

The stubborn resilience of Anton Bruckner (1824-1896) in the face of indifference and hostility is most notably epitomized by his magnificent Fifth Symphony. In 1874, while composing the earliest version of his Fourth Symphony—his most ambitious work to that date—Bruckner lost one of his teaching positions in the Austrian capital and was for a time dependent on his small salary as an instructor at the Vienna Conservatory, slightly augmented by income from private lessons. The following year, 1875, he obtained a test rehearsal for the Fourth Symphony by the Vienna Philharmonic, and the official finding was that only the first movement was fit to be performed. The rest was declared by the auditors to be “idiotic,” while Secretary Zellner of the Conservatory helpfully commented: “High time you threw your symphonies into a trash can. You can earn more money making piano arrangements of other composers’ works.” On January 12 of that year Bruckner wrote despairingly:

“I have only my place at the Conservatory, on the income of which it is impossible to exist. I have been compelled to borrow money over and over again, or accept the alternative of starvation. No one offers me any help. The ‘Minister of Education’ makes promises, but does nothing. If it weren’t for a few foreigners who are studying with me, I should have to turn beggar. Had I even dreamed of such terrible things, no earthly power could have induced me to come to Vienna. Oh,

how happy I’d be to return to my old position in Linz!”

Yet on February 14, with no prospect of a performance, Bruckner threw himself into the most gigantic work he had yet conceived, his Fifth Symphony. For the rest of 1875 he was involved with this score, just as he had spent the bulk of 1874 immersed in the first version of the Fourth. In the autumn, fortunately, Bruckner was finally able to procure the professorship at the University of Vienna that he had long sought, and his financial affairs thereupon began to improve. But the Fifth Symphony remained unperformed, except for a rendition for piano four hands, given by Joseph Schalk and Franz Zottmann on April 20, 1887. Bruckner himself had slightly revised the score in 1876 and 1877.

In its orchestral form the Fifth was at last produced in Graz on April 9, 1894, two and a half years before the composer’s death. Bruckner did not hear it, for he was then already too ill to travel. Perhaps it was just as well: The conductor Franz Schalk deleted one hundred twenty-two bars from the heart of the Finale and reorchestrated the rest at will! The first edition of the score, published the year of Bruckner’s death, also reflected Schalk’s emendations, and Bruckner’s own genuine autograph version was not published until 1939, as part of the Complete Critical Edition. Schalk was possibly right in thinking that this genuine score, staggeringly original and unprecedented in sound, would not have been properly understood and appre-

ciated in the 1890s, though it is scarcely conceivable that his (Schalk’s) great one hundred twenty two bar wholesale excision, altering the shape and thrust of the final movement, helped it to be understood any better.

Today we can fully appreciate the fact that those contemporary critics who, like Hanslick, persistently excoriated and belittled Bruckner the symphonist were not actually hearing what Bruckner wrote and had scarcely an inkling of what he really represented in music. The opinions expressed were, to be sure, undoubtedly as much political as musical, although Hanslick himself was, *au fond*, as literate and witty as he was insulting. Bruckner simply wandered into the wrong musico-political camp—the Wagnerite one—and nothing, essentially, was going to change that. Such was the Brahms/Wagner schism in Vienna. But the fact that Franz and Joseph Schalk, along with Ferdinand Loewe, instinctively “Wagnerized” Bruckner’s scores to a considerable degree as soon as they laid editorial hands on them could only make matters worse as far as Hanslick was concerned. The original autograph scores of the symphonies proved, at any rate, to be as indestructible as Bruckner’s spirit, and that is a particularly cogent fact in the case of the Fifth Symphony. The purity and originality of its conception, in 1875, at the very time that Wagner’s Ring des Nibelungen was reaching fruition, while Brahms on the other side was

formulating his First Symphony, is truly impressive.

The Fifth is a “finale” symphony, i.e., one in which the center of gravity is the last movement instead of the first. The classic example of this “deviant” form is the Beethoven Ninth with its big choral finale, and Bruckner does not fail to point up the parallel by starting his Finale with a series of quotations from the other movements, just as Beethoven had done. But Beethoven did so in order to reject the themes quoted and to “cue in” the dramatic entry of the choral theme following the baritone’s injunction: “O friends, no more these sounds continue! Let us rather raise our voices in tones more pleasing and joyous!” Bruckner astutely uses the “Beethoven connection” in our minds to achieve a comparable cueing in of his new theme (and the weighty business it brings) without resorting to words at all. Here at once is evidence of a subtle and sophisticated musical intellect standing in stark contrast to the oft-noted lack of these very qualities in Bruckner’s personal manner.

