

REFLECTIONS ON BRUCKNER'S SYMPHONIES

WITH REFERENCE TO GERD SCHALLER'S RECORDINGS

Introduction

Every other year *The Bruckner Journal* Reader's Conference is held at Hertford College, Oxford. It is an international meeting with delegates from every corner of the globe. At the 2017 gathering papers were presented on aspects of Bruckner's life and work by distinguished scholars including William Carragan, Benjamin Korstvedt, Paul Hawkshaw and Andrea Harrandt. Among the participants was the celebrated Bruckner conductor, Gerd Schaller. Besides these scholars other Brucknerians attended. During the coffee- and tea breaks we shared thoughts and networked.

I was able to have a short conversation with Gerd Schaller about his completion of the Ninth Symphony. He promised to send me CDs of this particular work. These duly arrived together with his recording of the Sixth Symphony. I wrote back to thank him, and included some comments about his performance of the Sixth Symphony. He asked me if I would like to listen to all his recordings and write similar comments on each. These recordings arrived later and over the next six months I wrote notes on each symphony

Some Aspects of Bruckner's Symphonic Output

To understand Bruckner's development as symphonist 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, generally referred to as the *Zero Symphony*. Of these the latter is the more important. The Overture in G minor is also included, since it is in sonata form, and it is important in regard to Bruckner's compositional development.

Form is the basic element of the symphony. The early Study Symphony sticks closely to the forms of Bruckner's predecessors particularly sonata form. During the course of his compositional development, however Bruckner often modified this basic form, in most cases adding a third subject-group, often in octaves accompanied by a second part. The second subject-group (which Bruckner termed the song period) often contains elements of counterpoint where themes are passed from one instrument to another; this is particularly so in the first movement of the Ninth Symphony. It is as if he found that formal restraints were holding back his creativity; he felt that when necessary he had to burst its bounds. The three subject-groups are disparate, somewhat like giant jig saw pieces, which are brought together and/or contrasted in the development section. Sometimes he went as far as the merging of the development and recapitulation.

The finale of the Seventh Symphony is an example of reverse sonata form. At times an extended coda could almost become another section.

Often his music is in blocks of sound rather than well defined melodies.

A prominent feature in his symphonic output is his use of the chorale, recalling the music of Palestrina. This feature is particularly prominent in the Fifth Symphony. His musical roots also go back to the music of Bach, Beethoven and Schubert, and to a lesser extent Mendelssohn.

There is a strong dance element in much of his work no doubt from his early days when he played the violin in a local dance band. Note particularly the combination of the chorale and the polka in the finale of the Third Symphony.

Some have complained about his frequent use of the general pauses, particularly in 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.

Bruckner's material is flexible and therefore capable of development. Motives are derived from contrapuntal subject-groups, 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 that one gets a sense of overload especially in the scherzo of this particular symphony.

Bruckner sometimes uses material 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.

In the past some have critiqued Bruckner's finales. It is true that Bruckner had doubts about some of them, hence the revisions, and indeed revisions by some of his admirers notably Franz Schalk. This is a long and complex matter, and this is not the place to discuss it. All one can really do is to advise the listener to explore all the versions.

The harmony of the Ninth Symphony is most advanced—note the jarring discord at the climax of the adagio. Indeed this symphony looks forward to the twentieth century. Listen to a version for two pianos, where the dissonances become more apparent due to the percussive nature of the piano. The Ninth looks forward to the twentieth century.

There are some who find Bruckner's music objective and thus cold. I find this difficult to comprehend. Who for instance cannot but be moved by the quasi-funeral march in the second movement of the Sixth Symphony? Bruckner's music contains depth, one with inner logic and intense emotional resonance. His music has also been described as lofty and majestic. At times it can even suggest another world, a world of darkness and light, a world of demons and angels. His music is surely a reflection of his deep Catholic faith, and there are many passages that could be described as devotional.

Note also quotations from the Masses and the Te Deum in his symphonic oeuvre, in which light overcomes the forces of darkness.

What now follows is a resume of the notes I sent to Schaller together with further observations.

Bruckner's **Overture in G minor** was written between 1862 and 1863. Unlike the earlier Symphony in F minor, it is in many ways a significant work, for it contains many more hints of greater things to come. It begins with a slow introduction typical of the classical overture, and a coda. The opening in this recording is given a sturdy reading. The first subject-group follows consisting groups of four quavers. Schaller gives these a very pointed interpretation. By contrast the second subject-group is a slow lyrical theme. At this point I found his tempo a little on the slow side, for the first subject-group dove-tailed towards the end of this section, sounds somewhat laboured. The following development and recapitulation are given a straight forward reading. There are two versions of the coda and Schaller chose to use the earlier one.

This work owes a debt to Mendelssohn and has a classical romantic sound, which Schaller delivers admirably.

The Overture was recorded by the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra in the dry acoustic of the Prague Radio Hall.

The **Symphony in F Minor**, dated 1863, often referred to as the Study Symphony, is a work I have neglected over the years. Performances of this work are rare but after Schaller's reading, I feel that it should be heard more often. Various critics have played down the work. Certainly in contrast to the mature works it is a slim score, but it is however fascinating in many ways. Here and there we can discern hints of Beethoven and Mendelssohn, and of things to come.

