

Anton Bruckner and the Legacy of the National Socialist's Propaganda

by John F. Berky, editor, www.abruckner.com

THERE WILL be little or no disagreement among us that what happened in Germany during the National Socialist regime of the 1930's and 40's was one of the greatest tragedies in history. Perhaps one of the biggest questions that continues to bedevil us about that epoch was just how it could have happened. It is easy to characterize Hitler, Goering, and Goebbels as evil demented leaders, but they were leaders who were able to move an entire nation into global war and mass annihilation, so while we condemn them for the enormity of what they did, we cannot but be in awe of the effectiveness of their methods. There is little doubt that their program, monstrous as it was, was imposed with frightening efficiency.

One of the most efficient and effective aspects of the National Socialist machine was its propaganda arm, and it was partly through their masterful use of propaganda that the Nazis were able to unify the nation to their catastrophic cause. Hardly an issue escaped their watchful eye and they worked everything to their mission. They were shrewd enough to see that music and the arts would be an important part of their propaganda strategy. For it to be so, they needed to take control and they did.

In this brief essay, I will show how the National Socialist machine not only used the music of Anton Bruckner to its advantage but also how certain aspects of their propaganda linger with us today. On the political front, most Nazi ideology has been blunted or eliminated, but in the strange case of Anton Bruckner, much of their skillful manipulation of the facts remains with us today.

In many ways, the National Socialist's approach to music was a metaphor and a precursor to their program of mass exterminations. 1937 was a pivotal year for art in Germany and for Anton Bruckner's music within that spectrum. In June of 1937, Joseph Goebbels marked the occasion of Anton Bruckner's bust being placed at the German Cultural Temple of Valhalla. In a carefully crafted speech, he linked Bruckner's life and art to the German soil. Bruckner was the personification of a German artist. This speech is a case study in factual manipulation¹.

The following month, Adolf Hitler opened the Great Exhibition of German Art in Munich with a long speech that linked many of Germany's past woes to the undercurrent of degenerate art that permeated German society. In conclusion, Hitler said,

"I do not want anyone to have false illusions: National Socialism has made it its primary task to rid the German Reich, and thus, the German people and its life of all those influences which are fatal and ruinous to its existence. And although this purge cannot be accomplished in one day, I do not want to leave a shadow of a doubt as to the fact that sooner or later the hour of liquidation will strike for those phenomena which have participated in this corruption. But with the opening of this exhibition the end of German art foolishness and the end of the destruction of its culture will have begun. From now on we will wage an unrelenting war of purification against the last elements of putrefaction in our culture."

This 'unrelenting war of purification' in culture is, of course, thoroughly consonant with Hitler's and the Nazi's racial policies that began to take effect with the anti-Jewish legislation of 1933, and that eventually became the foundation of Hitler's 'Final Solution'. In essence, their policies for art were fully in line with the social policies that led to the extermination of millions.

I am not going to dwell on the way in which Bruckner and his music were woven into the fabric of German cultural life, suffice it to say it took on nearly sacred dimensions. There are excellent essays by Benjamin Korstvedt², Bryan Gilliam³, and Mortin Solvik⁴ that discuss this process in detail. My intention here is to focus on the legacy.

In Goebbels' speech at Valhalla, two important points are raised. He speaks of Bruckner's life and he cleverly manipulates the story to match his political agenda. He speaks of Bruckner's naiveté and how he was manipulated by people who wanted to change his music. He also speaks of the urban intelligentsia in Vienna that made Bruckner's life so miserable. By doing so, he is bringing in the spectre of foreign influences that will later be condemned in Hitler's speech. He also roots Bruckner into the rural communities and the common folk – the backbone of the German race. And in this same speech, he announces that the Reich will be funding the preparation and publication of the Bruckner scores in their original editions – taken directly from the manuscripts. This project was to be under the directorship of Robert Haas.

As Haas took on his role as editor of this new Bruckner edition, he firmly stated that the early published editions are to be repudiated due to the interference by Bruckner's associates. There is a natural tendency for him to make this claim since it adds credibility and necessity to his project. Many Bruckner scholars openly criticized Haas' firm stance regarding the first published editions. Articles pop up in various music journals, but after Goebbels' Valhalla speech the concept of purification became an agenda of the Nazis and criticism, as one can imagine, quickly subsided. The strategy was firmly in place. Bruckner was bedeviled by foreign influences and the new edition would correct and repudiate these flawed scores.

