

Some time during 1906, there was a performance of Bruckner's Fifth Symphony in Dresden, at which the 23-year-old English composer Arnold Bax was present. Years later, in his book "Farewell, My Youth" (1943), Bax recalled the occasion as follows: "Beyond the work's 'heavenly lengths' I can remember nothing of it except its conclusion. The finale was cast in the shape of a formidably dull fugue, and as it showed signs of approaching its peroration I thought to myself that seldom or never had I heard any orchestra pile up such a prodigious volume of sound. It was at this precise moment that an army corps of brass instruments, which must have been crouching furtively behind the percussion, arose in their might and weighed in over the top with a chorale, probably intended by the pious composer as an invocation to 'Der alte deutsche Gott.' The crash of silence at the sudden cessation of this din was as shattering upon the ears as the blow of a sandbag."

Since Bax was himself following the new impressionist school, he would naturally have been out of sympathy with Bruckner's monumental Germanic style, and particularly with an extended fugue in that style; but his remarks about the "prodigious volume of sound" and the extra "army corps of brass instruments" make curious reading today. After all, Bruckner scored his Fifth Symphony, not for the huge post-Wagnerian orchestra, but for forces no larger than Schumann and Brahms had called for: apart from the strings, there are only two of each woodwind instrument (without extras): a normal brass section of four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, and tuba; and two timpani.

But then, Bax and the rest of the audience, unknown to themselves, had not been listening to Bruckner's own score of the work. The conductor would have been using the only score available in 1906, which had been published ten years earlier, when the composer was on his death-bed, without his sanction and perhaps without his even having seen it. This score had been prepared by Bruckner's pupil Franz Schalk for the first performance, which he conducted in 1894 and which Bruckner was too ill to attend. And Schalk had not only added a piccolo and double-bassoon (instruments which Bruckner himself never used): he had completely reorchestrated the work in the post-Wagnerian manner, with heavy doublings, and had called in an extra brass complement equivalent to Bruckner's own brass section - that is, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, and tuba - for the closing pages. So that Bax's sarcasm was unfortunately aimed at the wrong target; as we know today, it should have been levelled, not at Bruckner, but at Schalk.

The two versions of the work — Bruckner's and Schalk's — are so entirely different in orchestration that it is practically impossible to follow a performance of one with the score of the other. But worse than this, Schalk published the work with large cuts in the finale, which destroy the logical balance of the movement; and worse still, he even went so far as to tamper with the actual music in places. For example, he altered the final melodic phrase of the Adagio, replacing the last three crotchets - F sharp, A, and D — with a dotted minim F sharp, a crotchet A, and a semibreve A (and thereby turned it into a motive from Wagner's "Götterdämmerung!"); and at the beginning of the finale, he not only transferred the first two falling octaves from clarinet to trumpet, but also changed each from two crotchets to two quavers.

Schalk's monstrous distortion of Bruckner's work was to remain the only available score until as late as 1939; but in that year the International Bruckner Society published Bruckner's original, in a scrupulous edition by Robert Haas, and since then, Schalk's score has dropped out of currency altogether. Today, conductors use only the Haas edition (or the second Bruckner Society edition of 1951, by Leopold Nowak, which is little more than a reprinting of the Haas, with three slight "corrections" which are inaudible in performance).

Bruckner completed the work in 1876, when he was 52, and he never revised it -- though he retouched the score from time to time up to 1878. It was the only one of his symphonies - apart from the unfinished Ninth - of which he never heard a note performed. The reason for the neglect of the work in Bruckner's lifetime may have been that it stood clearly as the most monumental and the most austere objective of the nine: as we have seen, Franz Schalk thought it necessary, before he conducted the first performance, two years before Bruckner's death, to make it more approachable by "livening up" its orchestration and cutting out parts of the huge finale. It is, of course, this finale - a far-flung combination of sonata form with double-fugue and final chorale -- that gives the work its specially monumental character; but what is responsible for its austere objectivity is harder to define. It lies in the nature of some of the musical materials themselves, which one could describe as being more of the type associated with "absolute music" than is usual in a Bruckner symphony. And yet all Bruckner's symphonies are in fact "absolute music," in that none has a programme or any known extra-musical inspiration. All the same, in each one except the Fifth, nearly every theme has an immediate emotional appeal - an unmistakable feeling of joy or sadness, contentment or agitation, comedy or tragedy, and so on; but in the Fifth itself, although there are a number of themes of this kind, the most important ones

seem to have been invented with structural purposes in mind, rather than for the communication of emotion.

The first movement belongs to that type of "Allegro with slow introduction" in which the introduction recurs at focal points during the Allegro -- a type established by Beethoven in his "Pathétique" Sonata in C minor, Op. 13. Bruckner's introduction, though not long, is on a vast scale, with three contrasted main ideas; and none of these is of the directly emotional type. The first is like a hushed piece of old church polyphony over a stalking bass; the second is a craggy arpeggio for the full orchestra in unison, answered by a chorale-like phrase for the full brass (both elements are types which occur in Bruckner's other symphonies, where they form an exception to the general rule of immediate emotional expression); the third is a quicker and tenser passage, which anticipates the tempo of the Allegro, but culminates in a variant of the slow chorale-phrase, for full orchestra.

The Allegro itself - in Bruckner's own expanded version of sonata form - contrasts two main themes, and the second of these — a much-repeated violin phrase wandering through the quiet pizzicato chords of the other strings - is certainly of the directly emotional type, expressing a serene confidence which each time loses itself immediately in timid doubts. But the first theme (which is, of course, the main one) has an aphoristic character which makes it purely objective - naturally so, since Bruckner deliberately devised it so that it would go in counterpoint with the main fugue subject of the finale.

The Adagio also has two main themes, and, as is usual with Bruckner, they are alternated, being varied on each recurrence; both are profoundly expressive, the first nobly melancholic, the second massively confident. The outcome, however, is not, as in other Bruckner symphonies, a bright heaven-scaling climax, but rather a fierce contrapuntal high-point, with grindingly dissonant harmonies, which acts as a dark dome surmounting the whole structure.

Equally in the realm of "absolute music" is the fact that the slow pizzicato which accompanies the first theme of the Adagio becomes the quick pizzicato accompanying the first theme of the Scherzo. This scherzo, like those in Bruckner's other symphonies, is related to the peasant dances of Austria, and contains a number of emotional themes, both joyful and agitated. Yet the abrupt contrasts between the two types (enhanced by contrasting tempos) prevent any

simple emotional effect from emerging: the movement remains enigmatic and inscrutable. The trio, on the other hand, shuns emotion altogether in favour of a detached game with a simple rising and falling phrase, which intermittently stands on its head to become a falling and rising phrase.

The outcome of all this lack of total emotional commitment is that the first three movements turn out to have been no more (and no less) than a very large three-part introduction to the finale. And the finale begins (like its equivalent in Beethoven's "Choral" Symphony) by summoning back the main themes of preceding movements and dismissing them — not with cello-and-bass recitatives, however, but with a cheeky clarinet phrase; and to introduce, not a choral ending, but an "absolute," purely orchestral one. The cheeky clarinet phrase becomes a weighty subject for a powerful fugue ("absolute music"); then, after a warmly emotional second theme, a third one resumes the "absolute" conception — a stark chorale tune devised to go in counterpoint with the fugue subject. And so the sonata form continues with a development combining these two themes in a double fugue. Finally, after a full-scale recapitulation, the first movement's main Allegro theme returns in counterpoint with the fugue subject; and the symphony ends with a blazing apotheosis of the chorale theme, still in conjunction with elements of the fugue subject.

*Deryck Cooke*