The first movement is given an impressive reading, in particular the subject-group B was played with poignant tenderness. The exposition was repeated as directed in the score. The development has been criticised for being weak but I found that this reading made this section sound satisfactory. The recapitulation was managed well, particularly those rather awkward harmonic changes. Unforgettable were the horns in three parts over that long pedal note C, and later the trumpets triplet calls.

The most memorable part of the whole symphony is perhaps part one of the second movement played here with great affection. The subject-group B was played with great sensitivity. The middle section has, even during my occasional listenings in the past, always puzzled me. I ask myself, is this really Bruckner, for it sounds so contrived. Here this performance does its best with it. As to be expected the reprise of part one is performed with the same care as before.

I found the Scherzo very enjoyable. Repeats were executed. It was played with great vim and vigour.

The finale began in great spirits. All went well. The rather difficult second part of the subject-group B beginning (at bar 92) was handled well. This section to the beginning of the codetta (to about bar 118) is perhaps the most intricate part of the symphony; it was played with great care to detail. The development of this movement is maybe the weakest part of this work; however it is here performed with precision. The recapitulation and coda follow to round off the work with great gusto.

In many ways this work stands alone outside the canon of nine.

Gerd Schaller decided to record the very first version of **Bruckner's Symphony No 1 in C Minor** from 1866. I must point out that I have never been drawn to this symphony in a way that I have by the other symphonies composed by Bruckner, therefore I cannot claim to know this particular work that well. As usual at first I listened to the recording without the score. I felt somewhat lost. I found it difficult to discern the inner parts at times. At times the brass and timpani were overpowering making it difficult to hear the important contribution of the strings. Some of the problem may well be Bruckner's orchestration but another may be that modern brass tends to be much louder. (I remember a student orchestra playing Mahler's First Symphony where there was a fortissimo part for the brass. Being young players they let rip! The conductor was quick to quell their enthusiasm.)

My first hearing left me perplexed. In fact, I was deeply disappointed, but on second hearing with a score in front of me, I became more positive about both the recording and the performance. The first movement opened with a tempo that I initially felt was on the slow side but as the music progressed this tempo was obviously appropriate. I was very impressed with the music leading into the recapitulation. The structure of the movement came out well; the sound was impressive, especially at one point when the horns and trumpets called from one side of the orchestra to the other.

At first I thought the tempo for the adagio was a little on the quick side however, during a second hearing I came to the conclusion that all was well. This movement opened in gloom, to be followed by a brighter subject-group. These two moods alternate and interplay. By the end of the movement the gloom had been overcome. These moods were well executed. At the appearance of the second theme of the first subject-group the melody was obscured, (bar 30 onwards). This may be a result of Bruckner's writing, for the parts cross each other and, of course, as in all his writing there is a lot going on. At the climax of the movement (at bar 151), the winds dominated the orchestra making it difficult to hear the important violin part.

In the scherzo I found the winds too forward, except for the trio, which was played with a certain poise and calm.

The finale contains much loud music, and as a result the movement made a little arduous to listen to. From the opening I thought that the winds and timpani tended to

dominate making it difficult to hear the string figurations. I always look forward to the ending of the finale to the chorale that brings the work to a wonderful close. In some performances this sense of finality seems to escape the conductor's control of his forces. On this occasion I think the chorale sounded fairly impressive, although perhaps the tempo could have been broadened just a little. There is certainly something to be said for doing this.

From this point on the chorale is to play an important part in Bruckner's symphonic output.

This symphony is a great advance on his first symphonic oeuvre, often referred to as the Study Symphony, and this is reflected in this performance.

Although this work stands firmly in the canon of nine symphonies somehow it stands on its own.

In the end I was left wondering if part of the balance problem is due to the recording set up or simply Bruckner's own scoring.

The Symphony in D Minor, often referred to as the Nullte or Zero Symphony was composed prior to the Second Symphony; scholarship has proved that it was composed around 1869.

With this work we are on new ground. Bruckner is beginning to find his symphonic voice.

The opening of the first movement was unhurried and meticulous. This assured that the semiquaver motion could be clearly discerned; moreover it enabled the chorale-like passages maintain a sense of gravity. The first part of the development (bars 130 to 146) leading to several chorale passages for brass was well executed. Further crescendo passages led eventually to the recapitulation, again superbly executed. The two waves in the coda brought a fine close to this excellent performance. The movement had a certain sense of relaxation, and I felt that perhaps the tempo could have been a little brisker. Some recordings of this movement are one to two minutes shorter, but Schaller's tempo sounded just right on a later listening. A good example of sonata form well presented.

The account of the second movement was wonderful. I have never heard it so convincingly played before. The tempo had a forward feel. Some parts can sound rather aimless (especially bars 50 to 59) in the development. In this performance the end was always in sight. An example of modified sonata form well presented.

The playing of the scherzo was dazzling. There was spikiness in the playing. However I could hardly discern the trumpets with their double dotted rhythm (at bar 45 onwards) and other similar places; I felt the trumpets should have been more forward. The trio had a charming lilt. It was a surprise to be able to hear the low note in one of

the horns in the coda. A breathtaking performance in many ways, with the dance element always present.

The finale is one of Bruckner's most fascinating. The opening had an ecclesiastical prayerful ambience. The contrapuntal passages were played with conviction and precision; in fact, the movement could be seen as Bruckner experimenting with contrapuntal devices including fugato in the context of sonata form. Furthermore Bruckner has merged the development and recapitulation. A sumptuous ending.

