

ANTON BRUCKNER (1824-1896)

Side 1:

Symphony No. 6 in A

Original version

1. Majestoso
2. Adagio (Sehr feierlich)

Side 2:

2. Adagio (Sehr feierlich)
(Conclusion)
3. Scherzo (Nicht schnell)
Trio (Langsam)
4. Finale (Bewegt, doch
nicht zu schnell)

CONCERTGEBOUW ORCHESTRA, AMSTERDAM
conducted by BERNARD HAITINK

Throughout musical history, composers have tended to treat the key of A major as a particularly bright one for orchestral works - which is hardly surprising, since all the stringed instruments have an open A string, plus an open D (the subdominant of the key), and the violins have for their top string an open E (the dominant of the key). We have only to remember the two great repertoire A major symphonies - Beethoven's Seventh and Mendelssohn's Italian, which are among the brightest of all.

In each case, however, the composer was wise enough to offset the brightness of the work by a slow movement in the minor, and the Italian Symphony even has a minor-key finale (though here, owing to the vivacity of the tarantella rhythm, brilliance of a different kind remains in force). In a rather similar way, the brightness of Bruckner's A major symphony is offset by a minor-key scherzo and a finale based on a minor-key main theme; but there is more to it than that. In his own unique way, Bruckner continually infuses the actual A major music itself with melodic and harmonic inflections from the minor scale, and he does the same with most of the other major keys in the symphony; the result is that when pure major does emerge, it manifests itself as a glow or a blaze of extraordinary warmth or splendour. All this is responsible for the peculiar "dark radiance" of the work.

Actually, for Bruckner, with his long and assiduous study of the old polyphony, it was not *so* much the minor scale he was drawing on here as the ancient Phrygian mode (the white-note scale of E on the piano). The Symphony's majestic opening theme, played by cellos and basses beneath violin pulsations on C sharp (the essential major note of the scale of A) is based firmly on the Phrygian mode, with its minor second, sixth, and seventh (B flat instead of B, F natural instead of F sharp, G natural instead of G sharp). Yet the echo-continuation of the theme, by solo horn, immediately switches to A major's relative minor (F sharp minor), in the harmonic manner of Bruckner's own period, the nineteenth century; this fusion of the noble purity of the old church modes and the emotional intensity of romantic harmony is basic to Bruckner's musical language. After the full statement of this opening theme, and its *fortissimo* counterstatement by the full orchestra, the second theme (vio-

lins, *piano*) follows orthodox classical practice, being in the dominant key E; but unexpectedly it first confronts us in E minor, before breaking through (horns and woodwind, *forte*) into E major, to create one of those moments of pure major tonality which in the Phrygian context of this symphony have the effect of a sudden revelation. Eventually, a third theme follows - a forceful one, in orchestral unison, as is usual with Bruckner: the tonality here is C major - but the note C has a minor relationship (that of the minor sixth) with the E major in which the exposition reaches its end. This highly personal amalgam of major, minor, and Phrygian-mode music, pursued through a far-flung sonata form, culminates in a magnificent "sunrise" coda: it is based on the opening theme, which moves with massive deliberation through one key after another, to emerge at last in a blaze of A major - though this is still darkened until the last moment by one of the essential notes of the Phrygian scale - a fiercely insistent F natural.

Whereupon F becomes" the main key of the *Adagio* - F major. But again, this major tonality is immediately permeated with Phrygian elements: the brooding main theme, for strings, has a bass-line moving firmly down the complete Phrygian scale, which makes the music sound to modern ears as if it were in F major's subdominant, B flat minor. Moreover, the immediate developed counterstatement of this compressed four-bar theme is surmounted by a poignant oboe melody which is actually *in* B flat minor - yet as soon as the seventh bar the music has swung far in the contrary direction, having reached a chord of G major - the dominant of the dominant of F. Extraordinary tonal perspectives like these, expressing a profound depth of spiritual feeling, were available, in the nineteenth century, only to Bruckner, the worshipper of Palestrina and Wagner alike. The second theme, also for strings, follows in the translucence of a practically pure E major, and has a radiant tenderness that probably only Wagner and Wolf were able to command, apart from Bruckner, without falling into sugary sentimentality. The third theme brings another powerful contrast, being tragic funeral music in a darkly inflected C minor; all three themes are recapitulated, after which the movement ends with a wonderfully peaceful coda, transforming the main theme into the cloudless serenity of a pure F major, with all the Phrygian elements exorcised.

The nocturnal *Scherzo* - the only slowish one that Bruckner composed - returns to the Phrygian basis again: although in A minor, it moves above a continuous pulsation on E in the bass, as though that were the real key-note, and resolves it on to A only at the very end, for an A major conclusion. The trio section, in contrast, persistently clouds its C major (affirmed again and again by the horns) with harmonies and key-switches well to the dark flat side of that key.

After which, the finale begins by summing up the whole tendency of the work, having as the foundation of its A minor tonality a troubled main theme for strings based on the descending Phrygian scale on E. This is eventually answered by bold A major fanfares from the brass, against one of those hammering string unison ostinatos that Bruckner was so fond of. But even these are soon affected by the Phrygian tendency, moving ominously into B flat minor before breaking through into the dominant with a blaze of pure E major; then the second main theme, surprisingly, lilts in on the strings in an innocent C major. The conflict between all these elements is strenuous and far-reaching; but at the very end, the struggle against the ominous B flat minor music is magnificently resolved by the return of the symphony's opening theme in a new transformation - finally resplendent in the undimmed brightness of A major. Bruckner completed the symphony in 1881, when he was fifty-seven; but although he lived for another fifteen years, he never heard a complete performance of it. In 1883, the second and third movements were given at a concert by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, but it was not until 1899 that the first performance of the work was given, under Mahler - and even then, substantial cuts were made.

The Sixth is one of the few Bruckner Symphonies that were never revised, by Bruckner or by anyone else, in consequence all the published editions agree with one another, except in a few unimportant details. The edition used for the performance on the present recording is that of Robert Haas. The differences between this and the edition of Leopold Nowak affect no more than six bars (all in the first movement and are concerned only with minor features of the texture and the orchestration.