Time* (March 27, 1944), 73. This article refers to a then recent performance at Carnegie Hall of Bruckner's *Te Deum*; Bruno Walter conducted the New York Philharmonic and the Westminster Choir.



In Bruckner's lifetime, mainstream critics, appalled by the lurid iconoclastic vision of Wagner, denounced Bruckner also as a cultural vandal. Bruckner's Eighth shows us, however, that he was using Wagner's innovative musical compass to chart anew the spiritual heights and depths, lengths and breadths, that would have been familiar to medieval mystics. "The mentality of the Austrian Catholic peasantry," wrote Deryck Cooke, "which Bruckner to a very large extent retained, was essentially a survival from the Middle Ages."<sup>19</sup> It may be that, unwittingly, Bruckner set about baptizing the pagan mythology orchestrated by Wagner.

In any case, as we have seen, Bruckner attributed the origin of those first notes of this Adagio to having looked too long into the eyes of a young lady. This revelation of part of the inner workings of one man's creativity may seem incongruous for a symphony described by the composer as a mystery and dubbed by some critics as "The Apocalyptic." Gazing upon a pretty girl may seem far removed from mystical music, but one does well to keep in mind the Song of Songs (especially 2:12), where springtime love is associated with the singing of birds, in particular the dove to which the bride is compared.

In the Adagio, lush with violins and harps, one hears lapping waves of sound reminiscent of the calmer parts of the Allegro and the Scherzo. Here, "the whole orchestra," according to Wolff, "soars into high regions in the bright chord of A major."<sup>20</sup> In the Balthasarian schema, here we may be granted a glimpse into a Mozartean empyrean. That is, the Adagio ends leaving the listener transported afloat on the edge of the Cloud of Unknowing, just beyond the thin veil of which one may at last see God.

After this solemn heavenly ascent, perhaps even arrival, at the end of the Adagio, the blaring horns and thunderous tympani beginning the Finale come as a shock. Bruckner saw an eschatological dimension to this Finale, yet he explained that the heavy martial character of that opening referred to a state meeting in September 1884 of the Austrian German and Russian emperors. To what degree we may read that meeting in not only a geopolitical, but also an ecumenical way (Catholic, Lutheran, Orthodox emperors coming together) is now unclear. It may have seemed to be heralding a new era. Whatever the reason, the gathering profoundly impressed Bruckner.

Following the jarring blasts of that initial brassy fanfare, magnificent yet foreboding, the Finale resumes with strings and flutes and settles down into more placid tones and tempi. Here we may be encountering Balthasar's "crystalline atmosphere" associated with Bach. As was Bach, Bruckner was by training a church organist; Bruckner seems to have thought musically in terms of vast unfolding structures of sound filling every arch and vault of a basilica or cathedral. After the grave yet chryselephantine delicacy of the Adagio, the pompous and intense intrusion of emperors and their entourages seems strikingly out of place, and the return to the more tranquil pace comes as a relief.

Nevertheless, those more reflective passages are interrupted three times by bombastic echoes of the opening theme. Here again one finds Balthasar's theme of spiritual ascent and descent, but now divine Wisdom seems to be joined by a royal official. This coupling is not surprising

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<sup>19</sup>Cooke, "Bruckner," *New Grove*, 3:366.

<sup>20</sup>Wolff, *Anton Bruckner*, p. 239.

since Bruckner's Catholic Austria was also imperial Austria, and Bruckner was not only a devout Catholic but also a loyal subject of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. (The second edition of the Eighth he dedicated to Emperor Franz Joseph I.) Whatever one's country, it is worth mulling over how much one's spiritual sympathies intersect with patriotic sentimentality.

Both the Adagio and the Finale Bruckner marked with the adjective *feierlich*, connoting something solemn, yet also festive. Bruckner seems to be indicating the solemnity found at an important state function, but also recalling the ecclesiastical observance of, for example, Solemn Vespers, stately yet not necessarily somber. Whether in a palace or in a church, a solemn occasion can display modulated festivity most obviously in the subtle choreography of processions and protocol and in the colorful extravagance of dress uniforms or brocaded vestments. So, even in his terminology for two movements of this symphony, Bruckner associated the sacred and the secular.

## CONCLUSION

As the very genre of the symphony suggests, the mystery communicated in Bruckner's Eighth Symphony owes as much to Bruckner's Western Christian heritage as if he had written it out in German or Latin. In his everyday routine, despite his quirks, Bruckner was a respectable middle-class professional, a quiet churchgoer, all bow ties and beer and Biedermeier, and wherever he turned, his world, from Linz to Vienna, was adorned with crucifixes and double-headed eagles. Culture and faith are ever intertwined. In resounding harmonies evoking the text of Psalm 150 (for which in 1892 Bruckner wrote a setting), the Finale of Bruckner's Eighth Symphony flourishes with brass and drums, woodwinds and strings, converging to form a rousing monumental crescendo worthy of an emperor, yes, worthy of entry to Valhalla indeed, but also worthy of bringing the listener into the court of the King of Kings.

For this symphony, the last he finished, Bruckner provided enigmatic clues to shed some light on the mystery it holds. Scant references to looking at a maiden, to eschatology, to a meeting of emperors, taken in isolation fail to get one very far. Bruno Walter had declared that only a conductor's "religious and spiritual elevation" could do the work justice, but few of us are conductors, fewer still gifted with Walter's intuition. Werner Wolff agreed that the Eighth is full of religious mystery, and Karl Böhm's objective approach to interpreting music may best help the listener explore what Bruckner had in mind.

A trajectory of ascent and descent followed by prudential ascent once more, as indicated by Hans Urs von Balthasar, relates to the ebb and flow of the spiritual life, those vicissitudes of purgation and illumination, intersecting with mundane concerns such as one's romantic desires or international politics. There are "mysteries whose intrinsic meanings, not solved but lived," wrote Romano Guardini, "increasingly clarify the faith of those who live them."<sup>21</sup> Anton Bruckner's Eighth Symphony in C Minor, with its vivid chromatic harmonies by turns ebullient and martial, stormy and celestial, can serve as a musical mirror for the unsolved but edifying mysteries of the spiritual life. ❧

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<sup>21</sup>Romano Guardini, *The Lord*, tr. Elinor Castendyk Briefs (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1954), p. 256.