In the lyrical passages the violins in particular produced a lovely sweetness of tone.

Why this work was never included in the canon, I can never quite understand. I guess it was because Bruckner himself declared the work to be invalid, but interestingly he never destroyed the work. It is an important work. This symphony, played here with such persuasion, should be heard more often.

With the **Symphony No 2 in C Minor**, 1872-73, somehow we have arrived; now we clearly hear Bruckner's symphonic voice. In this symphony the third subject-group has a definite shape of its own, being well defined and often in octaves. Interestingly the Vienna Philharmonic found the work too difficult!

The opening of the first movement begins with the upper strings playing in sextuplets, which were clearly articulated in this recording. The first subject-group opens with a sighing motive, which was beautifully played merging seamlessly into the second part containing dotted notes, a message of hope. By contrast the subject-group B was played in a somewhat sombre mood. The phrasing of the subject-group C was meticulous. The development section contained some fine climaxes, which gently gave way to the three and a half bars rest just before the beginning of the recapitulation. The coda was superb, there being plenty of energy bringing this movement to a wonderful end. During the course of this section there was some very sympathetic playing from the woodwind. This all fitted together well. An excellent example of sonata form well executed.

I wondered at times if the orchestral balance was wanting; this was most noticeable in parts of the recapitulation where I found it difficult to clearly hear the cellos.

The scherzo contained some very crisp playing. The first time I heard the change in tempo from the slower section, marked *langsamer* in William Carragan's edition back to tempo 1 (bar 76) I was taken aback! The trio had a lovely lilt to it. I have always questioned this coda, is it really necessary? However in this performance I had no doubts. It is fine.

The playing of the slow movement had less energy and less momentum than the previous two, but this was fine, in fact it gave a welcome sense of relaxation. Some of the most beautiful playing was to be found here in this slow movement. This performance did not hesitate to let us clearly hear the discords in this movement (around bar 80 and onwards). At times there were problems regarding balance; this

was particularly noticeable (about bar 150 onwards). This may be a problem in the orchestration, for the two flutes, which play the melody, are accompanied by florid string passages.

The finale opened with plenty of drive and some fine clean-cut playing from the strings. In the opening climax (bar 22 onwards) the accents in the first violins could be clearly detected. Any hope from the first movement had become transformed into sheer joy. There was a great deal of activity in this finale. The development held together superbly, especially in that rather dissonant passage (at bar 337 onwards). The crescendo leading to the recapitulation was riveting, although perhaps there should have been a miniscule pause just before the recapitulation, like the taking of a quick breath. Again, all in all, another excellent example of sonata form well executed. The vigorous coda brought the whole work to a splendid conclusion.

Throughout the tempo was appropriate.

Some critics of Bruckner's symphonies have said that they are all the same. Exactly what is meant by this statement is hard to understand. For those who have ears to hear, for example, there is a huge difference between the Second and the Third Symphony. The second could be described as a light-footed pastoral work, while and the Third is a truly heroic work.

The Symphony No 3 in D Minor is one of my favourite Bruckner symphonies. Why? I am not sure, perhaps because I am fascinated by the number of versions, 3¹/₄. Once again we are on new ground. This work marks a huge expanse of creativity. Like the previous symphony there are a number of general pregnant pauses.

The key D Minor is significant, when one recalls that Bruckner had a great respect for Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. It is almost as if the key of D Minor haunted him.

In this work he draws on a huge canvas. Some of his ideas presented in the Third are simple, others complex, to say the least. In the hands of a less capable conductor the work could easily come apart. Using this material Bruckner somehow expresses his ideas within the structure of sonata form in the outer movements. His ideas are so vast that certainly in his later works there is a very real danger that these musical ideas could spill out of classical form.

Schaller decided to record the variant dated 1874 of the first version dated 1873. The variant contains additional brass parts mainly in the first movement otherwise there is little difference between this and the original. There is no other recording of this variant.

The first movement opens with a warm sound which continues to the end of the work. The trumpet quietly emerges from the mist to present the subject-group A. (Note the similarity of the opening subject-group with that of the earlier Symphony in D Minor.) It is a pity that at times (bar 46) the violins are obscured by the rest of the orchestra. After the exposition of the subject-group A the music gives way peacefully to the

subject-group B, the song period. This is not easy to pull off, since the first and second violins tend to cross each other, moreover the cellos also have an important part to play, however in this performance the various instrumental parts are made transparent. The subject-group C is later picked up from the last three notes of subject-group B ending with a chorale in the winds. All this subsides and the development begins. So far this has all been a smooth ride and now the tension is increased to reach a fortissimo, where the opening trumpet theme is played in octaves by the whole orchestra. Almost at once the music becomes choppy – this is not an easy part of this movement for the conductor; all too often the forward thrust is brought to a grinding halt, but in this performance it has a sense of inevitability, as if to say: We will have to take it easy for a few bars. This gives a chance for the subject-group B in inversion to have a gentle say. Various quotes from Wagner and the Second Symphony follow leading to the recapitulation. The coda consists of two waves each building to a fortissimo; finally the home key is reached. The whole of this movement was played with great conviction and the classical sonata structure held well.

