

Bruckner's Sixth has long suffered bitter neglect as compared to its powerful neighbors, and today it remains one of the least performed. Though this may be explained by a more restrained, less obviously monumental inspiration than seen in most of the other Bruckner Symphonies, the Sixth must be reckoned as one of his most startlingly original creations. As a more lyrical and intimate work it holds within the Bruckner canon a position somewhat similar to that of the Second, Fourth or Eighth in the series of Beethoven's Symphonies. Yet the latter works, while being far lesser-known ones than the great "odd-numbered" Symphonies, allow us to penetrate into their creator's fascinating inner world. The same applies to Bruckner's A Major Symphony, unique in its variety of moods and bewitching chiaroscuro. While the Finale is perhaps less convincing—another reason for the Symphony's comparative obscurity—the three remaining movements stand high among his loftiest inspirations. The Scherzo, for instance, is utterly different from anything else Bruckner wrote, showing him in a most unwonted impressionistic light. Playing for slightly more than 50 minutes, the Sixth is one of the shortest symphonies Bruckner wrote (in fact, the shortest except for the First!), and this should ease its approach to many listeners who might feel rebuked by the eighty minutes of the Fifth or eighty-seven of the Eighth! Since, moreover, it overflows with ingratiating melodies and with memorable themes (the opening is one of the greatest moments in symphonic literature), and since its architectural design is of perfect clarity whereas its idiom preserves all of the composer's most typical idiosyncrasies, the sixth Symphony may be considered a fitting introduction to the enchanted world of Bruckner. To those listeners who have learned to appreciate the master from Ansfelden through better-known works, it shall come as the most endearing of symphonic Sleeping Beauties.

The Symphony's composition was started on the 24th of September 1879, soon after the completion of the String Quintet, Bruckner's only venture into the realm of chamber music. He had just celebrated his fifty-fifth birthday, but was still struggling in deep obscurity: to begin the composition of a great new Symphony must have been for him a matter of pure faith and idealism. His Third Symphony (dedicated to Wagner) had met with the most bitter failure at its first performance, under the direction of Bruckner himself on the 16th of December 1877, and since then no conductor had dared to program a Bruckner score, so that the Fourth and Fifth lay unperformed in the composer's drawer: the latter one he was never to hear!

The new Symphony took nearly two years to complete, Bruckner's creative impulse being hampered not only by the heavy burden of his pedagogic activities, but also by bad health and by a thorough revision of the Finale of his Fourth Symphony, which took place during 1880. The first movement of the Sixth was lastly finished on the 27th of September 1880, one year after its inception. The remaining movements came with greater ease, however, the Adagio being completed on the 22nd of November 1880, whereas the striking Scherzo was written exactly in a month's time, between the 17th of December 1880 and the 17th of January 1881. On February 20th the long-awaited premiere of the Fourth Symphony, conducted by Hans Richter, turned out to be the first un-

qualified success met by a Bruckner Symphony. This undoubtedly kindled the composer's creative fire, but instead of completing the symphony he sketched a "Te Deum" between May 10th and 17th, this being the origin of the famous masterpiece of 1884. On June 28th the Finale of the Sixth lay ready in sketch, the score being finally completed at St. Florian on September 3rd, the eve of Bruckner's fifty-seventh birthday.

Only the two middle movements were performed during the composer's lifetime, at a concert given by the Vienna Philharmonic on February 11th, 1883 (at a time when Bruckner was engaged in writing the famous Adagio of the 7th Symphony). The four movements were played, in a drastically altered version (including heavy cuts), under the direction of Gustav Mahler in 1899, three years after Bruckner's death, and the work was not heard in its entirety until 1901. The grievous neglect suffered by this step-child among Bruckner Symphonies has had at least the advantage of keeping it free from any revision by well-meaning hands of the master's disciples. Even Bruckner never touched it up again, unlike his earlier symphonies, so that no textual problems arose when the original score was published in the "authorized" edition of the Brucknergesellschaft in 1937.

Bruckner is said to have called the Symphony "die Keckste" ("the sauciest"), a naive alliterative joke referring to its number ("die Sechste"). This qualification mainly applies to the fantastic Scherzo, and perhaps also to the rhythmic "Ostinati" of the opening movement. But as a whole the Symphony is of a rather contemplative and introverted—even philosophical—nature, and is a far less "saucy" work than the bold First, nicknamed "das kecke Beserl" ("the saucy little bosom") by the Composer.

