



Bruckner's last three symphonies—the Seventh, the Eighth, and the unfinished Ninth—occupy a special place in his oeuvre, which is not easy to define. It might be tempting to describe them as the climax and culmination of his long development towards a uniquely monumental conception of the symphony; but this is not strictly accurate, since in some ways the mighty Fifth, with its vast finale synthesising sonata, double fugue, and chorale, is the most monumental of all. Nor is it even a matter of growing mastery, since these final works can hardly be said to surpass the Fifth from this point of view, but only to rival it.

Yet there is still something special about them—something different in character; and a clue to this difference may be found in the one feature which is common to them, but not to the other symphonies. In them, Bruckner augmented the hitherto orthodox brass section of his orchestra (four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, and bass tuba) with four extra horns doubling Wagner tubas, as in Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*. This is an outward symptom which indicates a profound change of mood in Bruckner's inner life. He was getting on for sixty when he began work on the Seventh symphony, and the need for the extra weight of horn tone, plus the magically dark timbre of the Wagner tubas, was motivated by a deeper sense of life's mystery and solemnity—qualities which had always been inherent in his music, but were now to take on a still greater intensity. This is particularly noticeable in the Adagio movements: great as Bruckner's earlier slow movements had been—especially that in the Sixth—those of the Seventh, Eighth and Ninth are built on a much larger scale, with great terraced working-up passages, rising to climaxes of unprecedented grandeur.

In connection with this new development, the influence of Wagner's style should not be underestimated, even though the relationship between the two composers was a far from simple one. Bruckner's first acquaintance with Wagner's music was at a performance of *Tannhäuser* in Linz in 1863 when he himself was already thirty-nine and had still not yet found himself as a composer. The experience acted as a catalyst, releasing his latent creative genius; and yet the immediate result—his first mature and characteristic work—was the *Mass in D minor*, which shows not the slightest Wagnerian influence. Likewise, Bruckner's first hearing of *Tristan* two years later, left no visible or audible trace on the First Symphony which followed straight away. Yet after another eight years, when Bruckner actually met Wagner, who admired his Third Symphony and accepted the dedication of it, his worship of the older composer had become so dangerous that the score contained deliberate literal quotations from both *Tristan* and *The Valkyrie*. On the other hand, the symphony itself was largely free of Wagner's influence, and the eventual excision of these curious passages of homage made it almost entirely so.

It seems evident that Bruckner needed to steer clear of this influence at first, if he was not to be submerged by it; but by the time he came to compose the Seventh Symphony (around the time of Wagner's death), he had so established his own individuality that he could now draw on elements of Wagner's style quite freely if he wished, and make them his own. Hence, in the last three symphonies we can notice a new Wagnerian weight and richness, and even at times a fierce Wagnerian dramatic tension, as well as such things as the relationship between the opening theme of the Seventh and that of *The Ring*, or between the opening of the Adagio of the Ninth and the characteristic harmonic style of *Tristan*.

The Wagnerian affiliations of the Eighth are with Siegfried, and more specifically with the actual Siegfried theme itself: (Ex. 1):

Bruckner admitted that he had been inspired by this theme when writing the Adagio of the symphony—a statement which might seem unintelligible, in view of the general character of the movement, were it not that there are two near-quotations of the theme by the horns soon after the final return of the opening section: (Ex. 2):

This in itself would perhaps amount to little, but in fact this crucial moment in the Adagio reaches out across the symphony, both backwards and forwards, to link up with the opening theme of the first movement and its related equivalent in the finale, both of which have equally clear affiliations with the Siegfried theme. As regards the opening theme of the first movement, there is a clear rhythmic identity with Wagner's theme, indicated in the following example by a bracket: (Ex. 3):

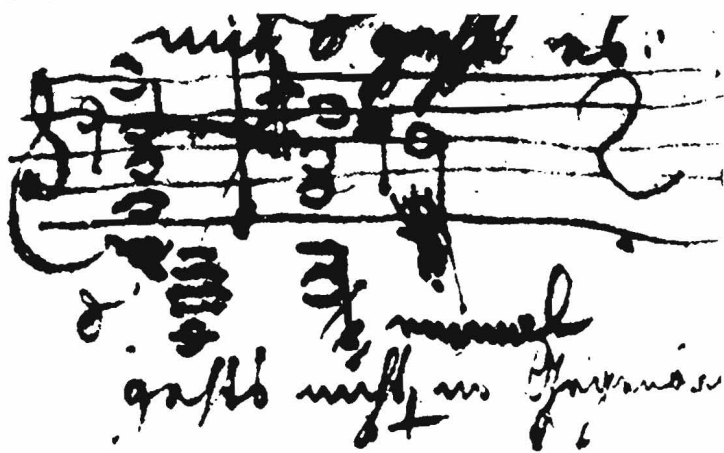
In the case of the opening theme of the finale, the relationship begins as a general rhythmic one (Ex. 4a), and continues as a motivic one (Ex. 4b):

And as the relationship can be noticed in the symphony's opening bars (Ex. 3), so it can in the last bars of all. At the end of the symphony, its opening theme is repeated over and over in the bass in a major transformation. (Ex. 5a), which is exactly what happens to the Siegfried theme in Act 3 of Siegfried, soon after Brünnhilde's awakening (Ex. 5b). The similarity of effect is unmistakable.