The second movement was played with enormous tenderness. In some performances the semiquaver passage which makes up part of the subject-group A are made to sound rather mechanical but in this performance they have certain gentleness; it is as if part of the subject-group A is sighing. There are a few places where it would appear inspiration was somewhat lacking, (notably from bar 100), however the music continued to be played devotionally with the same care to detail. Although this is a slow movement at no time was the music allowed to drag. It is a pity that at the beautifully played climax just before the final bars (between bars 262 to 265,) the violins were concealed by the rest of the orchestra. The difficult syncopated part for the violins that occurs from time to time in this movement was accurately executed. The five parts of this movement were contrasted admirably.

The scherzo was played with panache. The acoustics of the recording venue tended to obscure the detail in the loud passages; however this did not obtrude the thrilling experience.

The finale is particularly challenging containing disparate elements that need to be brought together or at least contrasted within sonata form. The stormy opening was played briskly but not hurriedly. The brass chorale played in the storm section contains some antiphonal effects. These were played to good effect and were easily clearly discernible. This gives way to one of the most fascinating pieces of composition, the combination of a funeral chorale in the winds and a polka in the strings. The intricate playing in this performance is to be highly praised for its clarity and precision. The subject-group C was played effectively in a stomping manner. The three sections of the development hung well together winding down with the two octave descending scale. The recapitulation begins with the subject-group A. Some find this unconvincing and in a sense redundant, but here it sounded in the right place and at the right time. The rest of the recapitulation continued as to be expected to be followed by an unexpected passage where subject-groups A and C are combined after which the main subject-groups from previous movements are recalled briefly. After this quiet interlude the music builds up to the peroration when we hear the subject-

group A of the first movement played fortissimo by the trumpets. In this recording the trumpets could have been more prominent.

The disparate elements were brought together splendidly in this excellent performance.

The tempi in this performance were just about right, although I would have liked a somewhat brisker pacing in the first two movements. The finale was particularly persuasive.

There are those who maintain that Bruckner's first ideas were often the best, and his revisions were unnecessary. I think that this may be so in the case of this symphony. But just why he embarked on such drastic surgery is beyond me. After hearing this performance I am persuaded that there is a strong case to prefer Bruckner's 1873/4 to the later versions. There are however places in the work that could do with some modest revision.

It is a long work but Bruckner is seldom in a hurry and our patience is rewarded.

The 1874 additional instrumentation could be heard.

Schaller has also recorded Bruckner's **Symphony in No 3 in D minor** in version of 1889, but in the printed edition of Franz Schalk dated 1890. In this edition the actual notes have not been altered; the main difference in the opening pages of the two scores is the staccato markings over the violin figures in the Schalk and the tempo markings.

In this edition we have the advantage of hearing the improved development in the first movement. Schaller brings this off superbly. The second subject-group sounds somewhat clearer in this recording.

One of the disadvantages of this final version is the structure of the slow movement, due to Bruckner's cuts. The central section containing music based on the A theme is 'missing' resulting in the expansion of the material dealing with the B theme. This means that interest can easily wane, however Schaller manages to keep the music going; momentum is maintained leading a beautiful climax.

The scherzo in this performance has a mechanistic feel about it. The trio played somewhat slowly comes as a pleasant contrast to the scherzo.

In some ways the finale is the most problematical. Schaller begins the finale at a steady pace. The playing of the second subject-group is very effective. It is in this movement that Bruckner makes further cuts. Bringing everything together is a real challenge and Schaller lives up to this with full marks. In this version at the recapitulation the first subject-group is omitted. Schaller succeeds in effectively joining, you might say healing the cuts (by no means merely papering over the cracks) made by Bruckner. Critics have been concerned regarding the dominant 13th in the

short chorale just before the final bars; in this performance the added 6th was given just the right emphasis.

I enjoyed this rendering of this seldom heard edition immensely. It is a five star performance.

Anyone interested in the evolution of the Third symphony should refer to Dermot Gault's excellent book *The New Bruckner*.

The sound world of this symphony is miles away from its earlier versions. It is not an easy work to bring off due to some of the inner structural problems but Schaller overcomes these obstacles. In this performance the brass players are on top form. This may not be pure Bruckner or even as he would have wanted it performed, but I found this performance stunning so much so that I played it twice in one day. Schalk's edition may well reflect performance practice of the time. This like many other recordings by Schaller was recorded in Ebrach cathedral with a reverberation of at least five seconds, if not more; this fact could have easily obscured the complex writing but due to the precise playing of the orchestra and the skill of the engineers clarity is for the most part achieved.

This symphony like Bruckner's others is cyclic; however unlike many other composers this is hardly obvious. Some composers make this so obvious that you get the impression that the main theme of the symphony has been specially imported. But in the Fifth Symphony in particular, new themes are derived from others; for example, the bass figure in the second movement is the basis of the main theme in the scherzo, this then becomes the chorale in the finale.

It is a great pity that this recording has not been included in the boxed set of Bruckner's Symphonies.

If I were asked to choose from one of Schaller's two recordings of the Third Symphony, I would go for the third version of 1890, despite the doubtful authenticity of the edition. It has a directness that is lacking in the 1874 version. Thomas Roeder has remarked that the composer and Schalk worked hand in hand to produce a unique amalgam.

