

Anton Bruckner's Organ Recitals in France and England

By MOSCO CARNER

It is curious that France and England—countries in which Bruckner's music has so far failed to gain a footing or any but a small circle of admirers—are the only two countries outside Austria in which Bruckner appeared publicly as an organist. These two concert-giving expeditions of his—the first to Nancy and Paris in the spring of 1869, the second to London in the summer of 1871—belong to a period of Bruckner's artistic development when he was still young as a symphonist. He was over forty when he wrote his first Symphony—an extraordinary case of delayed maturity. It is true that beside this first Symphony he had produced by 1869 a number of Church compositions, including the magnificent Mass in E minor that looks back in spirit and technique to Palestrina. But Bruckner as a composer was still practically a blank page to most of his contemporaries, with the exception of a small circle in Upper Austria, his native country.

With Bruckner as an organist it was a different matter. From early childhood the organ had been his favourite instrument. At twenty-one his free contrapuntal treatment of a Haydn theme and his improvisation of a fugue had attracted considerable attention at his examination for a school post. But what developed Bruckner into Austria's greatest organist was the period of eleven years (1845-56) as assistant schoolmaster at the seminary of St. Florian, near Linz. The baroque splendour of this Augustinian abbey was completed by its monumental organ, at that time the second largest in Austria. (The largest was that in St. Stefan's, Vienna.) It was here that Bruckner got the organ and its style into his very bones. The stylistic roots of both the Choral themes in his symphonies and the 'registration' effect of his orchestral scoring are evidently to be found in his intensive study of the organ during this period.

During these years at St. Florian's he made himself a complete master of the technique of organ-playing. In 1856 his brilliant success in a competition won him the post of organist at Linz Cathedral, a post which he gave up only after twelve long years, to go to Vienna as professor of theory and organ-playing at the Conservatorium der Musikfreunde (1868). Which brings us to the period of his journey to France.

This brief sketch of Bruckner's career as an organist shows at any rate that by the time he was invited to Vienna he must have enjoyed a very high reputation as an organ-player. Yet Vienna was (and is still) no easy ground for a newcomer, particularly for one from the provinces, no matter how good his reputation. It was necessary for Bruckner to establish his new position on a sound basis and he set about this in the field in which success seemed most certain, namely, as organist. A favourable opportunity soon occurred.

The organ of the newly built church of St.

Épvre in Nancy, which counted among its patrons the Emperor and Empress of Austria, was to be opened with a competition. On the advice of Hanslick, pope of Viennese music, all-powerful critic of the *Neue Freie Presse*, and at that time Bruckner's friend (though in later years he became his bitterest enemy), Bruckner decided to compete. His two recitals, on April 28 and 29, had such a resounding success that one French newspaper hailed him as 'un homme de goût le plus élevé, de la science la plus vaste et la plus féconde.' Bruckner, highly surprised and delighted by this result, wrote in his characteristic naïve, good, childlike way to Herbeck, the director of the Vienna Conservatorium: 'I have only the oral judgments of the professionals in my favour*—a point on which modesty bids me be silent—and also the applause of the public. Charming young ladies of the highest aristocracy even came to the organ-loft and expressed their appreciation.'

This success gave the head of the Paris firm of organ-builders, Merklin-Schütze, the idea of asking Bruckner to give a recital at their Paris factory. But the timid and conscientious master hesitated, for the leave Herbeck had granted him for Nancy had expired. He characteristically wrote to Herbeck asking 'that my leave may be extended for three days. I send your Excellency, though with a very heavy heart, this request from me and all these gentlemen [he means the Paris firm] most humbly, and beg you to be so kind as to do all you can with the authorities to get them to grant what I ask. And will you be so very good as to tell my pupils?' The permission was 'most graciously' granted and Bruckner played in Paris not only at Merklin's but at Notre Dame before a distinguished audience said to have included Franck, Saint-Saëns, Auber and Gounod. His success at Nancy was repeated and again it was his inspired improvisations that made the deepest impression. 'At the end I asked for a theme,' he writes to Linz. 'It was given me by C. A. Chauvet, one of the greatest organists in Paris, and when I had developed it in three sections, the success was unbounded. I shall never experience such a triumph again.' It is very probable that the success of this foreign trip helped to get Bruckner the appointment of organist at the Vienna Hofkapelle in the following September.

Two years later a second opportunity to go abroad presented itself. In the summer of 1871 an International Exhibition was held in London and the Exhibition Committee invited the Chambers of Commerce of the various countries to send their most prominent organists to London. During the Exhibition organ recitals were to be given on the giant organ just built by Henry Willis for the Albert Hall, close to which the Exhibition was held. When Bruckner heard of

* 'Oral' in distinction to the printed notices, which (as he explains in the same letter) he was unable to read.

this, he applied to the Vienna Chamber of Commerce to be sent to London and, after a trial, he was unanimously chosen from a number of candidates. The conditions were: beginning on August 2, he was to play twice daily for a week, for a fee of £50, including travelling and hotel expenses. A detailed description of the Willis organ was sent with the contract.