Even the key of the Siegfried theme (C, major or minor) is that of the symphony, and only the symphony's scherzo shows no immediate relationship to Wagner's theme.

Nevertheless, interesting though this glimpse into the musical sources of Bruckner's inspiration may be, we should not make too much of his Wagnerian connections. In spite of the influence of the rhythm and motivic character of the Siegfried theme, the actual stuff of the Eighth Symphony is unmistakably Bruckner's own, and the spiritual world of the work is considerably removed from that of Wagner's opera. The peculiarly Germanic, 'primeval' character common to both works manifests itself with Wagner as an exploration of depth-psychology, but with Bruckner as an affirmation of religious faith. Both composers penetrate to the very core of human feeling, but in entirely different ways. If there is something 'superhuman' about Wagner, there is something 'supra-human' about Bruckner.

From the purely musical point of view, the Eighth Symphony is perhaps Bruckner's most subtle (which is not inconsistent with its being in some ways the most magnificent). Subtlety is a quality not usually attributed to Bruckner, but he had it in considerable measure; it appears at the very opening of the Eighth, in that this C minor symphony begins most unexpectedly with a hushed pedal point on F, and a mysterious, magic theme which moves into C from the unlikely region of B flat minor (Ex. 3), and immediately moves out of it again. Furthermore, the first attempt to close the theme in the home key brings a menacing renewal of the B flat minor opening, fortissimo, and a full restatement of the theme; while with the second attempt, the tonality becomes fluid and indeterminate, as a lamenting oboe, echoed by bass strings, leads into the lyrical, aspiring second theme, for the violins. (Ex. 6):



Ex.1 etc.

(a)

Ex.2 f cresc. ff

(b)

Ex.2 ff

Ex.3 (a) pp

Ex.4 ff etc.

(b)

Ex.4 ff etc.

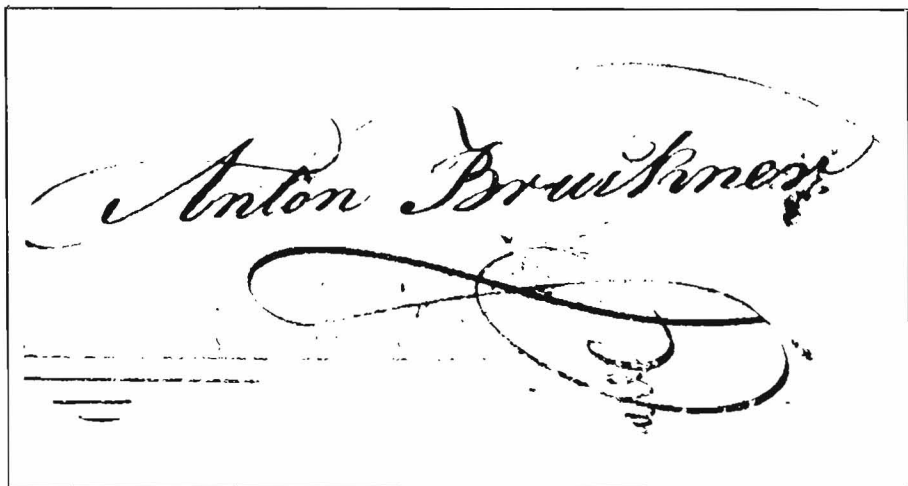
(a)

Ex.5 ff etc.

(b)

Ex.5 ff etc.

Ex.6 p etc.



This theme is based on the familiar Brucknerian rhythmic fingerprint of two-plus-three (which has already been introduced in the course of the first theme), and it begins as if determined to affirm one of the orthodox keys for the second subject of a C minor symphony—the dominant, G major; but it soon begins modulating freely, and the answering phrases for wind and brass touch on various keys. A return to G major brings a modified restatement of this whole second group, and this time the modulations lead quietly (with a flute remembering the very opening of the symphony) to the key of E flat, the major of this would be the orthodox alternative key for the second subject of a C minor symphony, but Bruckner unorthodoxly uses the dark E flat minor for his new theme. (Ex. 7):

So Bruckner has two 'second subjects' instead of one. This one, which immediately takes in some remarkable heavy descending scales for the brass, reaches a bright climax to establish the orthodox major of E flat, before the exposition ends quietly in that key. This time the oboe and the string basses remember the symphony's opening; and finally the horn, followed by the oboe, gives out the symphony's opening theme (Ex. 3), but now very calmly, and in the major.