Schaller has recorded **Symphony No 4 in E flat** twice in different locations; one version dating from 1878 to 1880 and the one other containing the Volksfest finale from 1878. If all the revisions are included the composition of this symphony covers a wide time span from 1874 to 1888.

As every Brucknerian knows this is the only symphony to which Bruckner gave a title, the Romantic, and a programme. The programme he gives is indeed very brief but it does set the tone of the work, especially when the Volksfest is played as a finale.

I shall take the two recordings together except for the two distinct finales. In these two recordings at the opening of the work I even heard the rustling of leaves from the

upper strings! However, I should add that the programme itself can be put to one side and the symphony be treated as absolute music.

The opening of the work had an open air feel about it. The general sound was translucent. The playing of the second subject group was particularly delicate. Towards the end of the development the transformation of the first subject-group into a chorale was highly effective. These performances brought out Bruckner's well placed positioning of the chorale near the end of the development. The passage leading to the recapitulation (from bar 322) had a decidedly atmospheric feel to it. The recapitulation itself was beautiful; in one of the recordings in particular the first flutist's sensitive playing of the descant was particularly moving. I would like to have heard more from the first two horns just before subject-group B (at bars 71+) and also at a somewhat similar point in the recapitulation (bars 433+); perhaps I am asking too much!

The second movement, a quasi-funeral march, was taken at a steady walking pace. From letter E the pace became animated without any feeling of haste leading to the central climax. This was beautifully played. A very pleasing performance indeed!

Attention to detail was exemplary especially the horn calls in the *tutti* sections of the scherzo. In the trio I was especially fascinated by the phrasing (at bar 3 onwards) which was easily discernible in this version. These are just two little details I noted.

We must thank Schaller for giving us the rare opportunity to hear the Volksfest finale, a movement depicting rainy weather, dating from 1878. This was a persuasive performance. It is a rather strange movement but worth an airing. The opening figure played by the violins suggests drops of rain. Some of those rather strange passages may suggest squalls. It is very easy to miss the recapitulation even with the score in front of you.

I managed to find a manuscript copy of this movement on the Internet.

The other recording Schaller gives a performance of the finale found in the later version, of 1880. This is one of the most difficult finales to bring off, due to the many disparate elements in this score from demonic, struggle victory, quasi-funeral, polka, etc. It is a kaleidoscope of emotions that the conductor has to bring together and this performance succeeded admirably. To achieve this requires flexible tempos and subtle changes of tempo —again very successful in this wonderful performance; I do not recall having heard finer achievement. The opening of the movement leading to the climax culminating in the four horns sounding out the horn call was stunning, although I would like to have heard more from the four horns. I have a problem with this finale, the subject-group C never appears again, unless both my musical ears and my study of the score have missed something. However these little quirks did not detract from this fine rendition of the finale. (There is a similar instance in the Third Symphony of 1889.)

There is another point that many Brucknerians have discussed, is the reprise of the subject-group A really necessary? However Bruckner makes short shrift of this by dismissing it with a wave of the hand, as if to say, Be gone! In the 1888 version this

was deleted. I hope that Schaller will record this version. I get the impression that Bruckner was attempting to forge a new structure for his finales, although it is clear, when it suited him, he would revert to sonata form.

Throughout the horn playing was excellent. I think it was William Carragan who remarked that this symphony was somewhat like a horn concerto, so important is the part they play; in fact the horns are of paramount important in all Bruckner's symphonies. Throughout both of these performances I found the tempo admirable, not stiff and rigid but pleasantly flexible. The tempo never sagged.

All in all I prefer the recording made in the reverberant acoustic of Ebrach Abbey, since the sound is notably richer and for the fine performance of this particular finale.

Balance is always a difficulty in the performance of any of Bruckner symphony; however in these performances most of these difficulties were overcome, allowing the detail of the work to come through admirably even the recording made in the cathedral.

Bruckner's **Symphony No 5 in B flat Major** written between 1875 and 1868 is his swansong to polyphony embracing all the disciplines associated with counterpoint making it one of the most difficult works to perform. It looks good on paper but to realise its intricacies in sound is another matter. How far does this performance achieve this? Here in this work Bruckner resolves the problem of finding a new form for a finale.

The opening of the first movement immediately poses problems of tempo. The score (Haas) is marked Adagio, two in a bar. On this particular matter this performance succeeds in eliciting a slow but forward feeling of duple time. The wet acoustics of the cathedral capture an echo following rests in the brass chorale to good effect. The Allegro starts at quite a brisk pace. I guess that the tempo is about twice that of the opening, that is, one minim equals one crotchet but I am not sure. The various tempos taken in this performance bring out admirably the structure of this sonata movement. At the repeat of the opening leading into the development the inner parts (at bar 247+) could have been brought out a little more. The complex writing was managed with tenacity, (most notably from letter K to N). It is always difficult to hear all the inner parts but to some extent you have to really listen to the overall dramatic effect. It is a sonic carpet. After the stormy development and recapitulation of subject-group A, the subject-group B comes as a welcome calm.

The second movement marked *sehr langsam* felt more like an andante but I thought that was appropriate to the music in question. The subject-group B was played at a tempo where the turn on the second beat could be clearly discerned. Shortly after the first appearance of subject-group B I thought the four horns (from bar 39+) were a little too prominent at times. The climax of this section (at letter C) was well timed, but I would have liked a little more from the brass. The transition (from bar 139) to the final section was beautifully handled. This was truly memorable, especially the

falling intervals. The final section of the movement had a devotional feel about it. This is one of the many prayer-like passages in Bruckner's music, beautifully played.

