

SIDE ONE: I. Allegro moderato
SIDE TWO: II. Scherzo
SIDE THREE: III. Adagio
SIDE FOUR: IV. Finale

Anton Bruckner had just celebrated his sixtieth birthday when he began his eighth symphony in October, 1884. The composer was vacationing at his sister's home in the little town of Vöcklabruck, about one-hundred and forty miles west of Vienna and near the Bavarian border. Long walks in the surrounding woods, a rented room with a piano provided Bruckner with the necessary solitude for his first sketches and the requisite peace of mind, after the disappointments of the past and almost fruitless struggles to gain recognition.

A persevering, kindly man, Bruckner was the typical product of a European small-town environment in his attitude of subservience to any person of authority, learning, or title. Composition was not his goal at the beginning; rather, the Austrian-born son of a village schoolmaster planned to follow in his father's footsteps, which also included duties as organist and choir director. From the time that he began his first musical instruction at the age of ten-and-a-half until well over twenty-five years later, Bruckner never gave up formal study, passing examinations, acquiring certificates of merit, and obtaining letters of recommendation with a determination that can only be described as compulsive.

Although Bruckner's life was completely dominated by both music and religion, it was only after he was coerced into competing for the vacant post of organist at Linz Cathedral in 1855 that the thirty-one-year-old composer was finally willing to accept music as his calling. A proposed move to Vienna eleven years later aroused further trepidations, for Bruckner was obsessed with feelings of insecurity and the necessity for a reliable, pensioned position. Finally, in 1868, he was appointed professor of thorough bass, counterpoint, and organ at the Vienna Conservatory as well as organist-designate at the imperial court chapel.

Vienna's response to Bruckner was far from enthusiastic in spite of his teaching abilities and the success of his organ tours to France and England in 1869 and 1871. The composer had unwittingly become a foil in the battle ranging between the Wagnerites and the Brahmsians, with Eduard Hanslick, the critic of the *Neue freie Presse*, (whom Wagner had bitterly satirized, and incidentally immortalized, as Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger*) as his most violently outspoken opponent. Bruckner idolized Wagner, somewhat to the latter's embarrassment, but in spite of what has often been claimed, Wagner's influence on Bruckner was limited only to certain elements and served primarily to fire his imagination; neither Bruckner's organ-like orchestration nor the concept of abstract music in his symphonies bears much relation to the music drama that formed the battleground between the two opposing sides. Bruckner, never a fighter, had merely stated his unending admiration for Wagner's music, with the result that Hanslick and those siding with Brahms made recognition and success nearly impossible. In 1874 the Vienna Philharmonic refused to perform the second and third symphonies. When this orchestra had the intention of programming the Seventh Symphony, following the composer's increasing successes in Germany and Holland, Bruckner pleaded with its members not to perform the work for fear of adverse criticism from Hanslick and its effect in these other countries.

Recognition did, however, finally arrive after the première of the Seventh Symphony on December 30, 1884, in Leipzig. Yet Hanslick could not refrain from writing, "It is certainly without precedent that a composer be called to the stage four or five times after each movement of a symphony. To tell the truth the music of Bruckner so rubs me the wrong way that I'm hardly in a position to give an impartial view of it. I consider it unnatural, blown up, unwholesome and ruinous."

Shortly after the completion of the Eighth Symphony's first movement, Bruckner was awarded the Franz Josef Order as well as a grant of 300 florins by the Austrian emperor who later undertook to pay for the printing of the symphony, and on September 23, 1886, he was given the honor of a private audience with Franz Josef. Upon being asked what special favor might be shown him, Bruckner, so the story goes, was supposed to have replied, "Would Your Majesty be kind enough to tell Herr Hanslick not to write such bad criticism of my work?"

By the fourth of September, 1887, Bruckner had completed his Eighth Symphony in the little town of Steyr, dedicating the work to the emperor. In a mood of confidence he sent the manuscript to Hermann Levi (who had conducted the première of *Parsifal*) with hopes for a performance. Levi, although he was friendly with the aging composer, was unable to understand the music and had the score returned. Bruckner, completely shattered, suffered a relapse of a mental breakdown. His counting mania (he numbered every bar of his works) began to absorb him even more — for example, the number of leaves on a tree, windows, church crosses, buttons, the compulsive recording of daily prayers and ejaculations in a diary, the searching for forbidden parallel unisons and octaves in his entire output.

During this period of nearly three years, Bruckner was unable to continue working on the Ninth Symphony, which he had begun, and commenced with newly revived feelings of insecurity to rewrite the Third, Fourth, and Eighth Symphonies. If Hanslick and his circle were harrassing enemies, the well-intentioned members of Bruckner's camp were far from the true friends they professed to be, for the composer only too readily agreed to their suggested changes of orchestration and extensive cuts in his scores — presumably for the purpose of making the music more playable and easier to comprehend. The revision of the Eighth Symphony, begun on March 4, 1889, was completed one year later, and the première was entrusted to Felix Weingartner at Mannheim. Bruckner's apprehension and paradoxical attitude is revealed by two letters to the conductor: "How fares the Eighth? Have there been any rehearsals yet? How does it sound? I do recommend to you to shorten the *Finale* severely as is indicated. It would be much too long and is valid only for later times and for a circle of friends and connoisseurs." The second letter: "Please submit to the wishes of the orchestra. But I do implore you not to alter the score and it is one of my most burning wishes to have the orchestral parts printed without alterations."

Weingartner, however, had to forego the first performance, having accepted the post of Court Kapellmeister of the opera and director of the Royal Orchestra in Berlin, and the première consequently took place on December 18, 1891, amazingly enough in Vienna, with the Philharmonic conducted by Hans Richter. The performance proved to be a triumph, and even Hanslick was forced begrudgingly to mention the tremendous reception accorded the new score. Hugo Wolf, ever Bruckner's loyal supporter, wrote ecstatically, "The work renders all criticism futile; the Adagio is absolutely incomparable." The composer, suffering from illness and forced to adhere to a strict diet, had at last received his due, for in addition to the Symphony's success, Bruckner a few months earlier obtained the honor he had coveted for so many years: an honorary degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Vienna to place beside his title of Professor.

The Eighth Symphony, often called the "crown of nineteenth century music," has no program *per se*. Yet the popular emphasis on an explanation of even absolute music was so strong that Bruckner, under the influence of his friends, provided the following "story" for three of the movements:

"In the first movement the trumpets and horns play the rhythm of the theme: the heralding of death, which appears at intervals more and more intensely, finally entering with extreme severity; at the end: resignation."

"*Scherzo*: the principal theme is called *Deutsche Michel*; in the second part the dear fellow goes to sleep but he cannot find his beloved in his dreams; finally he wakes up in despair."

"*Finale*: once upon a time our Emperor met the Czar at Olmütz; the strings play here; ride of the Cossacks; brass: military music; trumpets: fanfare upon the meeting of their Majesties. In conclusion all the themes: the *Deutsche Michel* ends his journey in a blaze of brilliance, just like the king's command in the second act of *Tannhäuser*. For the last bit the death march again and finally transfiguration (brass)."

In spite of the thinly fabricated program, one is tempted to identify the *Deutsche Michel*, a symbolic figure which the composer described as typifying the "Austrian folk-spirit, the idealistic dreamer," with Bruckner himself, the music's conflicts with his own struggles for recognition, and the Symphony's triumphant peroration with the master's own hope for immortality.

— IGOR KIPNIS

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