DISCOVERING BRUCKNER – A LISTENER'S APPROACH By David Aldeborgh

My talk this evening will focus more on the personalist and subjectivist experience of listening to Bruckner, rather than on the formal and academic aspects, although I will touch on those too. If you will indulge me a little personal reminiscences before launching into my subject, I think I can set the stage for making clear what for me is important in music, and of course, in Bruckner.

In the course of my childhood and youth, I had a lot of exposure to good music, beginning in the Reformed Church in Poughkeepsie where my parents took me to services and to Sunday school -- a church that has always had a good choir and a beautiful organ. On Special Sundays, such as Easter, we might also be treated to trumpets and strings, or French horns or flutes, or even a harp. We also participated in music by singing hymns. Although I didn't realize it at the time, a foundation for appreciating classical music was being laid, for hymns are serious music, as are the anthems we heard sung by the choir.

The grammar school I attended -- a private school -- had a very good music teacher who taught us English and European folk songs, French and Spanish Christmas carols, selections from Gilbert & Sullivan, etc., as well as how to play the recorder. My parents also took me to a number of concerts, including a recital by Rachmininoff, and I had 3 years of piano lessons -- but none of this awakened in me a conscious love of classical music as such. -That had to wait until my senior year at Choate (1945-1946). I was assigned a new room mate who happened to have a very large 78 r.p.m. classical collection. This person later became a famous playwright of whom you have all heard, namely Edward Albee. He expressed disdain for my love of swing and jazz, and put the 1812 Overture on the record player for me to hear. It blew my mind. The vision of the rockets, the cannon and the bells of Moscow was unbelievably vivid in my mind, and from that moment I was hooked on classical music. My horizons were suddenly wider, much wider. Needless to say, I began my own record collection. One of the albums I bought was Mahler's Das Lied von der Er.de, conducted by Br.uno Walter, with Charles Cullman as tenor. What I loved about music is that it gave me a coherent vision of beauty, of cultural and moral values.

I will now fast-forward to 1960 when, when by chance and on impulse, I bought my first Bruckner recording. It was a Vox album with a lovely photo of a castle tower standing on a lush green hilltop overlooking a river -- I almost bought it for the cover alone. The piece was Br.uckner's Seventh Symphony~ played by the Southwest German Radio Orchestra, Baden-Baden, conducted by Hans Rosbaud. I had a general idea of who Bruckner was, but was not familiar with any of his music.

When I put on the record, I loved the beautiful opening, but my initial reaction to the piece as a whole was decidedly mixed: the melodies are nice, I thought, but the composer doesn't know what to do with them; he jumps from one idea to another without a logical connection; a secondary theme appears

without its being a response to the one that preceded it -- unlike Mozart, Haydn or Beethoven, where a new theme is invariably and clearly a response to the preceding theme, either as a corollary idea or a contrasting one, and if a contrasting one, at least it's a meaningful contrast. With Bruckner it is often a non sequitur -- or at least it so seemed to me. Yet despite what I deemed to be the symphony's faults -- the non-integration of themes into development and resolutions of tensions a la Beethoven or Brahms; the serial quality of the way the themes were strung-out, and the lack of sophistication in transitions -- all of which added up to a sort of primitiveness to my mind (and I should stress that when I encountered this symphony, I was in the middle of a Debussy kick, from which nothing could be further removed in terms of sophistication, nuance, subtlety, orchestral savoir-faire, etc.) -- there was nonetheless something about the music that made me put the needle back to the beginning of the record. With each replay, the perceived faults seemed to disappear, or at least become 1ess intrusive, and I gradually found myself becoming more understanding of the composer's vision. Yes, there was real beauty here.

The next symphony I bought was the Ninth -- the Bruno Walter recording -- but it seemed so grim and dark, its themes so unfeeling and cold, as almost to be repulsive. As with the Seventh, however, and despite my very negative feelings, there was something about the music that made me put the stylus back to the beginning of the record. By coincidence, at this time, I was taking an extension course in philosophy, and, as a homework assignment was reading Plato's dialogue with Timaeus, which concerns itself with the origin of the universe: a universe (if I may snatch a few phrases) created by God from an eternal archetype, composed of fire, earth, air and water, harmonized by proportion; the shape of the universe being a sphere, having harmony within its parts, being at peace within itself, having a soul and a body revolving in a circle; a universe which could not exist without a third nature known as space, which may be compared with the mother or containing principle, whereas the source of all things may be likened to the father or causative principle, and the intermediate nature/which results in physical manifestation may be compared to the child or principle of generation; the receptacle, space, being no element such as the four out of which the universe was made, but an invisible being which, in an incomprehensible manner, partakes of the intelligible, etc., etc. Cosmic thoughts of this type are what make up the Timaeus, and, while reading it put on the Ninth again -- the record was already on the turntable -- and suddenly my mind was opened to the vision of the Ninth: a cosmic vision which caused the thoughts in the Timaeus to leap off the page and the music to reveal its secrets.