I have always had difficulties with the scherzo; there is so much going on and much of the detail can be easily lost. One's mind can become overloaded! In this performance much of the counterpoint was discernible. Then there are the deliberate changes of tempo that the movement demands; these were managed well, but they can make the movement difficult to follow, especially when you consider the speed at which the music progresses. And there are also places where the music moves in opposite directions—contrary motion. All these difficulties were well executed.

The finale is an extravaganza of counterpoint. The opening containing reminiscences of the preceding movements with interruptions from the clarinet(s) was a delight. When the fugue began I was a little surprised at the rather slow tempo that was adopted; the score is marked *Allegro moderato*; it was distinctly more *moderato* than *allegro*, however as the music progressed I came to the conclusion that this was going to be suitable for such a complex movement. However I felt that the fugue subject-group needed to be more marked (more *marrkiet*). The subject-group B was a relief after the incessant dotted rhythms, to be followed by the subject-group C derived from the subject-group A with its dotted rhythm. This triad of subject-groups was played most convincingly. There followed the announcement of the famous chorale. When listening to this finale I find myself asking is this really in sonata form, or is it in two parts, the first ending with the 'thin' double bar (210) after the announcement of the chorale? Of course a recapitulation can be sighted at letter Q. This consideration reminds me of the finale of *Symphony in D minor* which is effectively in two parts. This earlier finale also incorporates many contrapuntal devices and combination of subject-groups or part subject-groups foreshadowing Bruckner's Fifth? Returning to the present finale the realisation of the contrapuntal section was outstandingly clear. On reaching the coda the announcement of the main subject-group of the work (at bar 462) by the upper wind was just about distinguishable, but to be fair this is a problem of balance due to Bruckner's scoring. In this performance it was clear that the end was in sight, the momentum never slackened, it persisted to the end. Finally, we arrive at the grand final statement of the chorale played by the brass choir accompanied by the subject-group A. The chorale is extended and the music comes to its natural end; in this riveting and noble performance there is a sense of inevitability about this wonderful conclusion.

For some unknown reason the **Symphony No 6 in A Major** written between 1879 and 1881 is the Cinderella of the canon of nine. I first began by listening to Schaller's recording of this Symphony without reference to a score, in order to get the feel of the whole performance. The next day I listened with the score in front of me. I have two copies of this work, an edition by Woess and the other by Nowak. I understand both editions are questionable when it comes to Bruckner's true intentions.

Overall this is an excellent performance of one of Bruckner's most intricate works. There are places where the writing is extremely complex; in such places it is important

to be able to hear the inner parts. This first appears in the second subject-group and more particularly in development of the first movement. On these and subsequent occasions all was well. The violins opened the work with a repeated rhythmic figure played crisply. The lead into the recapitulation has a certain feeling of inevitability about it. This is no doubt due to a forward pacing of the movement. The coda, which glides easily from one key to another, is one of the most beautiful that Bruckner ever wrote, however I felt that the solo brass in the coda (bars 337 to 352) could have been a little more prominent. At the conclusion (from bars 361 onwards) the accent on the first of each triplet played by the violins came through wonderfully clearly. The whole movement was played with plenty of energy.

The second movement, one of Bruckner's greatest, was well paced and well played. The passages of light and darkness were well contrasted. The anguish of the movement was very moving. The lead up to the climaxes (at bars 37 to 40) and later (at bars 125 to 128) were extremely well timed and impressive. The coda was played a little more slowly and with great sensitivity.

I was a little disappointed with opening of the scherzo. I expect, as it were, little flashes of light from the first violins and the woodwind; for me this was not there. On the whole I felt there could have been a rather more forwardness in the scherzo. However, congratulations to the magnificent horn playing in the trio section.

The finale, like that of other Bruckner's symphonies presents real problems for the conductor, but these were happily overcome. The changes of tempo were well handled. I have in mind particularly the development section. It begins slowly and somehow the conductor has to pick up the opening tempo at the recapitulation. Sudden changes of tempo decimate the structure of the movement. In this performance of the development the increase in tempo was imperceptible, so that the listener was almost unaware that at the reprise of the first subject-group the opening tempo has been resumed, moreover the accompanying figuration in the strings did not give the impression that Bruckner was returning home from a night on the tiles, but that of angels dancing around the Throne of God.

The balance of the orchestra and recording was about right. At no time did the timpani dominate the orchestra as can so often happen in recordings.

A beautiful performance of a great work.

There is just one version of the **Symphony No 7 in E Major** written between 1875 and 1876; however there are several editions. There are more tempo markings in the Nowak edition than in the Haas edition. Interestingly this symphony is the only one where Bruckner left metronome markings.

The first movement contains many tempo markings with a metronome indication. Schaller gives this due consideration as is exemplified by his rendering of this movement. He truly understands the complexity of this movement, which makes up, like many of Bruckner's symphonic works, blocks of sound. The task of the conductor

is to bring these contrasting blocks into some semblance of unity. It is a question of diversity in unity. Schaller understands the task and fulfils it admirably. The tempo marking for the opening of the work is *allegro moderato*. I am always worried about how conductors begin the work, all too often the opening subject-group is played so slowly, more *moderato* than *allegro*, that one can be mistaken for thinking that this a slow movement. Needless to say Schaller does not fall into this trap. Schaller brings out the contrasting blocks of sound to great effect within the classical sonata form. All in all this is a fine performance of this movement.

