

The Interpretation Of Bruckner's Symphonies

The point of culmination comes at a different place in each of Bruckner's symphonies. In the Sixth, for instance, in my opinion, it comes as early as the first movement; at the very least, the first two movements are the weightiest in respect of content, while the third, (though distinctive, undoubtedly marks, together with the fourth, a tendency to wind down. Given "the Finale problem", that is perhaps a certain weakness in this symphony. It need not be so, and the best example of that is the Seventh, where the climax is in the second movement (Letter W in the score). The first movement is heavy with significance, but after it the inner formal line continues to climb in the second, and reaches an incomparable culmination at Letter W. The significance of it is all the greater for coming at almost the middle point of the work, estimated by page-count, and doubtless occurs according to a conscious formal plan. Viewed as a whole, the third and fourth movements, in spite of the great climax at the end of the latter, constitute a subsiding and a descent ("descent" meant not in any judgmental sense, but in purely formal terms). The climax of the Fifth Symphony, on the other hand, is not merely in the last movement but at the very end of it, in the chorale. The same is true of the Fourth, but this differs from the Fifth in the weight of meaning borne by the first movement; the second and third movements are lighter. In the Eighth, too, the climax comes at the end of the Finale; it surpasses even the climax of the Adagio, in both formal weight and external evolution. The Fifth is so constructed that, when we look back from the end, the first, second and third movements seem almost no more than a vast preparation, and the third movement, the Scherzo, even acquires the character of a certain relaxation (something of a formal descent, that is, in the context of the first three movements).

The preparatory character that I ascribe to the first three movements of the Fifth Symphony applies in a special sense to the first movement. That may sound a little strange, if you think of the expansive adagio introduction. But it seems to me that, in terms of formal significance, this introduction does not belong to the first movement alone, unlike the slow introduction of a French overture. Rather, it is a large-scale foundation, laid as part of, and as an aid to, the construction of the whole work, and destined to bear the weight of all four movements. The proof, for me, lies firstly in the purely thematic feature of the connection of the bass progression first encountered in bars 19-20 with the first subject of the second movement and hence with the contrapuntal passage for the strings at the opening of the third. The second piece of evidence is the fact that this introduction is revived in an abbreviated form at the beginning of the fourth movement, as if the composer wished to reassure himself of his foundation's ability to bear the weight before the last and greatest manifestation in the fourth movement. Finally, the relationship of this introduction to the 'actual' first movement, the Allegro, is manifested, inter alia, in the anticipation of tempo at Letter A, where the marking "more animated, in the forthcoming allegro tempo" must be observed strictly. The weight of significance carried by the movements of a symphony must be taken into account in the interpretation, that is, the interpretation must relate everything to the climax. In the Fifth Symphony, for example, it must direct everything towards the Finale and its ending, and, important as the first three movements are, continually keep something in reserve for the conclusion. The choice of tempo is decisive in the interpretation of any music. The generously proportioned tensions in Bruckner's symphonies, which need to evolve and be resolved, call for the 'correct' fundamental tempo, which may be slightly varied from time to time. In the case of the introduction of the Fifth Symphony, for example, I would regard the moderately-paced crotchets (quarter notes) at the first fortissimo (page 4, bar 15) as the fundamental tempo. These crotchets should correspond exactly to the minims (half notes) of the first subject of the Allegro, the minims at Letter A (where "the forthcoming allegro tempo" is anticipated), and the crotchets at the end of the introduction (marked "original adagio*1). In relation to this fundamental tempo, I allow myself to take the pizzicato bars of the opening just a fraction more gently, but that should not be a different tempo, only a slight modification of the principal tempo. The fact is that, if these opening pizzicato bars are taken too fast, they lose the eerily pacing throb; there must be, as it were, a space around every note, isolating it, but that space, in turn, must not be so large that the coherence of the two-bar ostinato is lost. Then the very slight speeding-up of bar 15 underlines the fortissimo outburst and the shock it registers; the four following bars, with their solemn chorale, stay in the same tempo throughout, of course. Small modifications of this kind are often very important for the proportions of the whole.

