

Symphony No.7 in E The Hague Philharmonic - Carl Schuricht, conductor

Introduction

Bruckner's rise in our estimation has been a slow and gradual one. Prejudices had to be demolished and misconceptions rectified before the large public outside Central Europe could be brought to accept him as one of the great symphonic composers of the nineteenth century. For a considerable time Bruckner was regarded as *génie manqué*—awkward and clumsy in the manipulation of the symphonic form, unable to build an organic structure, rambling and repetitive in thought, and not knowing when to finish. Did not the hostile Brahms dub the Bruckner symphonies 'boa-constrictors'? Today we have come to recognise in this Austrian musician a highly original and powerful mind, a mind going its own independent way and creating a body of symphonic works entirely *sui generis*, a law unto itself. To apply to the Bruckner symphonies the canon of the classical form (as is still done) is as appropriate as to measure Goethe's *Faust* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* by the yardstick of the traditional play and novel.

Bruckner's symphonic vision sprang from a region wholly different from the world out of which Beethoven and Brahms created their symphonies. Bruckner was non-intellectual to the point of naively, unspeculative and romantically irrational. His true predecessor was Schubert, more particularly the Schubert of the Ninth Symphony. In that work, a new elemental feeling begins to invade the music, carrying everything before it and refusing to be coerced into the rationale of the Beethovenian form. With Bruckner this feeling becomes the mainspring of his symphonic creations, conditioning their content, character and style. The 'cosmic' eruptions and the enormous tidal waves in which the music surges forward are perhaps its most impressive manifestations.

Bruckner's spiritual world was the world of religion. This links him with the artists of the Middle Ages and like them he saw the sole, all-embracing purpose of his music to be the glorification of God - his life-work was devoted

ad majorem Dei gloriam. The specific musical symbol for this attitude are his great chorale themes inspired in this most Catholic of composers by, strangely, the music of the Protestant Church. Most closely allied to his profound and unquestioning faith was his deep-seated love of nature. Nature was part of God's creation and to feel at one with it signified for Bruckner a mystic union. Moreover, he spent the most impressionable years of his youth at the foothills of the Austrian Alps. Their rugged grandeur and imposing majesty, their primordial stillness and their immense spaces—all this is mirrored in Bruckner's symphonies: in their huge piled-up blocks of sound, their mysterious 'silences' and their monumental formal span.

The Seventh (compl. 1883) is together with the Fourth the most frequently performed of Bruckner's nine symphonies. The reason for this lies in the striking beauty and euphony of its melodic invention and in the fact that in the Adagio it contains the greatest slow movement Bruckner ever penned. The work is a milestone in the composer's development: compared with his preceding symphonies it displays a very considerable formal extension of each of its four movements and a richer and more varied range of orchestral sonority. For the first time in his symphonies Bruckner introduces into the Seventh a quartet of Wagner tubas (Adagio and Finale), on account of their solemn character which combines the mellow softness of the horns with the sombre, dark-hued sound of the trombones. The work marks the beginning of Bruckner's last creative phase and stands as the gateway to his Eighth and Ninth.

The first movement opens with one of Bruckner's finest inspirations a theme of remarkable length (24 bars) and encompassing a span of two octaves. Song-like and ardently expressive, it seems to have determined the character of the whole movement, but there are several mighty climaxes to disturb the broad flow of the music. The second theme, first heard in organ-like orchestration (a

typical feature of Bruckner's orchestral style) is in a markedly inward, meditative vein. It is presently followed by yet a third idea of a strong rhythmic nature which represents the conclusion of the exposition. In the development section the three themes are viewed from different angles after which the first is subjected to contrapuntal treatment. In the recapitulation, the expository material reappears in a richer texture, and the movement closes with a coda that starts quietly but gradually works up to a climax of imposing grandeur.

Bruckner began the *Adagio* in sorrowful anticipation of Wagner's death which occurred at Venice on 13 February 1883. The movement was nearly finished when the sad news reached Vienna, and Bruckner now added a coda which represents the actual funeral music for his adored master. The music unfolds with the utmost solemnity conveying the composer's grief in a uniquely impressive manner. Shortly before the coda it reaches an overwhelming climax where Bruckner, on the advice of Arthur Nikisch (who conducted the first performance at Leipzig on 30 November 1884) introduced a triangle and cymbals to mark the highest point of this climax. The autograph score, however, suggests that he later had second thoughts about this addition.

The *Scherzo* is a pounding rustic dance based on a strongly contrasting idea: a pithy, leaping trumpet figure followed by a violin motive in downward swaying sevenths. The Trio, in a somewhat slower tempo, demonstrates Bruckner's closeness to the peasant music of Upper Austria.

The *Finale* is a highly dramatic movement whose conflict arises from the opposition between the combative, forward-driving first subject and the static, solemn chorale of the second theme. There is a covert thematic relationship with the first movement which becomes explicit in the coda, where Bruckner reintroduces the beginning of the first Allegro's opening theme in triumphant fashion.

Mosco Carner