In some ways the second movement does not involve the complexities of the first movement. The form is pretty straightforward, five part song form. The first climax culminating at bar 131 is well timed. However Schaller saves the full power of his orchestra for the main climax. I have always been in two minds regarding the use of the percussion here but in this performance I had no hesitations. The effect here is quite dazzling. I found just one quibble, why do the two oboes (at bar 31) near the conclusion of section A speed up? The pacing was excellent throughout this movement. The fine coda was played with refinement.

The third movement contains a scherzo and trio as usual. The scherzo is given a lively performance to be followed by a somewhat limpid trio, finely contrasted.

Many feel that the climax of this symphony is in the slow movement, at the famous climax clash. With this in mind is it possible to have the final climax in the finale? I think Bruckner solved this problem by composing an unusual finale, a finale that in some ways presents certain problems. A friend who was not a trained musician in any way, but nevertheless a keen admirer of Bruckner could not get on with this finale. It does help to have an idea of the structure of the movement. Robert Simpson in his book *The Essence of Bruckner* states that the composer was writing in a 'new' form but never states what this form is—reversed sonata form. This movement, somewhat like the first movement, is peppered with tempo changes. Schaller again fully understands these complexities and brings out the form admirably. No opportunity is lost to contrast the light subject-group A with the serene chorale and heavy subject-group C played at a somewhat slower tempo. We eagerly wait for the return of the home key and the majestic coda. A wonderful interpretation of this symphony!

I have three complete scores of Bruckner's monumental **Symphony No 8 in C Minor**—1887, 1890, the Haas edition, and also the intermediate adagio of 1888.

The opening of Schaller's recording of this work somewhat surprised me, for I found the deliberate tempo initially on the slow side, perhaps it was more *moderato* rather than *allegro*, but it worked. The tempo chosen gave seriousness and depth to the music. No doubt due to the chosen tempo the climaxes were well placed. The first big climax at the recapitulation came over very well, and had a feeling of having been foreordained. After the reprise of the second subject-group there was a doleful passage of further winding down, which is peculiar to this experimental version. I found this particular material beautifully played, exquisite and very moving indeed. The jagged

third subject-group leads to the famous climax culminating in the fanfare of the three trumpets. I feel that in this performance, this was the climax of the movement. Does the coda found here and in the first version sound convincing?

In the Scherzo the clarity especially the violins figuration at the beginning and its continuation was excellent. In the trio the horns were on top form. A delight!

The lower strings wave-like, pulsating, rhythm heard at the beginning of the slow movement was clearly maintained throughout. There is a tendency for some conductors to play the subject-group B too quickly, but to my mind in this performance the tempo was spot on. There was some delightful playing from the tuben (especially at bar 139+). The accelerando just before this was well judged. The final section leading to the climax can be difficult to bring off, but in this case it was managed well. Once again the horns were on top form. I found the playing of this rarely heard movement a delight and very moving, especially the four horns solo just before the climax (at bars 251 to 253). I regret Bruckner not including this short passage in his final version.

The finale, unlike the first movement is not an easy movement to pull off due to its structure. Whereas the first movement is in concise sonata form, the finale, although in the same form, consists of blocks of music in different tempi and styles. It is somewhat like a jigsaw with unequal pieces. The opening tempo was deliberate, matching the first movement. The contrasting chorale sections were fine. The third subject-group, the funeral-like march was, unlike in some performances, played at one tempo throughout. From here the music pressed on hesitantly and teasingly until the opening subject-group eventually found the home key to be followed by the dance-like passage that gives way to the second subject-group. The long development section was played very convincingly, my only comment being that the cadence at letter Ff (see 1890 version) could have been a little more pointed. The recall of the opening subject-group of the whole symphony can sound contrived but in this performance all was well. There followed the splendid coda—the famous piling up of the main subject-groups of the symphony—what a glorious ending in this performance.

All in all a splendid performance of an unusual version.

When I was about 20, some 60 years, ago, I heard for the first time Bruckner's **Symphony in No 9 in D Minor**. It hit me! I cannot now remember the conductor or the orchestra involved. At the time Bruckner for was almost unknown in Britain and generally in English speaking countries. I was fortunate at the time in having a reel to reel recorder. The performance was broadcast by the BBC on the Third Programme, the precursor of the present Radio 3. I recorded the work and played the tape many, many times. It's a wonder I did not wear out the iron oxide on the tape itself. Bruckner's Ninth has continued to hold its fascination for me. It is the first Bruckner score that I purchased.

Why the fascination, what was it that had seized my concentration so dramatically? Looking back over those many years I cannot quite remember, what it was in those far off days. Was it something that resonated in my unconscious, that sense of foreboding, that deep foreboding that runs throughout the whole work? That seems to me to be the subject-group that binds the whole work together. It is not a musical subject-group, so much an emotional or possibly a spiritual one.

The composition of this symphony spans a wide range from 1887 to 1896.

Schaller has recorded this work twice, first in 2011 with the completion by William Carragan, and again in 2016 with his own completion. In this review I am concentrating on the 2016 recording.

