

The Bruckner Renaissance

By FREDERICK BETZ

A member of the Bruckner Society pays tribute to a neglected genius

IT seems a strange fate that throughout human history greatness is generally either antagonized or very unwillingly recognized. Illustrations in proof of this statement can be enumerated by the scores. We smile at the ignorance of by-gone ages who completely ignored or misunderstood or persecuted their great men, and we throw out our chests in the proud feeling that we of today recognize the inherent greatness of the famous names of the past, the inhabitants of various halls of fame, pantheons, valhallas, and other repositories of genius. But it is nevertheless true that we are doing just the same thing that our ancestors did in regard to the great names of their day. To be sure, we do not burn or stone them, but we have the milder form of inflicting the death-penalty: we ignore them.

A flagrant illustration of our attitude toward real greatness has been (and to a certain degree still is) the case of Anton Bruckner. Although he has been dead for over a quarter of a century (a long time in our age) he is unknown to thousands of music lovers, misunderstood by others, and antagonized and vituperated by certain so-called critics. The chief criticism launched again and again against him was (and in some cases still is) that he is too Wagnerian. Wagner was condemned for being too Wagnerian. Today he is praised and extolled for being Wagnerian. He is the great master of the late nineteenth century. Because Bruckner adapted certain phases of Wagner's technique to his purposes, he is called a plagiarist and a shallow imitator, and what not. It is either not known or purposely ignored, that certain well-known Wagnerian effects and themes were written by Bruckner long before Wagner ever wrote them in his scores. But Wagner became known (after bitter and terrible struggles) and Bruckner remained obscure. And when some critics heard in Bruckner the more familiar Wagnerian music, what was more natural than to say: Plagiarist? Critics are, of course, only human, and one of the chief characteristics of humans is inertia. Hence the predilection for slogans, catch-words, hackneyed phrases, where a critic can conveniently cover up any lack of knowledge, taste and brains. At any rate, Bruckner was liberally treated to all the above mentioned epithets. As far as some critics were concerned, they had effectively and finally settled and buried Bruckner. But true greatness cannot be killed. Bruckner stayed alive, and today he is more alive than ever. In Europe he is now recognized as one of the greatest musicians of all time, as the greatest symphonic writer after Beethoven, truly the "Wagner of the Symphony," using that term deliberately, and without any of the aspersions that cynical shallow criticism might connect with it. Bruckner festivals are regular events in Europe, performances of great masses thrill thousands, and most critics of any consequence abroad now "admit" Bruckner to the Olympus of the Great Artists of All Time.

In order to familiarize music lovers with Bruckner, the modern and effective means of phonographic recording has been resorted to. One symphony (the 7th) and parts of other symphonies, are already available. The E Minor Mass in almost complete form, the overpowering Te-Deum (the finale of the Ninth Symphony) and parts of other Masses have been recorded. That is a beginning, although a modest one. There should be undertaken a systematic and earnest attempt to record all of the great works of this great and noble musician, perhaps one of the last from the era which may to future historians of music represent the golden age of music. In the present chaotic state of music, which shows many signs of disintegration, such firm and noble artistry as that shown in Bruckner's work is a solace and comfort to those for whom

music still fulfills the function of an uplifting and inspiring element in human life. All criticisms levelled at Bruckner, when measured by the sum total of his work, become insignificant and trifling. Any with a still naive ear and open mind for greatness as portrayed by music will at once admit that he is in the presence of a great personality when he listens for the first time to Bruckner.

European phonographic recorders are leading the way in regard to popularizing Bruckner. And that Bruckner recordings are selling even in America is proved by the fact that several hundred sets of Bruckner's Seventh Symphony were sold in one year in one city.

It is an encouraging symptom of the fact that the indifference and antagonism toward Bruckner's art are giving way to interest in and appreciation of his great services. The distinguished American critic, Mr. Lawrence Gilman in a recent issue of the *Tribune*, listed Bruckner's Eighth among masterpieces still to be recorded.

Let us hope that soon his symphonies and masses will be available in recorded form to all lovers of noble music,—and there must be many, for on Sunday afternoon, March eighth, when the New York Philharmonic gave its fourth performance of Bruckner's Seventh under the direction of Toscanini, spontaneous and enthusiastic applause greeted the conductor and his men, and some of the New York newspaper critics mentioned the hearty applause after the first performance on March fourth. Surely there must be Bruckner lovers in other cities too—in Chicago, for example, where Bruckner's Ninth was performed by Stock three times during January and February—who would welcome Bruckner recordings.



Toscanini

(from a caricature by Dr. Ricardo M. Aleman)