I am not suggesting that it was Bruckner's intention to describe the creation of the universe, but rather that the level of vision in this music is truly cosmic, concerning itself with eternal verities. As with the great Amen in Sir Arthur Sullivan's The Lost Chord, this experience "trembled away into silence as if it were loath to cease; I have sought, but I seek it vainly, that one lost chord divine, which came from the soul of the organ and entered into mine" -- by which I mean to say that I have sought to reproduce this experience by reading the Timaeus and playing the record, but it never quite works the second time around. However, this event was my first true insight into understanding what Bruckner is really about: his thoughts are huge, majestic and deeply felt, but seldom, if ever, personalist or sentimental. The vast

scope of his symphonic structures reveals a sense of proportion, and, like the motions of the planets, the themes must take their time to come around. This horizontal successiveness is an important part of Bruckner aesthetic. And what do I now say about a theme that doesn't seem to relate to its predecessor? "It's just another planet, and if you wait, it will come around again. In any case, it's all heavenly.

I must admit that everyone of Bruckner's symphonies gave me some trouble as a listener on first acquaintance, with the exception of the Eighth -- the van Beinum recording on Epic label --which absolutely bowled me over on first hearing. Even with that one, I had a slight problem with the mutual irrelevance of the opening themes in the finale, but this difficulty evaporated after a few hearings. With respect to the other symphonies, the most difficult movement for me to come to terms with was the finale to the Sixth, which struck me as a crazy-quilt patchwork comprising starts and stops of mutually irrelevant themes, the composer constantly interrupting himself before completing an idea, with the intrusion of another -- or so it seemed to me. I now enjoy the movement thoroughly, though it must be admitted that he does interrupt himself repeatedly in preparing the final climax of the movement, as he does in the finale of the Seventh and in the closing pages of the Haas edition of the Second Symphony. But again, these problems tend to evaporate with repeated hearings, but the vision remains.

Lack of time this evening is going to prevent my going into the question of the various versions of Bruckner's symphonies in any depth, but I must touch on this briefly. Bruckner himself was responsible for most of the revisions, leaving us two versions of he First, two of the Second, four of the Third, four of the Fourth, one version of the Fifth (a previous version having been mostly obliterated on the original manuscript by the composer and therefore not recoverable); one version of the Sixth, one version of the Seventh (a dispute remaining as to whether or not there should be percussion in the adagio, two versions of the Eighth and one of the Ninth: a total of eighteen or so versions by the composer, depending on how you count the several variant movements. In addition, one must include the first-published editions, which received considerable input from Bruckner's star pupils and chief apostles Franz Schalk and Ferdinand Loewe, both of whom became Vienna's leading conductors of the Vienna State Opera and the Vienna Symphony respectively, and who did more than anyone to promote the music of Anton Bruckner and establish his reputation as a composer. In the case of the Fourth Symphony, despite the significant input of by Loewe and Schalk (in my opinion, the fingerprints are primarily Loewe's), the composer's involvement was such that it must be considered his own, and it should become part of the critical Complete Edition -- which it is not at the present time. The Fifth Symphony is another matter, however. It was subjected to major revisions by Franz Schalk, these revisions resulting from alleged discussions in preparation for the premiere performance which took place under Franz Schalk in Graz, Austria, in 1894. That some discussion took place with the ailing composer is undoubtedly true, and he may have approved a number of changes, such as the additional brass with the cymbal and triangle in the coda to the finale, and even some of the cuts for performance purposes (a total of 122 bars in the finale), it is unlikely in the extreme that the alterations in orchestration, which are so pervasive throughout the work, were done with the knowledge or approval

of the composer. The same applies to the emendations in the posthumously published first edition of the Ninth as edited and revised by Ferdinand Loewe. Nevertheless, one cannot deny the great beauty of these revised versions, which, to my mind, do not impede but in certain passages, enhance the composer's vision. The Sixth and Eighth Symphonies were also subject to revisions by the editors of the first editions, Cyrill Hynais and Max von Oberleithner respectively - but these revisions were relatively minor.

The proliferation of versions does not end here, however. The critical Collected Edition of all of Bruckner's music was launched by the International Bruckner Society in 1929 under the editorship of Robert Haas, the newly appointed Director of the Music Collection at the Austrian National Library. Haas was an extremely ambitious and hard-working scholar whose original intention was to publish the final version of each of Bruckner's works, but, in the case of the Second and Eighth Symphonies, he concluded that a number of passages in the composer's earlier versions of these works were beautiful enough or important enough to be incorporated into the critical edition. As a result, he actually created hybrid versions of these two symphonies. In 1945, Robert Haas was relieved of his post because of his Nazi connections, and his successor, Leopold Nowak, rejected much of Haas's work, and republished all of the symphonies, including the Second and the Eighth. Oddly enough, he retained (with minor modifications) Haas's hybridization of the Second, but published the Eighth according to Bruckner's final 1890 score. It was Nowak's intention to publish each of Bruckner's versions of all the symphonies, and realizing his inconsistency with respect to the Second, appointed Bill Carragan to be the official editor of the Second Symphony, on the strength of Bill's scholarship in his completion of the unfinished finale to the Ninth Symphony.

