In 1885, when at last he had begun to gain international acclaim as a symphonic composer, Anton Bruckner was sixty years old and already had entered the stage of gradually declining health that was to end with his death nine-and-a-half years later. He began sketching his Eighth Symphony right after his sixtieth birthday (September 4, 1884), and was hard at work on it when reports began to reach him of the triumphal progress of his Seventh Symphony through Germany, Holland and America. The Seventh seemed to be welcomed everywhere—except at home in Vienna, due mostly to the continued opposition of the influential Eduard Hanslick. When Hans Richter had led the Vienna Philharmonic through the Seventh on March 21, 1886, Hanslick pronounced the work "unnaturally exaggerated, sick and perverted." While he had to admit that "most certainly it has never happened before that a composer was called out four or five times after *each* movement," nevertheless his power prevailed over Vienna's musicians—who feared his displeasure—even after Bruckner was decorated by the Emperor himself. Evidently the composer had solid grounds for lamenting that "without Hanslick's approval nothing is possible in Vienna."

When the Eighth Symphony was completed in September 1887, Bruckner inscribed the score with his name and the word "Hallelujah!" It was fated to be his last completed symphony. As in the Seventh, he had added to his standard complement of brass instruments (four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and bass tuba) the quartet of small tubas specially invented by Wagner for *The Ring of the Nibelungs*. But now he also added a second quartet of horns, to be alternated with the "Wagner" tubas by the same players. Bruckner was also to do this in his unfinished Ninth Symphony, and in both cases the extra brass sonority is used to impart a kind of mystic depth and solemnity to the music. For the inner movements of the Eighth, he also afforded himself the luxury of a harp ("tripled if possible"), not to be found in his other symphonies.

Bruckner sent the score at once to Munich, to Hermann Levi, the first conductor of Wagner's *Parsifal*. Levi had led a highly successful performance of the Seventh Symphony there in March 1885, and also had paved the way for the acceptance of that work's dedication by King Ludwig II of Bavaria. The composer, addressing Levi as "my father in art," therefore hoped for the equally propitious launching of the Eighth Symphony with an early performance in Munich. He was bitterly disappointed. Since Levi could not understand the symphony, he had to decline to conduct it at all. And though he contrived as delicately as possible to convey the news to Bruckner, for whom he had the greatest admiration, the result was catastrophic. Instead of simply seeking the Eighth's fortunes elsewhere, Bruckner suffered a profound shock and fell into one of the binding depressions which had periodically afflicted him throughout his life. But this depression was the most serious in purely artistic terms, since it occurred literally at the zenith of his career as a composer. Tortured by self-doubt, and preyed upon by the strange, apparently unrelated neurotic afflictions he had suffered before, Bruckner abandoned work on the Ninth Symphony, which he had already begun to compose, and had to wait nearly three years to take it up again. Meantime, he began, compulsively, to revise earlier works, and was susceptible at this time, more than at any other, to the suggestions of the young friends and disciples who urgently desired to "improve" his scores by giving them a more plausibly Wagnerian appearance.

His most drastic revisions, however, were lavished on the Eighth Symphony itself, and herein was assuredly the most creative contribution of the 1887-90 period, occupying most of the final year of it. No work had undergone such a drastic overhaul at Bruckner's own hands since his Fourth Symphony in 1878-80. The changes include the following: (1) for the first time in his career, triple instead of double woodwinds; (2) the first movement made to end *ppp* instead of *fff*; (3) for the first time in Bruckner, the *Scherzo* placed before the *Adagio*—as in the Ninth to come; (4) a completely new *Trio* section for the *Scherzo*; (5) the climax of the *Adagio* recomposed in a different key; (6) extensive rescoring; and, finally, some 150 bars deleted.

This 1890 score was published by the International Bruckner Society in its critical edition of 1955, edited by Leopold Nowak. The original version of 1887 is unpublished to this day. Earlier, in 1939, Robert Haas had edited for the Society a score in which he restored 48 of the 150 deleted bars, deeming them "organically vital," and inferring that Bruckner had been persuaded to expunge them by his disciples, against sound artistic judgment. Haas also restored some of the earlier scoring, thus creating a kind of "compromise version" between the 1887 and the 1890 autographs. Nowak rejected these unproven speculations *in toto* as being contrary to the clear intent and purpose of a critical edition, since the resulting compilation corresponded to no Bruckner autograph.

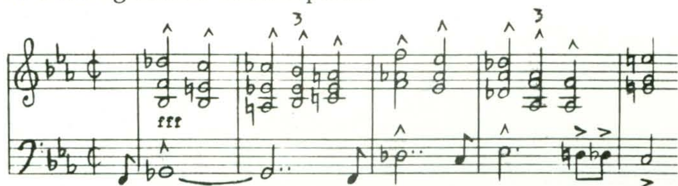
By the time this revised Eighth was ready for performance, in 1890, Levi was no longer the conductor at Munich; however, he urged his friend Felix Weingartner, at Mannheim, to undertake it. Weingartner, much less of

a Brucknerite than Levi, commenced rehearsals in March 1891, but soon had to give it up. The symphony was eventually delivered back to Vienna and the tender judgment of Hanslick; on December 18, 1892, Richter presented it at a Philharmonic concert. While acknowledging "tumultuous acclamations," Hanslick likened his own impression to "the misery of dream-troubled cats." He added: "In the *Adagio* we behold nothing less than 'the all-loving Father of mankind in all His infinite mercy'! Since this *Adagio* lasts exactly 28 minutes, or about as long as an entire Beethoven symphony, we cannot complain of being denied ample time for the contemplation of the rare vision."