The one notorious example of comparing the "original version" with a published version was the direct comparison of the Symphony No. 9 in the version edited by Alfred Orel, and the published edition prepared after Bruckner's death by Ferdinand Loewe. This direct comparison concert was given by the Munich Philharmonic conducted by Siegmund van Hausegger, on April 2, 1932. In this case, Orel's edition, taken from the manuscript, came to be the clear favorite. But it must be remembered that the published edition was one prepared after Bruckner's death thus he had no part in the preparation of the publication. Orel, even as the editor of this original version, saw a degree of validity in the published versions prepared during Bruckner's life. He squared off against Haas on this issue but this triggered his dismissal from his role in the preparation of the Bruckner Edition.

After the war, Haas was himself dismissed from his position and the edition was handed over to Leopold Nowak. For aesthetic reasons and for purposes of getting the Bruckner scores back into the hands of an Austrian publisher, Nowak set out on a new approach to the Bruckner manuscripts. He not only prepared new editions, but went through the process of preparing versions of Bruckner's symphonies at different periods of revision. This was especially true in the Symphonies No. 2 & 8 where Haas chose to amalgamate two differing versions of the manuscripts. There is a continuing debate amongst Bruckner enthusiasts regarding the use of Haas or Nowak editions, but that debate, as interesting as it can be, is not within the scope of this essay. What is at issue here is that both Haas and Nowak chose to go back to the manuscripts and ignore the first published editions.

By the end of the war, two issues regarding Bruckner seem to have squeezed through the net unchallenged – and both were carefully woven into Goebbel's infamous speech.

1. Bruckner's naiveté and his inability to hold fast to his principles thus allowing foreign influences

into his scores: While Haas referred to these people in purely negative terms, later researchers mitigated the criticism by referring to them as "well-meaning but misguided" assistants. They dropped the racially loaded innuendos, but they still ignored the fact that Bruckner was actively involved with the editions to which they were referring.

2. The importance of going back to the manuscripts with their almost complete lack of performance markings. We usually refer to these now as "original editions." It seems interesting to note that many of the German conductors during the war stuck to interpretations which included elements of the first published editions, but after the war, this practice all but disappeared. A whole new crop of conductors embraced either Haas or Nowak but never went back to the scores that, in many cases, were prepared by Bruckner after he had an opportunity to hear the given work in performance.

So, even though we abominate the actions of the National Socialists, and as much as we enjoy and hold dear the music of Anton Bruckner, we seem to have allowed some of the cleverly manipulated propaganda of the Nazis to linger unchallenged and it has – as the Nazis hoped it would – influenced the way we think of Bruckner and affected the way we present and listen to his music. It is as if the life and work of Anton Bruckner, as it was known from his time forward, ran through some form of information filter that subsequently changed our perceptions. As I said at the beginning of this essay, we may abhor the whole panoply of National Socialist propaganda, but we cannot but be impressed by the way they have effectively manipulated public perceptions to this day.

1. See 'Goebbels's Regensburg address' in Gilliam, Bryan, 'The Annexation of Anton Bruckner: Nazi Revisionism and the Politics of Appropriation', T.L.Jackson and P Hawkshaw (eds.), *Bruckner Studies* (Cambridge, 1997) pp72-90, reprinted from *The Musical Quarterly* 78, 584-604

2. Korstvedt, Benjamin M., 'Anton Bruckner in the Third Reich and after: an Essay on Ideology and Bruckner Reception', *The Musical Quarterly* 80 (1996), 132-60; and ' "Return to the pure sources": the ideology and text-critical legacy of the first Bruckner *Gesamtausgabe*' *Bruckner Studies* (Cambridge, 1997) pp 91-109

3. Gilliam, Bryan, 'The Annexation of Anton Bruckner: Nazi Revisionism and the Politics of Appropriation', T.L.Jackson and P Hawkshaw (eds.), *Bruckner Studies* (Cambridge, 1997) pp72-90, reprinted from *The Musical Quarterly* 78, 584-604
4. Solvik, Morten, 'The International Bruckner Society and the N.S.D.A.P.: A Case Study of Robert Haas and the Critical Edition', *The Musical Quarterly* 82 (1998) 362-82.