I would like to give the songlike second subject (at Letter C) as a further example. It is often taken too slowly, which causes it to lose its visionary intensity and excitement. There must be some slight modification and slowing, but absolutely not too much. The wind should "sing" the third subject, at Letter F; it must flow calmly, without dragging. Officially the development section begins at Letter I,

where Bruckner puts the double bar-line and we have dominant harmony; but it does not really begin until bar 237, in the dominant of the dominant. The twelve bars from Letter I to bar 236 inclusive form a first transition with the preceding thematic material. Once again the beat is four crotchets in a bar. These proportions must agree exactly, or else the logic of the construction is destroyed; these crotchets also correspond exactly to those of bars 15ff. In this way a large-scale coherence enters the whole, which is especially important in movements where the tempo changes as much as it does in this one.

It does no harm if, in the last bars before the first-movement recapitulation, before Letter O, the tempo is imperceptibly increased, so that O itself is heard at a slightly faster principal tempo. This first thematic complex was fairly concisely presented already in the exposition, and now, in the recapitulation, it is so compressed that it can bear a taut tempo. I take the coda (Letter U) somewhat faster, perceptibly a little quicker still than the recapitulation at Letter O; in this way the recapitulation represents a certain heightening of tension after the exposition, as does the coda after the recapitulation, and that is absolutely appropriate in this movement, which does not so much exist for its own sake as bear witness to a strong drive towards the goal of the following movements, and especially the Finale; for me, this movement always has something a little sketchy about it, like a draft version of something envisaged as larger and greater.

As a general rule, however, I must caution against subjecting Bruckner to the excessive *accelerandi* and *ritardandi* that the sensual music of the late Romantic era demands. Bruckner's music develops out of an "eternal rest in God the Lord" and a mystical relationship to God which is matched by only one other composer in the whole history of modern European music, and then in a quite different form: in J.S. Bach. The music will not stand nervous, 'heated' increases of tension: Bruckner's tensions rise almost always in a 'sweeping, circling motion', that can be represented only by absolute regularity of tempo. There is a quite individual kind of accent in Bruckner, especially for the brass; he usually writes it as an arrow-head. He uses it a lot, but it does not really represent the effect he wants, and it originates in his experience as an organist. The organ knows nothing of accents, on the contrary it often speaks heavily - especially in the case of the mechanical action of Baroque instruments - and the player must in fact accentuate the notes, in order for them to sound precisely and at the right moment. The conductor must regularly remind the wind-players, and especially the brass, that in Bruckner the arrow-head accent very often (for example, in the introduction of the Fifth Symphony) signifies a tenuto which is to be played distinctly but without accentuation, otherwise the solemn, chorale-like passages, in particular, will sound forced and chopped-up, and Bruckner's musical style will be fundamentally falsified. In another example, in the Adagio (second movement) of the Fifth, from Letter I onwards, the accent is written above every chord on the brass and woodwind staves: the entire wind section is to play *sempre tenuto*, for once again the accents ask for pregnantly articulated tenuti Bruckner's staccato is a similar case. There is often a true staccato, certainly, but very often 'staccato' whether indicated by a dot or an arrow-head, is like a portato, and one must decide which kind is called for in each and every case, guided by the immediate context. One must always keep at the forefront of one's mind that the Brucknerian conception of sounds comes primarily from the organ. The arrow-head means something different in the Scherzo of the Fifth: the staccati must be very short, like a tapping. There must be something eerie about the whole. At the second tempo marking ("significantly slower"), a really high-spirited Upper Austrian peasant dance strikes up: here the crotchets marked with an arrow-head should be rather short and playfully marked, each note given a slight accent. In the Trio, too, especially in the piano section, the accents must be brief, light and effervescent. The arrow-heads indicate actual staccati here: the quavers (eighth notes) on flutes and first violins before Letter A must be very light, dainty and short. On the other hand, in the cello and double bass descent directly after Letter A, the arrow-heads signify a rounded line, the notes marked with one must sound with audible vibrato, and not be too short. Another characteristic of Bruckner's style that originates with organ-playing is the changing of manuals. Look, for instance, at the beginning of the development section in the first movement of the Fifth. The 'horn manual' is palpably distinct from the full organ' in bars 241-2, from the 'woodwind manual' in the four allegro bars, 243-6, and the combined string and woodwind 'manuals' in bars 247-58; then it is the turn of 'full organ' again, and so on. Bruckner must often have improvised in this style of Baroque manual changes, in the great Austrian collegiate churches of St. Florian and Klosterneuburg. It is also easy to imagine certain pianissimo passages (e.g. the second subject on horns and trombones in bars 325-8) rendered on the remote (choir) organ, perhaps near the altar, and set off against the 'pleno organo' on the Great organ at the far end of the nave. There is an even more striking example in the Finale of this symphony at the first fortissimo entry of the brass chorus, assuming the role of the Great organ,