As so often at this point in a Bruckner movement, all momentum ceases, and the music seems to look out on infinity. The development begins with a long-drawn dialogue, based on the opening theme, for the tubas and the oboe; then the theme is developed briefly (with some remarkably original harmonic clashes) before a halt is reached, with string pizzicato dying away into silence. At this point the true development begins, as the strings take up Ex. 6 in inversion they gradually convert its two-plus-three rhythm into a tense working up passage, with the first two-note melodic phrase of the symphony sounding in the bass as though the recapitulation were soon to begin, and in the 'correct' key of C minor (Ex. 8a). But the phrase moves higher and higher, until, when eventually the opening theme crashes in, it does so in B flat minor, as at the beginning; the two-plus-three rhythm continues broadly above it (Ex. 8b):

This is not the recapitulation, however. The music fades away in C major, with trumpets hammering out only the rhythm of the opening theme on one note; then a fragment of the theme is repeated over and over, and developed in such a way as to set the music swirling mysteriously; and eventually, when the flute has added its voice to this swirling, the recapitulation begins almost unnoticeably with the oboe quietly playing the opening theme in the 'right' key of C minor. Only gradually does the listener become aware that the recapitulation has started, when the trumpet is heard playing familiar phrases from the opening theme; this is one of the most subtle moments in all Bruckner, and indeed in all symphonic composition.

Even then, the recapitulation is anything but a literal restatement. The opening theme is heard only once this time, and it leads to the first of the two 'second subjects' in an entirely new way; and this begins almost as a new melody, until the answering phrases for wind and brass restore normality, but again, the transition to the second of the 'second subjects' is recomposed. This theme, too, though it begins and continues as at first, reaches a quite different climax—an awe-inspiring one, with the trumpets again hammering out the rhythm of the opening theme on one note, and continuing to do so on their own after the full orchestra has broken off. Then, out of the ensuing silence, emerges the brief, tragic coda—broken references to the opening theme, which finally recede into silence again. Even these are in a 'wrong' key—that

Ex. 7



Ex. 8



Ex. 8



of F minor (resolving on to C minor): the fact that the only statement of the main theme in its right key has passed almost unnoticed is something that is resolved in the finale.

The following movement needs no such detailed analysis, since it speaks clearly for itself. For the first time Bruckner placed the Scherzo second and the Adagio third, as in Beethoven's Choral Symphony, an order he was to retain in his own Ninth Symphony. The fierce scherzo, pounding away like some celestial dynamo, and its idyllic trio, tramping along to a familiar Schubertian march-rhythm, are unlike any others in Bruckner's symphonies; indeed, all his scherzo-movements are entirely original and completely different from one another. The unique originality in the main scherzo here is the almost impertinent way that Bruckner turns one of the chief vices of the bad composer—repeating a phrase over and over—into a resplendent virtue. The whole of this tremendous scherzo is built out of two short phrases (Exs. 9a and 9b) which are reiterated, separately or in combination, in an obsessive way: what makes this a great movement, instead of a piece of boring nonsense, is Bruckner's masterly handling of slow harmonic change over extended rhythmic periods.

In the superb Adagio, Bruckner worked on a plan which he had adopted early, and brought to its consummation in the Seventh Symphony. The movement does not surpass, but only rivals its equivalent in the Seventh, a statement which is also true of the Adagio of the Ninth. All three movements are built on a foundation derived from the slow movement of Beethoven's Choral Symphony: an extended first section, an equally extended second, a developed restatement of the first, a developed restatement of the second, and a final climactic restatement of the first, followed by a broad coda. The Adagio of the Eighth begins with a deeply expressive violin theme over throbbing string chords, which reaches a powerful climax; then as it continues, it takes in a rising chorale-like progression (Ex. 10) which is eventually to be developed to form the massive work-up to the final climax.

This phrase leads to a broad cadence for strings and harp which marks the end of the opening statement, but the whole is now repeated, and the same cadence brings the end of the complete opening section. The second section begins with a profoundly moving theme for the cellos (Ex. 11); the effect here is rather different from that in the Adagio movements in the Seventh and Ninth, since this theme acts less as a sharply-demarcated 'contrasting section' than as a 'second subject' which takes over where the first leaves off. The result is that the Adagio of the Eighth has greater organic continuity.