In the same year, the symphony was published for the first time with the help of a subsidy from the Emperor Franz Josef, who also received the dedication of the work. For the last fifteen months of Bruckner's life, Franz Josef was to give him free lodging in the Imperial Palace of Belvedere that was surrounded by a beautiful garden with a commanding view of the city below, the Vienna that had so often treated the composer so shabbily. The first performance of the Eighth Symphony in America was given in the year of Bruckner's death (1896) by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra conducted by Theodore Thomas. In the first and in subsequent editions of the Eighth are to be found some further completely unauthorized instrumental revisions, made by Max von Oberleithner, that prevailed until the critical edition of Haas appeared in 1939. Since 1955, the edition of Nowak has been rather widely preferred, and it is the one used for the present recording.

The Eighth and Ninth are the two most dissonant symphonies by Bruckner, and, together with the Fifth, they are also the most polyphonic. In these last two, Bruckner especially anticipates the later tendency of Mahler to counterpoint wholly dissimilar themes in clashing textures. (By the time of Bruckner's death, Mahler had already composed his first three symphonies.) Bruckner does this in his own more deliberately "structural" way, hurling great massive themes together with attendant flashes of lightning. This is what happens, for example, to the two main themes of the Eighth's opening movement. The first theme is impressive enough in its own right: a soft kind of growl in the lower strings, full of latent menace, beneath a characteristic attention-focussing tremolo in the violins and long-held notes in the horns. The theme is couched, with apparent deliberation, in the same jagged rhythm as the first theme of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, note for note, and could easily have been designed to show how utterly different that pregnant rhythm could be made to sound. Bruckner clearly shows that the rhythmic identity of the motive is much in his mind, when he begins his development section by developing the same rhythm in other, equally individual, melodic ways (beginning with a direct inversion), and when he later has the trumpets obsessively mutter the rhythm over and over again on only one note. At one point alone does he seem to converge *expressively* with Beethoven's use of the rhythm: The moment of recapitulation, at the 225th bar, *fff*, conveys perhaps the same catastrophic sense of cosmic fury as the corresponding point in Beethoven's movement—with the addition

of heterogeneous counterpoint:



The above theme that the upper half of the orchestra hurls against the lower is the hitherto calm and decorous second subject. The final, sullen unwinding of the first theme, in the coda, was clearly referred to by Bruckner as a "death clock,"*i.e.*, the clock in the room where a man lies dying. The life slowly expires, but the clock goes on.

The *Scherzo*, one of Bruckner's greatest, carries the concept of perpetual motion into new realms of higher invention and fantasy, inverting everything at the start of the development, just as in the first movement, and so on. The composer had an elaborate rationale for the recurrence of the words *"allegro moderato"* (also used at the head of the first movement) for this *Scherzo*. He identified the music with the legendary folk-hero "Michel" of upper Austria, and added: "My Michel typifies the idealistic Austrian dreamer, not the German spirit, which is pure *scherz* (jest)." The *Trio* section, marked *langsam (slow)* is also Austrian pastoral, with delicious arpeggios in the harp.

The yearning theme of the *Adagio*, in D-Flat Major, presently culminating in still more harp arpeggios, was probably remembered by Mahler, deliberately or unconsciously, when he came to set the *Chorus Mysticus* of Goethe in his choral Eighth Symphony. Bruckner's own inspiration for the theme's syncopated accompaniment has been conjecturally attributed to the love duet (*O sink hernieder*) from *Tristan und Isolde.* A contrapuntal highlight of the movement is the placement of this yearning theme in the bass against two other themes in the antiphonal violins. And, quite marvelously, the same little four-note figure (the last four notes of the Beethoven analogue) that brought the first movement to its close in sullen desolation, now brings the *Adagio* to a cadence of resigned contentment and beatitude.

The finale's main theme, based on a striking new development of the first movement's "Beethoven" rhythm, is played against the most energetic of Bruckner's ostinatos, a sort of galloping beat that the composer once recklessly identified with Cossacks, giving rise to all manner of programmatic nonsense. The chromatic beauty of the later contrasting ideas is often startling. In the recapitulation and coda, themes from the preceding movements are reintroduced one at a time; and, at last, the themes of all four movements are *simultaneously* accommodated to a blazing C-Major harmony, ending with a decisive blast of the above-mentioned four-note figure.

—Jack Diether, Editor, *Chord and Discord*
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