Mystery pervades the whole of the first movement, and the horns clearly indicate that this going to be a great performance. The music moves steadily to a beautiful realization of the subject-group B. This subject-group is far from obvious, since it contains many contrapuntal strands. One cannot take the subject-group out of its environment, so to speak, for it is dependent on the many parts. You cannot isolate the subject-group as such and you cannot sing it aloud; the best you can do is to sing the whole subject-group in your head including the parts! This section requires a translucent string tone, and the orchestra under Schaller succeed admirably in this respect. The subject-group C is played with a gentle swaying manner which befits its inner nature, one which is both rather heavy and reflective, at the same time. Under the firm control of the conductor the ideas already heard are developed. The climaxes are well controlled. The recall of the subject-group B is a welcome relief after the previous turmoil. At this point the sense of angst increases. It is as though the conductor has saved this intensification for precisely this point in the movement. The sections of the movement are well balanced. The general control of the changes of tempo is well chosen and the pacing of this movement is excellent. An outstanding performance!

The conductor gives a superb rendering of the scherzo and again he chooses a brisk but steady tempo that allows the cumbersome quality of the movement to emerge clearly. The unsettling nature of this movement is portrayed brilliantly and yet underneath the dance element remains. The phantoms are clearly portrayed in the trio especially those that take flight in the central section.

The strings present the foreboding opening of the slow movement in fine style leading to the ray of light in D major which soon fades. (The opening bar is somewhat similar to the opening of Richard Wagner's Faust Overture.) After the wonderful fanfares and some contemplative playing from the horns we are led to the next section. The playing of this movement is highly memorable especially the chorale like passage played by the mainly divided strings and that which follows just before the beginning of the last section of the movement. The lead up to the famous discord is played with confidence. The movement ends peacefully with some glorious playing from the horns and woodwind. Throughout this movement the climaxes are well controlled. Since this is a four movement version of the work, the tempi chosen in the three previous movements must be chosen carefully, especially the closing of the slow movement; if

allowed to sound like the termination of the whole work then any completed finale will inevitably sound like optional extra. The conclusion of the third movement and the start of the finale should be very short.

(The following comments apply to Schaller's completion.)

The opening of the finale with its jagged subject-group invokes a feeling of expectancy. It has an air of uncertainty and instability in tune with much that has gone before. Then we come to the big dotted subject-group that is played here with great precision and confidence. It is pretty frightening stuff. After a sigh or two from the brass, the subject-group B appears. Although a rather neutral subject-group, it has a lyrical twist in the middle that is here played alluringly and with great care to detail. After the famous chorale follows the development played here with great zest. The reprise of subject-group B is here taken a little slower than that of its first appearance; that seems totally appropriate, for it is like the calm after the storm. Just before the return of the chorale the music bursts into a panic. Interestingly at the return of the chorale Schaller has added calls from the brass thus heightening the tension. The music builds up and up then dies down to begin the coda with the second violins and violas quiet tremolo. Once again the music intensifies to a discord to be followed by a return to the opening of the symphony. With confidence the music continues and we are lead to a wonderful blaze of D major, the home key but transformed from minor to major.

It has been very difficult to write anything really meaningful about this completion without a score or notes appertaining to this important finale.

During the finale the brass have many highly important parts to bring off and they do so with flying colours. In fact, the whole orchestra have excelled themselves in this mighty performance of this mighty symphony.

Of all the completions that I have heard that are available on record, this is the one I find most convincing and indeed thrilling. I do however find William Carragan's completion also satisfying.

The above was written before I obtained a copy of Schaller's book on how he came to complete the finale of Bruckner's Ninth Symphony. After the preface the book begins with a section on the formal structure of the finale. There follows an analysis of the individual sections of the movement. This is very detailed and requires a sound grounding in form and harmony. There are many examples of harmonic progressions. Next is a section giving a list of materials that he consulted. As most Brucknerians will already know some pages of the finale were lost and this has resulted in gaps some small some large that have to be filled in. Schaller gives a list of the existing pages that have survived, and to fill in the gaps he has where possible gone back to earlier pages of composition to fill in the music; if this was not possible he has had to compose the music himself. Finally, there is the full orchestral score.

The full score including the preface in English is easily available from the publishers, Ries & Erler, Berlin; www.rieserler.de

On my first hearing I was very impressed with Schaller's completion I was often aware of the gaps, but in this completion the music moves along in one piece as it were.

Postscript

Tempo is a difficult matter, especially in the openings of the Fifth and Seventh Symphonies. From early recordings we know that Bruckner's music was often played quicker than most of today's performances. Schaller manages tempi which allow most of the intricate inner parts to be clearly discernible. I found Schaller's pacing excellent. This was particularly noticeable in the slow movements of the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies. Initially we had a disagreement regarding the opening tempo of the Symphony in D minor.

As noted earlier most of Schaller's recordings took place in the Abbey Church in the former Cistercian monastery at Ebrach in Franconia, where the reverberation is at least five seconds; thus the blurring of some parts is inevitable, however the recording engineers have to a large extent overcome this problem. The other recording venue, Regentenbau Bad Kissingen, has a drier acoustic.

Finally, Gerd Schaller's approach to Bruckner's symphonies could be described as highly disciplined and never ever self-indulgent.