

The 20 Crucial Compositions of Anton Bruckner

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11. Symphony No. 6 in A major (1879)

Repertoire formation is a funny business. Musical merit is one factor, certainly, but often not the only factor or even the most important one. With any composer, there are pieces which are rarely heard, yet when they are heard, people wonder why they have never heard it before, since they are such good pieces of music. And so, with Bruckner, it is somewhat of a puzzlement that the Sixth Symphony is so rarely heard despite being so well-done and so fascinating, whereas the Fourth Symphony, with its various flaws and problems, is one of Bruckner's most popular.

Various reasons are given for this, such as that Bruckner was trying too hard to pare down his conception to a smaller scale, or the predominance of the Bruckner rhythm (2 + 3 or 3 + 2 in the time-space of 2 + 2) in the first movement in overlapping triplets of different note values. The violins use this rhythm for the accompaniment figure high up in their range, while the cellos intone their foreboding theme. The overall atmosphere of the work is heroic, and with quite a bit of optimism in the first movement.

The Adagio, representing the only time Bruckner ever used sonata form for slow middle movement, feels like a much warmer version of the melancholic Adagio of the Fifth Symphony.

The Scherzo is somewhat Mendelssohnian in its more fleet-footed moments, but wholly Brucknerian overall, especially in the louder outbursts. The Trio has some odd references to the Fifth Symphony. The Finale is broadly heroic with warmly memorable lyric moments, but there is something tentative to the provisional feel of the triumphant coda—perhaps this is another mysterious element that has made Audiences slow to appreciate this particular Symphony.

Despite these facts of its reception, that the Sixth would probably never be included in a collection of Bruckner's greatest hits, it must nevertheless count as one of his crucial works for its significance in Bruckner's development and for the fact that he remained fond of this piece to his dying day. And also for the fact that it contains one of the best examples of Bruckner's harmonic puns, in the first movement, as the timpanist singlehandedly occasions the return of the tonic (though these last item will be more appreciated by those with perfect pitch and those looking at the score, as they will notice the repeating A-flats suddenly become G-sharp with the timpani's entry).

There was a wider gap between work on the Fifth and work on the Sixth, but this is because Bruckner also worked on his only significant chamber composition, the String Quintet in F major, after finishing the Fifth. Work on the Sixth was delayed by a revision of the Fourth Symphony (the version more usually heard today of that work), and when he was almost done

with the Sixth, he started working on the Te Deum, and soon after the Seventh Symphony.

Whereas Bruckner's Fifth is usually thought of as being too long and complex for those new to Bruckner, maybe the Sixth might serve as a better introduction. Not quite as long and austere as the Fifth Symphony, the Sixth is a wonderful precursor to the serene luminance of the Seventh, though perhaps without requiring quite the same level of concentration. And given the Sixth's more assured mastery of form, it should be considered a preferable introduction to Bruckner over the Third and Fourth Symphonies.

I have never heard the Sixth Symphony live in concert. Indeed it should come as no surprise that anyone who has heard the last three in concert has not heard the Sixth, but I have even managed to hear the First in concert. Bruckner himself at least got to hear Wilhelm Jahn conduct the middle movements. While a paucity of complete early performances can certainly hinder a work's acceptance into the core repertoire, the (relative) facility earlier Symphonies have enjoyed discredits that theory for the Sixth's rarity in concert.

You would be justified in assuming that in recordings, the Sixth is generally tackled by conductors who do complete cycles (notwithstanding whether the Zeroeth is included or not). Leonard Bernstein's recording with the New York Philharmonic is a surprising upset to that theory, given that the only other Bruckner Symphony he's recorded is the Ninth (though not surprisingly, the Sixth just once but the Ninth four times).

Nevertheless, once again I am recommending Herbert von Karajan with the Berlin Philharmonic as the definitive recording. Sir Colin Davis with the London Symphony Orchestra and Sir Roger Norrington with the SWR Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra are also worthwhile recordings, though with the latter beware that although it is on modern instruments, Norrington has the strings withhold their now expected vibrato, something that is not to everyone's taste. The New Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Otto Klemperer is another nice recording.

I am not bothering to distinguish between those conductors who choose the Nowak or Haas edition. Since Bruckner did not revise this Symphony (except possibly for some rather minor details), only performers who have used both editions and the most devoted Bruckner fans are really aware of the differences between the two editions. Karajan and Furtwängler both predictably use Haas, while younger conductors like Barenboim and Pletnev opt for Nowak, though there are a few older conductors who choose Nowak, such as Rafael Kubelik.

Most of these recordings, clocking in at about 60 minutes, though some as little as 50 minutes, leave enough room for filler, though it is generally for remastered recordings that this option is taken. For example, Horst Stein's recording with the Vienna Philharmonic also includes Weber's Overtures to *Der Beherrscher der Geister* and *Abu Hassan*. Depending on which remastering of Klemperer's recording you get, you might also get Gluck's Overture to *Iphigénie en Aulide* as arranged by Wagner, and Humperdinck's Overture to *Hansel und Gretel*.

The 1899 edition by Cyrill Hynais was recorded once in 1952 by Charles Adler and only once after, more recently, by Ira Levin in 2008. I have not heard either of these recordings so I will not comment any further on them. It is also worth mentioning that Erwin Horn recorded a transcription of the Adagio for organ in Nuremberg.

As with the Fourth, I will also be recommending film music to start off the concert. Specifically, the Superman March by John Williams. Then can follow some pieces from *Schindler's List* as a kind of violin concerto. And, with permission from John Williams, after the Bruckner Sixth, the Superman March should be repeated with some of the rhythmic patterns changed to the Bruckner rhythm.