

Bruckner: Symphony no. 5 in B flat

Bruckner's Fifth Symphony presents no textual problems in as much as the composer never revised it, the two Bruckner Society editions by Robert Haas and Leopold Nowak respectively being based on the autograph score of 1878. The Nowak edition performed here differs from Haas only in minor editorial corrections.

Sixteen years elapsed before the Symphony received its premiere at Graz in the aging composer's absence due to ill-health. The conductor was Bruckner's pupil Franz Schalk who, in his misguided zeal, ruthlessly cut, reharmonised and reorchestrated the score, presumably to make it more palatable to contemporary audiences, for it was this version which was published in 1896. The original version had to wait until 1936 to be published in the scholarly edition of Haas.

The Fifth Symphony, which the composer never heard performed, remains a monument to that sublime faith in God which never wavered and which was the lifeline that allowed this great and humble master to continue writing some of the world's finest music in the face of almost total incomprehension, ridicule, hostility and neglect. Like the mainly anonymous mediaeval architects and masons who erected their soaring Gothic cathedrals as prayers in stone and glass to the Almighty, Bruckner conceived it a duty to compose, God having bestowed this gift upon him, and he considered his music to be his humble offering of thanks for this precious gift. Today, with the ever-growing number of Bruckner performances, all may partake of that prayer of universal humanism rooted in Bruckner's deep religious experience.

Written in the romantic era, Bruckner's symphonies nevertheless adhere more to classical principles. Haydn would still recognise that form which he 'fathered', although the thematic content, harmonic language and time-scale are all greatly expanded. Indeed, one who understands the form of a Haydn symphony should have little difficulty in mastering Bruckner's Fifth, the most classical of his symphonies, despite the larger format. The Symphony culminates in a contrapuntal finale of overwhelming grandeur which was described by the great conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler as "this most monumental Finale of the entire musical literature of the world".

This is the only Bruckner symphony to begin with a slow introduction. A solemn tread on pizzicato lower strings against a slow interweaving of agonised lines in the upper strings, pianissimo—a terse upward flourish, fortissimo, on full orchestra—a solemn brass chorale—the terse flourish a 3rd higher—the chorale completed—a gradual increase of tempo with wisps of the chorale theme banded about over a soft pedal bass, leading to a grand climax with each idea separated by an expectant pause. Thus in fifty tremendous bars Bruckner has set the scale of his argument and presented its material in embryo.

The 1st subject of the *allegro* is given out by violas and cellos against soft tremolo violins, a falling theme with a curious final rising flourish imitated by other instruments. After appearing in the full orchestra the sonority lightens and the 2nd subject emerges, a chorale-like theme on pizzicato strings and embellished with a haunting countermelody bowed on the G string by the 1st violins. This lyrical section, treated at some length, gradually acquires a strong, surging rhythmic bass and this is transformed into the 3rd subject, a massive unison theme which soon dies away, leaving a magical augmentation of its 1st five notes on horns and echoed by oboes, then flutes. A hushed descending tremolo scale for violins and violas leads to a nostalgic duet between solo horn and flute which concludes the exposition. The development begins by recalling the introduction and then proceeds to deal dramatically with the 1st subject as originally heard and in inversion. Twice the 2nd subject interrupts the turmoil as the development reaches its climax, softly on horns, then woodwind, to be succeeded by the mighty chorale intoned by the full brass choir. A foreshortened recapitulation ensues, followed by a tense coda in which, over a quicker variant of the Symphony's opening pizzicato, phrases of the 1st subject announced by flute and clarinet are gradually taken up by the full orchestra in the minor key before spectacularly turning into the major with a series of emphatic fanfares.

The *adagio*, in D minor, has a basically simple formal layout—ABABA coda. The 1st subject, sparsely orchestrated, presents a conflict between the triplet pizzicato string accompaniment and the elegiac oboe theme in duple time. A falling interval of a 7th, picked up from the 2nd phrase of the oboe theme, is a dominating feature of the movement and gives an Elgarian feeling to some listeners. The 1st subject peters out, followed by a pause. Words cannot describe the effect of the

entry of the 2nd subject, a theme whose solemn nobility engenders a state of ineffable serenity and which reflects the composer's deep spirituality. Presented by the strings, with all the violins playing on the G string, it is treated at length and rises to a majestic climax, with the theme fervently intoned by trumpets and horns alternately before dying softly away. The 1st subject returns in the woodwind over pizzicato triplets but gradually a richer orchestral texture takes over and an element of nobility is achieved with the chorale-like entry of the brass. Again the falling 7th motif is much in evidence. The 2nd subject is repeated in a more subdued orchestration, serene and confident, and a rich fantasia is woven round it. The 1st subject, more fully scored, returns for the last time, its rhythms now concordant, giving strength of purpose. The addition of brass propels the music forward to a grand climax before breaking off into the falling 7th motif. The sound dies away and the brief coda forlornly restates fragments of the initial ideas before fading away indecisively.

The *scherzo*, also in D minor, is a sonata movement in miniature. The 1st eight bars of the pizzicato string accompaniment are identical with the 1st four bars of the *adagio*, though at a greatly increased pace, and its figurations are kept up throughout the movement. The 1st subject, a unison woodwind theme, is presented over the pizzicato strings. The 2nd subject, slightly slower, is a suave, dancing theme on violins but with the pizzicato accompaniment still in evidence and later transferred to the woodwind. The 1st subject returns, is extended and developed, and with the return of the 2nd subject, is combined with it. There is a recapitulation and a vivacious coda culminating in the full orchestra hammering out the chord of D major. The *trio* is charming and short—almost Mendelssohnian fairy music, despite an unexpected outburst just before the close. The *scherzo* is repeated in full.

The Symphony's introduction also opens the monumental *finale* but is twice punctuated by a downward octave leap on the clarinet which then extends this into a complete phrase. The main subject of the 1st movement is quoted, then the opening of the *adagio*, the two statements separated and followed by the clarinet phrase. The movement proper now gets under way and the clarinet phrase is found to be the opening of the 1st subject, now heard in full on cellos and basses and presented as a complete fugal exposition. The 2nd subject is a non-fugal lyrical section treated at some length and

is followed by a powerful 3rd subject based on the 1st and presented in unison by woodwind and brass against swirling strings. A majestic brass chorale ensues with soft interjections from the strings and the music sinks to an expectant pause. The development opens with two quiet statements of the chorale theme by solo horn, then woodwind. This now becomes a 2nd fugal subject initiated by the violas. Eventually the 1st subject is added and an extensive double fugue of enormous technical skill and dramatic power unfolds; its climax is also the start of the recapitulation. The two fugal subjects thunder out simultaneously and reach a momentous climax before slowly dying away, to be succeeded by the return of the 2nd subject. With the emergence of the 3rd subject, the 1st movement's main subject is heard in combination with it, plus the rhythm of the 1st fugal subject. The coda commences softly with the 1st fugal subject in the bass. As more instruments join in, the 1st movement theme reappears and leads to a brief climax. The music, based on the 1st fugal subject, builds up again and leads to the subject's apotheosis—grandly, triple forte and in augmentation. As the blaze of sound reaches its apex, the chorale—in augmentation—enters majestically on full brass against the rhythmic skeleton of the 1st subject; and as the Symphony courses to its glorious conclusion the main subject of the 1st movement is added like a triumphant benediction.

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