

ANTON BRUCKNER

Symphony No. 1 in C minor

(Linz Version)

Side 1:

1. Allegro molto moderato
2. Adagio

Side 2:

3. Scherzo. Lebhaft
4. Finale. Bewegt und feurig

CONCERTGEBOUW ORCHESTRA, AMSTERDAM conducted by BERNARD HAITINK

The great musical event of 1868 was the premiere of Wagner's "The Mastersingers," on June 21 in Munich. But not every bit of the opera had its first performance on that occasion: eleven weeks earlier, the last few pages had been given in Linz, under the Cathedral organist and choirmaster there, Anton Bruckner.

It happened like this. Bruckner was taking a choir to a choral and orchestral festival in Nuremberg; so he wrote to Wagner, whom he revered but had met only once, asking him if he had a suitable work. Wagner recommended the closing section of his new opera — Hans Sachs's final address and the final chorus; and the delighted Bruckner conducted it in Linz before taking it (appropriately!) to Nuremberg.

At 43, he was completely unknown outside Linz, where he was just making an impression as a composer. A hearing of "Tannhauser" there, five years earlier, had sparked off his genius, and inspired his first really important works — though these were quite un-Wagnerian in form and style. They were three masses and the Symphony No. 1 in C minor.

Bruckner conducted the Symphony's first performance only a month after introducing the first sounds of "The Master-singers" to the world. The occasion was a modest one: the orchestra was small, the audience smaller. The people of Linz were preoccupied with the local disaster of the day before - the collapse of the bridge over the Danube - and the few concert-goers could hardly have realised they were attending the birth of a new symphonic world. In the first movement, however, the "Tannhauser"-like third theme may have made some of them prick up their ears; if so, they probably labelled Bruckner immediately a "Wagnerian symphonist" - a mis-conception that later became widespread. The theme's orchestration - unison trombones against pulsating strings - obviously owes something to Wagner's "Pilgrims' Chorus"; but the spirit of the music is not really Wagnerian.

It was three years earlier that Bruckner had met Wagner, briefly, at the premiere of "Tristan and Isolde" in Munich. He took with him the completed movements of his First Symphony — the first, third, and fourth — but was too overawed to ask Wagner to look at them. Perhaps this was just as well, since Wagner maintained that the symphony had died with Beethoven — an opinion for which there was then good reason: certainly, in spite of Mendelssohn and Schumann, the *mighty* type of symphony had died with Beethoven, and anyway it was already fifteen years since Schumann's last symphony

Bruckner's three movements were not exactly mighty: when he eventually plucked up courage and showed Wagner his second and third symphonies, at Bayreuth in 1873. it was the huge and powerful No. 3 that awakened an enthusiastic response. What Wagner might have admired was the First Symphony's *Adagio*, which has a long opening paragraph as chromatic as "Tristan" and as unwilling to settle in a key. Again, the spirit is quite un-Wagnerian, but only the composer of "Tristan" could have understood such music at that time.

All unnoticed, then, Bruckner's First Symphony continued the great Austro-German tradition after the gap following Schumann's death. Schumann himself had hailed Brahms as the natural heir, and when Brahms's First Symphony appeared, eight years after Bruckner's, it was acclaimed as "Beethoven's Tenth." But, in fact, as Brahms himself realised, he took up the challenge of Beethoven scarcely more than Mendelssohn and Schumann had done; it was Bruckner (and later Mahler) who did so. Bruckner was the first to emulate Beethoven: and if his First Symphony has less absolute mastery than that of Brahms, it marks the impressive beginning of a longer series including several works which scale heights that Brahms never attempted. One striking contrast between the two composers is their different approaches to the scherzo problem. Brahms avoided the Beethovenian type altogether — perhaps he thought Beethoven had exhausted it in his Ninth; Bruckner adhered to it — at a rather more deliberate speed, certainly, but with a heavier rhythmic emphasis in compensation. The one in the First Symphony is naturally not the greatest, but its fierce driving power has no parallel in Brahms.

The symphonic movement that gave Bruckner most trouble — as with other composers after Beethoven — was the finale; at least, it did when he broached his own new monumental type of symphony, in the Third and Fourth. In this sense, the First's finale is uncharacteristic — right from its forceful opening, which crashes in abruptly, without preliminaries. Bruckner himself, who later preferred to start a finale with a mysterious preparatory background for the main theme, came to find this directness naive, saying it was like some simpleton bursting into a room and shouting "Here I am!" (*Da bin I'.*). But today, we can only find it magnificently pugnacious.

The First Symphony was the only one of the nine that Bruckner composed in Linz: soon afterwards he settled in Vienna for the rest of his life. His later symphonies caused bewilderment because of their unprecedented magnitude, but he himself was always more worried by the "boldness" of his normal-sized First. He called it *'shecke Beserl* ("the cheeky little minx") — and in his later years he tried to make it respectable, producing a revised version that most Bruckner-lovers prefer to forget. On this recording Bernard Haitink conducts the original Linz version, as edited for the Bruckner Society by Robert Haas.

Deryck Cooke