A journey to London was not such a simple matter in those days and Bruckner, ever timid, implored a friend to travel with him. 'Then we can come back in fine style by way of Switzerland,' he wrote temptingly. But nothing came of this and Bruckner had to make the journey to London alone. He arrived at the end of July and stayed at Seyd's Hotel, a German hotel in Finsbury Square.

A story of rather doubtful veracity is told of his first day in London. He had no sooner arrived than he went to the Albert Hall to try the organ. It was a Saturday and the manager of the Hall explained to him that it was too late. There was very little steam up—the organ was blown by steam—and Bruckner could play only as long as the steam lasted. Undisturbed the master seated himself at the organ and began to practise and improvise. Enthusiastic at what he heard, the manager had the fires stoked up and sent for various friends, so that when Bruckner finished he found to his astonishment that he had a considerable audience. *Si non è vero, è ben trovato!*

Besides Bruckner, six other organists had been engaged for these several weeks of recitals: W. T. Best, the official organist of the Hall, who had opened the series on July 18, Saint-Saëns from Paris, Mailly from Brussels, Löhr from Budapest, Heintzen from Stockholm, and Lindemann from Norway. Although Bruckner had already played for the first time on August 2, the then widely read *Musical World* published on August 5 the following rather reserved announcement: 'Herr Anton Bruckner, Court Organist at Vienna, and Professor to the Conservatorium of that city, has arrived in London to play on the great organ of the Royal Albert Hall. The dates of his performance will shortly be announced. It takes some little time to become acquainted with the details of so large an instrument. Herr Bruckner's strong points are said to be classical improvisations on Handel, Bach, and Mendelssohn.'

The programme of Bruckner's London debut was:

- Toccata in F major (*Bach*)
- Improvisations upon the foregoing
- Fugue in D minor (*Handel*)
- Improvisations (original)
- Improvisation on Bach's Fugue in E minor

From this programme one sees how very fond Bruckner was of improvisation, in which art he was, by all contemporary accounts, a past-master. Shortly before his journey to London he said to a pupil in his Upper Austrian dialect: 'No, i werd net lang den Bach einwerggln, dös sollen die machen, die ka Phantasie haben, i spiel über a frei's Thema,' which might be rendered: 'No, I doan't care for grindin' out lots o' Bach. They can do that as 'as no imagination o' their own. I plays away as I likes.'

In the course of a week Bruckner gave six recitals at the Albert Hall with such success that August Manns, the famous conductor of the Crystal Palace Saturday Concerts, engaged him for four more. I quote here a letter of August 23 from Bruckner to an influential Linz acquaintance—the only one so far published from which we can glean further particulars of his stay in London: 'Just finished. Played ten times; six times at the Albert Hall, four times at the Crystal Palace. Tremendous applause, endless every time. Encores demanded. In particular I often had to repeat a couple of improvisations. Both places the same. Heaps of compliments, congratulations, invitations. Kapellmeister Manns of the Crystal Palace told me he was astonished and that I was to come again soon and send him my compositions. . . . Yesterday I played before 70,000 people* and had to give encores as the Committee asked me to—for I didn't want to, in spite of the tremendous applause. On Monday I played with equal success at the concert. . . . N.B. Unfortunately the critic of *The Times* is in Germany: so hardly anything will be written about me now. Please let the Linz papers know something of this.'

The postscript betrays clearly that Bruckner attached some importance to having his recitals noticed by the critics. As a matter of fact, the important dailies published nothing but the bare announcements. It was summer and these recitals, given mainly for the benefit of visitors to the Exhibition, were apparently not taken very seriously in musical circles. Still, in the already mentioned *Musical World* we find reports striking a by no means enthusiastic note. There is mention of 'second-rate foreigners' and of the 'modest mediocrity' of some of the foreign organists and 'a little discretion in the selection' of the artists is demanded (a little too late) of the management. Bruckner himself comes off comparatively well: 'He has given us a grand extempore Fantasia, which although not very original in thought or design, was clever, remarkable for its canonic counterpoint and for the surmounting of much difficulty in the pedal passages.' But now comes the blow: 'There can be nothing said extemporaneously upon the National Anthem of Austria, and still less upon the "Hallelujah" Chorus of Handel; nor do we think any improvisation with any effect can be given upon the Toccata of Bach or the Sonatas of Mendelssohn. Great composers exhaust their themes. Nothing can be added to the "Hallelujah" Chorus, nothing to a toccata of Sebastian Bach.'

What impression was made on Bruckner by London as a town we do not know. He left at the end of August—by the way, he had begun the Finale of his second Symphony here on August 10—intending to return next year and tour the provinces. But nothing came of this. Four (!) years later he received from the Royal Exhibition Commission a medal for his successful collaboration. Once later, in 1886, he thought of coming to London to conduct his seventh Symphony in place of Hans Richter, who was ill. But this plan, too, came to nothing. A few trips

* This was at the German National Fête at the Crystal Palace on August 19.

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to Germany to hear performances of his works were the only occasions on which Bruckner went abroad in later years. Moreover, organ-playing gradually drifted into the background as Bruckner

began to concentrate more and more on symphonic composition. As he once put it himself: 'What my fingers play is forgotten, but what they have written will not be forgotten.'