while the answering pianissimo strings act as Choir organ (Letters H-I). In any event, 'changes of manual' of this nature conjure up purely spatial imaginings of vast, Baroque interiors. But there is something yet greater beyond it: it is like the cry of the heavenly hosts ringing out from metaphysical space, and the earth's humble answer. From time to time I think dynamic retouching is necessary, especially when Bruckner is working with imitation and counterpoint. Everything can be heard, so long as one handles the brass with skill and keeps the playing transparent. There are so many performances of Bruckner's symphonies where this does not happen, and so they are given a false drama and become noisy. In polyphonic structures, for instance, the double fugue in the last movement of the Fifth, it is not enough to bring out the themes as such; since Bruckner, just like the Classical symphonists, simply marks all the parts with the same dynamic, forte or piano, the subsidiary parts would be too loud and submerge much of importance. But if they are held back, relative to the rest, they are sufficiently audible, and clearer, while the principal themes stand out better and the whole still makes the necessary fortissimo effect. Even when brass and strings play the same thing in a fortissimo the brass must be handled with restraint, even if it is playing the melody. The brass will come across anyway, the strings must be brought out. On the other hand, on very rare occasions, it may be necessary to augment one or more of the brass lines. Differing only a little from an old practice that goes back to Schalk, in the last movement of the Fifth, from the chorale onwards (bar 583), I reinforce the entire brass chorus with an additional eleven players: 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones and one bass tuba. (They're known irreverently as "the Eleven Apostles". The twelfth, Judas, is the missing one.) Schalk discovered during the rehearsals for the first performance in Graz that by the time the chorale is reached the normal orchestral brass contingent is so exhausted that it cannot, on its own, summon up the necessary culminating splendour for this unique closing apotheosis, and so the all-important conclusion sounds dull and is an anticlimax. So he had this idea of introducing eleven extra brass-players, plus triangle and cymbals, and positioned them separately, behind and above the orchestra. This remained the general practice for a long time. When possible the "Eleven Apostles" were put up in the organ loft. To my taste that effect is too theatrical, nor does it correspond to the chaste, organ-like instrumentation of the original version of the symphony. So I put the eleven extra players in the orchestra, behind or next to their colleagues, as space permits - close enough, at all events, for their sound to blend completely with that of the others. If they sit behind them, which is a particularly good idea in the case of the trumpets, they can also relieve their colleagues here and there at earlier points in the work, but if they do one must take care to ensure that there is no doubling except in the very few passages where it is called for, because that effect must not be preempted. They may only deputize for their colleagues, and only in a very few places at that. Thus from bar 583 onwards, all the extra players play together with the normal brass section, and the latter may then spare themselves a little here and there. That is what happened in the performance on this recording. It can be done differently: in Amsterdam, for example, we have only the extra players playing from Letter Z to bar 583, except where "a 2" is expressly marked. This gives the exhausted players of the regular orchestra a rest of almost 20 bars' duration, and they can re-enter at the beginning of the chorale with new, invigorated splendour.

So far as orchestration goes, Bruckner scarcely deserves the name of a Romantic. The Baroque ideal of sound is the sole foundation of his own conception of it, and in that he anticipates fashions in scoring that have revived only in the modern age. The span of his ideas reaches, however, from the mysticism of the early Gothic Middle Ages, through the world of Palestrina, to the 19th century with its closeness to nature, and only in this last respect does he come at all close to his contemporary Richard Wagner. But Wagner expresses all the nervous sensibility of his own time in his monumental oeuvre, which is filled with ardent eroticism and boundless subjectivity, joined to a view of nature as a grandiose spectacle. Bruckner is wholly free of this sensual eroticism, but is filled instead with the warmth and vitality of the landscape and the native folk culture of Austria. Behind that, however, as the background to all his music, lie a piety and a mystical personal relationship to God known otherwise in European music only to Bach.

-Eugen Jochum (translation: Mary Whittall)