Another striking feature of the Symphony’s over-all design is the mirror sequence of keys represented by B-flat major/ D minor/ D minor/ B-flat major. It is striking not only because it is virtually unduplicated elsewhere, but because the double mirror-image is thematic as well as tonal: The two outer movements begin almost identically, over a common plucked-bass figure, while the Scherzo begins with a string pattern

which is also that of the Adagio's opening, but drastically speeded up and bowed instead of plucked. One, therefore, is a "straight" reflection, the other a "distorting image."

The unity-in-diversity imparted by these devices is uniquely powerful, sinewy, and pervasive. It enables Bruckner to invest each movement with an astonishing amount of inner diversity which is yet anchored to the over-all grand design. The first movement, for example, is the only one by Bruckner consisting of a sonata-allegro with a slow introduction. Mahler was to use slow introductions to about half of his symphonies, and those which do not have one in the first movement very often do have one in the last. Furthermore, Mahler's methods of integrating his slow introductions into the movement as a whole, reintroducing and developing them rather than just stating and then dropping them, owe much to Bruckner's example here. Finally, the aforementioned plucked-bass figure, which is to return verbatim to launch the Finale, also occurs in the faster tempo to launch the coda of the first movement. This anticipates the exhilarating effect of the speeding-up of Adagio into Scherzo and contributes to the uncanny sense of inevitability which invests the work as a whole.

The Adagio movement is as steady and undeviating as the first movement is fluctuating in tempo. The contrast here is twofold and falls entirely within the

basic Adagio pulse. First, there is the contrapuntal contrast between the plucked-bass pattern in triple meter and the superimposed melodic material (beginning in the oboe) which is duple, with the unsettling cross-rhythms that result from this contretemps. Secondly, there is the strong lateral contrast between all of this main-section material on the one hand, which is in D minor, and the broad and noble maggiore theme which twice alternates with it, first in C major and then in D major. The latter reflects some of the grandest D-major pages of Wagner and anticipates those of Mahler.

The Scherzo is again an exercise in fluctuating tempos, more so than any other Bruckner scherzo. The speeded-up string pattern from the previous movement is light, airy, and fantastic, while the stamping, hard-shoe passage that follows, somewhat more slowly, is in the more peasantlike dance vein of the typical *ländler*. (The relationship that Bruckner sets up between these two ideas presages that which Mahler was to construct between the *ländler* and the waltz in the second movement of his Ninth Symphony.) The movement's middle section (trio) is in B-flat major, the Symphony's main key. The woodwinds make several attempts at a naive melody in this key, while a one-note horn signal doggedly keeps insisting on G-flat. Then, as the string bass stealthily plays the melody upside down, we suddenly realize that it is a dance variant of the

solemn and mysterious bass progression from the opening of the Symphony! It then begins to mix convivially with a host of bucolic dance figures, finally storming into the trombone section, and we feel that the thematic integration of the Symphony is complete: Everything is related, yet everything changes.

With the onset of the Finale, we come to realize that Mahler's individual kind of development of Brucknerian fancies begins with the very opening of his First Symphony. There, Mahler takes the first two notes of his main theme, based on one of his songs, and builds a whole slow introduction around them: The two notes become an oft-repeated cuckoo call in the clarinet, surrealistically falling a fourth instead of a third. Here, in his introduction to the massive Finale, Bruckner has a six-note "motto" theme which sounds extremely droll on the clarinet and which punctuates each reference to one of the previous movements as if in mockery and at different pitches. Prior to this, however, the first two notes of the motto, also on the solo clarinet, are superimposed on the slow plucked-bass figure previously alluded to, and they too sound like a cuckoo call—one which falls not just a fourth, but a whole octave! This humorous-serious introduction of just thirty bars terminates as the droll six-note motto is gruffly repeated by the cellos and basses, two to three octaves lower, and abruptly becomes the opening bars of an ongoing fugue theme. Thereafter two quarter notes, sometimes ham-

mered out on the timpani, become the punctuating element of the whole movement, repeatedly announcing new sections as a major-domo might announce newly arriving guests by pounding on the floor with his staff.

The Finale itself, Bruckner's contrapuntal chef d'oeuvre, is a brilliant amalgam of sonata form with multiple fugue form. The first sonata theme is also the first fugue theme, the second sonata theme is a lyrical one, and the third is a typical chorale theme. As the development section begins, the chorale becomes the second subject in a double fugue. In the coda, this double fugue becomes a triple one by the addition of the Allegro theme from the first movement. Last of all, the brass instruments triumphantly reaffirm the chorale with each note doubled in length, while the rest of the orchestra brings the fugue to its apt conclusion. And, as the biographer Hans-Hubert Schönzeler remarks: "A symphonic tour de force indeed... As far as one can gather from the existing sketches, the Finale of the Ninth Symphony would have been somewhat similar in construction, had Bruckner been permitted to complete it."

—Jack Diether

Director of The Bruckner
Society of America

Contributor to The American
Record Guide