

Bruckner: Symphony No.9 in D minor

Anton Bruckner was born in 1824 in the small Upper Austrian village of Ansfelden, the son of the village schoolmaster in whose footsteps he was to follow. In time he came under the influence of the community of the Monastery of St. Florian, near Linz, where his simple and utterly sincere religious faith found an abiding home. Here his innate musical genius began to flower as an organist. In 1855 he succeeded to organist at Linz Cathedral, only then (in his early thirties) beginning serious study in composition. He composed eleven symphonies altogether (two being outside the numbered nine), three masses, a *Te Deum*, many smaller choral works and a fine string quintet. He died in Vienna in 1896 and is buried in St. Florian.

It has to be admitted that Bruckner's *Ninth* is an unfinished symphony but, like its eminent predecessor, Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*, it is a perfectly satisfying entity offering a complete and profound experience. Although extensive sketches of the proposed finale are extant, Bruckner scholars agree that a working reconstruction is an impossibility. A major factor in arriving at this symphony's emotional and intellectual perfection was undoubtedly the change in the order of movements adopted by Bruckner from his *Eighth Symphony* onwards. Up to this point the *Adagio* had been the second movement, the *Scherzo* third. For the *Eighth Symphony* this ordering of movements was reversed, the *Ninth Symphony* following the new pattern. How fortunate, therefore, that the *Ninth* ends with the *Adagio* and not the *Scherzo*.

This is a symphony of turmoil — and principally turmoil of the spirit. The simple devoutness of Bruckner gave him the strength to overcome the bitter disappointment of his meagre acceptance by critics and public alike, but in human terms he must have undergone considerable mental anguish, though stoically borne.

Though earlier symphonies, and especially the *Eighth*, depict the agonies of the spirit, all torment finally overcome in a blaze of glorious fulfilment, the *Ninth Symphony* bears eloquent testimony to an even greater struggle. Not even Bruckner's solemn chorale subject, striding in icy defiance through the coda of the first movement, can prevent the cataclysmic outburst which finally overwhelms all.

To some listeners the eerie *Scherzo*, daringly scored, is a haven of relief from the drama of the preceeding movement, but to others it is a remorseless *danse macabre*, its surging energy carrying all before it. The *Trio* section, marked to be played faster, scampers away with amazing drive, yet, despite some lyrical moments, retains the underlying sense of strife present in the *Scherzo* proper; and when this returns in exact repetition, its full fury appears to be wilder still.

The *Adagio* continues the conflict of the first movement but now in a more rarefied atmosphere. The two principal themes unleash a host of warring emotions, the crux of the argument culminating in a grindingly dissonant climax. But in the miraculous coda all the conflict, the tension and the heartache are eased into a serene calm, all strife forgotten. Surely in this music Bruckner depicts the Paradise he understood to be the reward for those who trust implicitly in the Goodness of Divinity. Not for nothing is this symphony dedicated "to my dear God".

Joseph Brand