

The Bruckner Ninth Finale – An opinion by John F. Berky

As I look through the Bruckner Discography and the Archive I am impressed by the number of performances of the Finale to the Bruckner Symphony No. 9 that have taken place since 1984 when the early versions of the completions by William Carragan and Samale and Mazzuca were first performed. Both of those completions have gone through extensive revisions and the Samale/Mazzuca collaboration now includes the work of Benjamin Gunnar Cohrs and John Phillips. In addition, completions by Nors Josephson and Sebastien Letocart have received performances. It has grown to be a significant list of recordings.

Yet in these twenty eight years, most conductors have shied away from the Finale completions and most performances that have been given of the Finale have been “one night stands.” Only recently, Sir Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic have placed the Finale (the SPCM 2012 completion) into a concert schedule sequence which included a performance in Carnegie Hall and a recording with EMI. This recent effort by Rattle may well be the best chance that the Finale (in any of its completions) may have in gaining a foothold in the concert repertoire. Only time will tell.

My thoughts on the Finale completion have remained interestingly consistent over the years and I have been listening ever since the first completions appeared in the mid ‘80s. As good and as great as many of these performances have been I always get the feeling that, with the first three incredible movements, Bruckner may have “painted himself into a corner.” By saying this, I am not implying that Bruckner could never have finished the Ninth Symphony. Taking my analogy further, given enough time and sustenance, a painter would wait for the paint to dry, then step out and finish the job. So too, if Bruckner had been able to maintain his health and his mental stamina into the mid 1890s than Bruckner would have eventually given us a Finale that would have been the crowning glory of his Ninth Symphony. However, Bruckner’s health was clearly declining and his ability to cap off this final symphony had simply become too great a challenge.

In Theophil Antonicek's book on Bruckner and the Hofkapelle (Pages 118-119) he discusses Bruckner's 1892 retirement from the Hofkapelle on medical grounds, and quotes a medical certificate, signed by 2 leading practitioners, which lists 'general sclerosis of the arteries', with consequent weakening of the heart muscles and valves, 'atrophy of the liver' (cirrhosis hepatitis) with persistent digestive problems, and diabetes. Unlike the unfinished works of Mozart, Schubert and Mahler, those uncompleted scores were left when the composers were at the peak of their creative powers. Bruckner was clearly in a state of steady decline and had been for four years.

Adding to this challenge was the incredible quality and originality of the three completed movements. It was the tragic combination of the inspiration of the first three movements coupled with his declining health has left us with a fascinating torso, but one that ultimately does not sufficiently round out the rest of the symphony.

Some may feel that this was God’s way of bringing Bruckner’s creative life to an end. That He took the composer’s pen away and we should be content with a symphony that ends with the Adagio. I find no solace in such thoughts. For me, this was simply a physical phenomenon that

occurs with incredible frequency. People's lives usually do not end neatly. Sudden deaths often leave many things undone and while longer illnesses may allow some to sort out their affairs; others struggle in a desperate attempt to finish what they have started. The nature and degree of their illness and their stamina are the primary factors in their eventual success or failure.

I love to hear the Finale performed and we owe the completionists our heartfelt thanks for letting us hear what Bruckner was composing at the time of his death. They have brought the sketches to life and they are fascinating to hear. They also help to remind us that Bruckner had every intention of putting a fourth movement on the Ninth Symphony. He even proposed that the Te Deum be played if he could not complete the Finale. So while there should be no doubt that Bruckner wanted a fourth movement and struggled with it to his dying day, I can only sense that the struggle was far from a cohesive conclusion. He had already spent more time on this one movement than he had on entire symphonies. He was clearly struggling.

One of the dilemmas facing the completionists is that they are bound to these sketches and the moment music notation shows up on the page, they must adhere strictly to what has been written. But we all know that Bruckner was a constant reviser so what has been partially written here could well be a first cut at an extremely challenging symphonic movement.

Yet, in spite of what I said earlier regarding the clear intent by Bruckner to compose a fourth movement, there is also something about the way that the Adagio ends that makes me feel that Bruckner may have been accepting his fate to some degree. The ferocity of the Adagio's climax, clearly the most powerful and poignant and groundbreaking a passage that Bruckner ever wrote, is followed by a heart wrenching passage of acceptance and resignation. There is nothing else like this in Bruckner's music. So while I have no doubt that Bruckner wanted to continue on and did so, I think he knew that the task before him might just be too much for him to accomplish and the ending of the Adagio may be a form of resigned farewell.

So while I look forward to every performance of the Symphony with its Finale, I still inherently feel that Bruckner knew that the Ninth may just have to end after the Adagio and he left it to us in a way that lets us understand his struggle but also brings us to a moment of peaceful acceptance where Bruckner is as musically close to his God as he would ever be.