In summary, the combined Haas-Nowak output on the nine symphonies alone comes to some 25 volumes -- all of which are available and in use. Conductors today tend to be divided into either Haas or Nowak partisans. Virtually no one performs the first-edition versions any more, but, like the planets, their day may come around again -- I hope.

Getting back to the question of approaching Bruckner as a listener, it is important to understand the composer's aesthetic is different from that of other romantic symphonists, as I have tried to point out. His forms are not as integrated as those of Brahms, for example. In Brahms, form and substance are inseparable, whereas in Bruckner this is not always the case. An example which (to me) proves this is the finale of the 1889 version of the Fourth Symphony -- the so-called Loewe/Schalk version -- in which the first theme is completely eliminated from the recapitulation. In the original, so-called 1878/80 version, which one usually hears today, the theme is in the recapitulation all right, but as a disconnected brass enclave that, musically speaking, goes absolutely nowhere. It utterly fails to function in the traditional manner as a welcome return to home territory from which the development lead you, as in a Mozart or Beethoven symphony; but because the sonata form requires it, Bruckner stuck it there. I can see no other reason for its presence. Thus for Bruckner, the sonata form was essentially a framework on

which he tacked his ideas -- ideas which could as well (in some cases, at least) be tacked onto a different form. Another example is the Schalk version of the Fifth, in which the revision virtually converts the form of the movement from a sonata-allegro into an exposition and fugue, with little of effectiveness on the listener -- arguably a gain, in fact, as a certain amount of ponderousness is avoided.

As a composer, Bruckner is generally very square, following the nominal requirements of form -- as to end up with a very symmetrical design. In most of his scherzo movements, the scherzo proper is repeated in its entirety after the trio. I know of no other composer who does this. In the case of the Fifth Symphony, for example, this means that the listener must hear an entire sonata-allegro twice, that being the form of the scherzo proper in this case. In Schalk's revision, only the recapitulation of the scherzo proper is reprised after the trio. In the Loewe/Schalk version of the Fourth, the reprise of the hunting scherzo is shortened by a cut and fitted with a second ending -- to the piece's great advantage, in my opinion such revisions reflect the origin of the scherzo form in the classical minuet, in which the repeats within the minuet proper were eliminated in the reprise after the trio section, hereby shortening it and it has certainly been the practice of most composers to foreshorten the reprise of the scherzo after the trio. Having said this, I must acknowledge that Bruckner's scherzos are, without exception, superb and wonderful creations which I (if you will pardon my ambivalence) don't mind hearing twice. I'm not sure that everyone in the audience feels that way, however.

Since this is a gathering of Mahlerites, I would like to touch briefly on a few aspects of Bruckner's symphonies that seem to have something in common with those of Mahler. First of all, both composers were Austrian and loved to write very long symphonies, significant portions of which reflect Austrian culture. One thinks at once of the laendler rhythms and folk music references, particularly in the scherzos of each of these composers. Secondly, each of these symphonists were masters of the adagio, and composed slow movements that are without equal in Romantic music. Bruckner's late music pointed to the 20th century, and Mahler's entered it, making the full transition from the Romantic into the modern era, and with a noticeable change in style. Both composers were obsessed with death, and the Ninth Symphony of each constitutes a farewell to life. Furthermore, both composers suffered from mental or emotional problems at one point or another in their lives.

Although the names of Bruckner and Mahler are often linked, the two composers were profoundly different from each other, and the differences in their music exceed the similarities. It is well known that followers of Bruckner are often uncomfortable in listening to Mahler's music, and vice-versa. I am hopeful that this evening will have strengthened the bridge of friendship that should exist between the aficionados of each of these two great masters.

In closing, I would like to quote from the late American critic Paul Rosenfeld. I lifted the quote from an album cover that was published in 1956 at which time the quote was already 30 years old which makes it 70 years old! It seems to touch the essence of the Bruckner vision:

"Bruckner's symphonies have scarce commenced heaving their mighty volumes through time, before we know we are come into a world of deep breaths and far vistas and profound experience. Bruckner's works are large in form as in conception. They bring us into contact with and elemental and taurian strength. The lung capacity of the man, the vast span of his themes and thematic groups make the majority of composers seem asthmatic ... Once the slow, ox-like power is gotten into motion, once the Bruckner orchestra begins squaring its great monoliths of tone, then, mountainous things begin to happen. The great battering rams are slowly gotten into action. But, once heaved forward, they crash walls down. The man was an innocent, seeing only his own idea ... Where a world felt lightness of life and the decay of state and modern commercial tempi, there the little organist found the walls and windows and vaulting of a cathedral nave; and the high experiences that transformed themselves imperceptibly into solemn trumpetings and ecstatic gamuts of his unworldly musics ... "