After both sections have been restated in varied form, the final restatement of the first section begins with an accompaniment of a repeated figure on the violas, which gather power all the time and is joined by the rising chorale-progression (Ex. 10) on the brass. The whole effect is similar to that of the equivalent passage in the Adagio of the Seventh, and it reaches a comparably titanic climax. The movement ends with a long-drawn hypnotic coda based on reference by the horns to the opening violin phrase of the whole movement.

The finale, as always with Bruckner, is the largest movement, yet in spite of its wealth of material and its size, it is by no means as complex as the first. It shares with that movement a sonata-structure based on three contrasted subjects: the tremendous first theme, given out against a hammering rhythm, has already been quoted (Ex. 4); the devotional second one follows

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Ex. 9

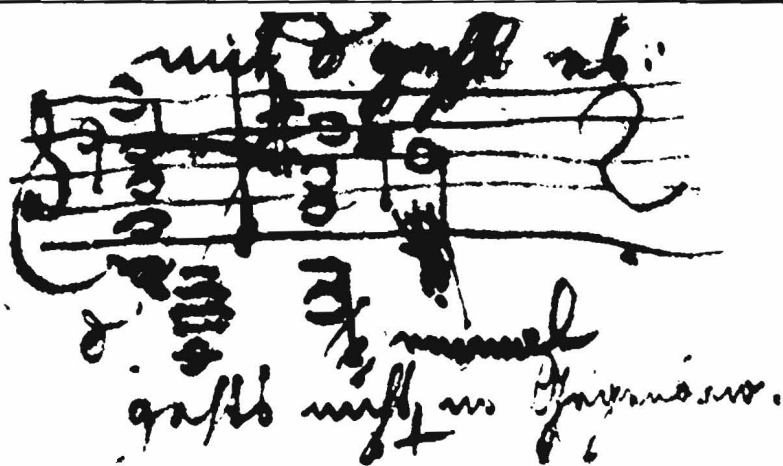
(a) 3/4 (b) 7/4

Ex. 10

p etc.

Ex. 11

mf etc.



this immediately, after a brief pause; and the third, which enters rather late, is a tramping march-tune for the strings, with woodwind phrases superimposed. These three ideas are worked out in a vast, roomy movement which has a surprising and yet somehow inevitable culmination: the recapitulation of the third idea—the march-tune—reaches its climax with a shattering brass statement of the opening theme of the first movement, now at last in its 'right' key of C minor. This suddenly brings the driving impetus of the Finale to a halt, and heralds the majestic coda. Here the Finale's first theme sets off calmly in the darkness of C minor and gradually rises out of it into the blazing brilliance of C major, where it is joined by the main themes of the other movements: all four ideas are reduced to terms of the chord of C major and played simultaneously to bring the symphony to a triumphant conclusion.



No note on a Bruckner symphony would be complete—unfortunately—without some reference to the question of different versions of the work. Some confusion has been created in the case of the Eighth, owing to misleading statements having been published to the effect that Bruckner himself made three different versions. In fact, he made only two, and the facts are quite simple.

He sketched out the work during 1884 and 1885, and put it into full score during 1886 and 1887; this was the first version, and it has been neither performed nor published to the present day. The reason for this is that, when Bruckner completed the score, in September 1887, he sent it to his friend and champion, the conductor Hermann Levi, who criticised the work severely; and under the influence of Levi's criticism, coupled with that of Joseph Schalk, he revised it considerably during 1889 and 1890. The first movement's original ending was completely rewritten, so that it finished pianissimo instead of fortissimo; the Scherzo movement was provided with a completely new Trio; the keys of certain sections of the Adagio were altered; instead of two of each woodwind instrument, Bruckner now for the first time used three; he also made cuts in the Adagio and Finale.

This was the second and final version, which has been the basis of all performances and publications of the work since; it clearly replaced the earlier version entirely, being Bruckner's own comprehensive revision of his first score.

There are, however, several different published versions of Bruckner's own final version. The early ones, from 1892 onwards, are now discounted, since they contained features not sanctioned by Bruckner himself; but there still remain two published by the Bruckner Society—one edited by Robert Haas in 1948, the other by Leopold Nowak in 1955.

The difference is as follows. Haas based his edition on the widespread belief that the cuts in the 1890 version (as opposed to the alterations) were made by Bruckner entirely at the persuasion of others, and were against his own better judgement; hence Haas published the 1890 score, but with these passages restored from the 1887 version. Nowak, on the other hand, holds that this represents an unjustifiable mingling of two quite separate sources, and his edition represents quite simply the final version of 1890, as it stands in Bruckner's own hand, with the cuts. It is his edition which has been used for the present recording.