The opening "Maestoso" is one of Bruckner's most perfect achievements, blending the contemplative pantheism of the romantic Fourth and the militant assertiveness of the Fifth. It is entirely pervaded by the celebrated "Bruckner-rhythm" of two-plus-three, and its ever-recurring ostinato background reminds one of the most illustrious of all A-major Symphonies, Beethoven's Seventh. The main theme, however, of truly epic sweep and grandeur, is one of Bruckner's supreme inventions, opposing its initial falling fifth (the composer's fingerprint!) to strange modal inflections (the second, sixth and seventh degree are flattened, though we are clearly in A-major). It is said to have been inspired by a military bugle-call used for the evening Retreat in the Austrian Imperial army, and composed by Michael Haydn. Its mood is at the same time heroic and contemplative. First played softly by the low strings, it goes through daring modulations before reassessing itself in a powerful fortissimo of the whole orchestra, backed by the ever-present rhythmic ostinato. The music now subsides for the entrance of the second theme, a gentle string melody in E minor, distinguished by great contrapuntal ingenuity, warm-hearted lyricism and a very complicated rhythmical background of four against six (this is a real problem to conductors, but need not bother the listener!). Following the canons of Brucknerian sonata-form, there is yet a third theme, a strongly rhythmical unison assertion by the full orchestra, after which a decrescendo leads to the development. This is shorter than in most of Bruckner's first movements, and mainly deals with the inversion of the main theme and with the second subject. The recapitulation is

telescoped in a most effective way in that its beginning coincides with the climax of the development, the main theme being first presented fortissimo, and then in the lower strings as at the beginning. This is the first appearance of a most interesting formal procedure, which Bruckner was to use again in his Eighth and Ninth Symphonies. The movement concludes with a grandiose Coda, in which the main theme powerfully asserts itself in the brass, while the remaining instruments, including drums, hammer the ostinato.

The warm, moving Adagio in F-major, marked "very solemn", speaks of more earthly and human feelings than Bruckner's other slow movements, whose inspiration is more religious. It is built upon three themes, the first of which gains a heart-aching intensity by the little counter-subject of the oboe. The second, coming as close to a love-song as anything in Bruckner's music, expands into some lovely string polyphony, whereas the third is a poignant funeral march in C minor. There is no central development section, but each theme is varied and embellished greatly during the recapitulation, which is followed by a wonderful coda on the first theme of truly heavenly repose, perhaps the expressive heart of the whole Symphony!

The Scherzo conjures fantastic moods of unusual delicacy, and has aptly been compared to some "Walpurgis Night" music. It is fairly short, and for the first time in Bruckner's work it does not resort to the Austrian "Laendler" as a source of inspiration. The moderate, but strongly accented gait of the opening bars perhaps unconsciously inspired Mahler when he composed the Scherzo of his own Sixth Symphony (both pieces are in A minor). The orchestration abounds in felicitous devices of a most elfin lightness, and a very peculiar brand of "nocturne" humour sets this piece apart from anything the composer had written until then, though he was to exploit this vein again in the Scherzi of his two last Symphonies. It cannot be denied that the music sometimes pays due respect to Wagner's Rhine-Maidens, but this passing similitude is of no more importance than say the reference to Beethoven's Ninth in the Finale of Brahms' First Symphony: it affects the letter, not the spirit. The brief slow Trio is mainly built on a romantic call of the horn quartet, but the woodwinds surprisingly intrude with a reference to the main theme of the first Allegro from the composer's Fifth Symphony!

The rather complex Finale, one of Bruckner's more problematic pieces, starts in a rather greyish and diffident mood, in A minor, but it soon gathers strength and confidence, leading to a triumphant proclamation of the four horns, which seems to launch the crux of the argument. The lovely lyrical theme, one of Bruckner's typical tripping polka tunes adorned with rich counter-subjects, such as are to be found in the Finales of the Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth Symphonies, is followed by a bouncing rhythmic element, with heroic dotted accents, clearly forecasting the Finale of the next Symphony, the celebrated Seventh. This is to play a leading part in the course of the short development section. The recapitulation is shortened too, dispensing with the sullen opening theme and starting at once with the triumphant horn theme. The music finally reaches its goal victoriously by recalling, as in all Brucknerian perorations, the opening theme of the first movement turned into a blazing apotheosis of the full orchestra in the original A major.

Notes by HARRY HALBREICH