The Baffling Case of Anton Bruckner
A couple of years ago, Vienna's famous concert organization, the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, sent out to its subscribers a questionnaire asking them what kind of music they wanted to hear, which composers, which works. Of the 4,000 persons queried, only 1,086 replied; on the whole, however, their preferences may be taken as representative of those of the average conservative concertgoer in Vienna. The answers were tabulated in two ways: first, by composer; then by specific works. As anyone familiar with postwar Vienna might surmise, Anton Bruckner came out on top, by a comfortable margin: Bruckner, 337; Mozart, 277; Franz Schmidt, 270; Beethoven, 257; Haydn, 244; Richard Strauss, 244—and so on down to Schoenberg (77), Webern (71), and Prokofiev (66). As for particular works, Bruckner's Eighth Symphony won at 377 (Mozart's Jupiter got only 100 votes).

For those unfamiliar with the phenomenon of Bruckner in Austria, it should be explained that his popularity there has been rising steadily ever since the First World War, and most sharply since the sensational revelations of the early Thirties, when it was shown that the published scores of Bruckner's famous symphonies had been "improved" by well-meaning disciples. It is not always clear why Bruckner allowed his original versions to be altered by conductors; but in at least one case, the unfinished and towering Ninth Symphony, the retouchings by Franz Schalk and Ferdinand Löwe were flagrant falsifications of the master's intentions; and there was no question that the Originalfassung—first
played in 1932—of the Ninth was more powerful in addition to being more authentic. As score after score appeared in the "original version," not only was the musicological sensation among scholars heightened but audiences in Austria and Germany had a chance to reconsider Bruckner. Both the professional critics and the general public came to wholehearted agreement that the original versions, though longer, were more convincing than the "edited" scores. Bruno Walter, Wilhelm Furtwangler, Hans Weisbach, Sigmund von Hausegger switched from the "old" to the "new" and authentic versions. (Of celebrated present-day conductors, only Knappertsbusch stubbornly refuses to use the corrected scores.)

Gradually, to many Austrian and German music lovers, Bruckner came to mean all things. As World War II progressed, it was to Bruckner that they turned in times of bombing, darkness, and death. When Hitler's death was announced over Hamburg Radio in those final cataclysmic days of April 1945, it was the Adagio of the Seventh Symphony that followed, illustrating (one presumes) the utter depth and despair into which the German nation had been plunged. Even more than Wagner, Bruckner came to mean the essence of German spiritual life: all that was Dichter and Denker, all that was mystic and philosophic, seemed to be summed up in the solemn grandeur of Bruckner's adagios. It was, people felt, the ultimate expression of the Faustian nature in music. The shattering emotional experience of the Eighth under Furtwangler, played by the Vienna Philharmonic in the scarcely heated Musikvereinsaal during the somber winter of 1944, seemed to make all the suffering worthwhile. An office: on leave in late 1944 wrote in his diary, "The [Bruckner] Ninth with Hans Weisbach: now I know what we are fighting for; to return to the Front will be easier."

The reverence for Bruckner in Vienna has, indeed, something extramusical and feverish about it. The newest trend is to hiss applause after performances of the Eighth and Ninth Symphonies, on the principle that "profound silence" is the only appropriate tribute to these two huge and emotionally racking works. The Viennese also considered it entirely appropriate that St. Stephen's Cathedral should, a couple of Vienna Festivals ago, have allowed the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra to give a concert there consisting of the Bruckner Ninth Symphony and his Te Deum. "Thank God," said one Viennese to me, "they couldn't applaud in the Stedansdom. Besides, it's almost a Mass, that symphony, isn't it?"

In the fifteen years during which I have lived in Vienna, I have often—as a matter of statistical curiosity—asked people at a Philharmonic Orchestra concert if they thought that Bruckner was a greater composer than Beethoven. Most of them have replied: "Perhaps not, but he says more to me." Those who have not attended a Bruckner concert in Vienna can hardly imagine the concentration, the dedication, with which audiences listen to the Masses and symphonies. I have never felt a more charged atmosphere in any concert hall than I did in the Musikverein after Furtwangler's performance with the Philharmonic, shortly before his death, of the Bruckner Eighth. And not only the audience is so emotionally involved; the players themselves seem to take on a kind of rapt, otherworldly inwardness when playing Bruckner. Everything combines to produce an atmosphere closely akin to mass hysteria by the time the work is finished. The very loudness of the last pages of the Eighth, in which it is tradition to have a whole set of extra brass come in (making sixteen horns, six trumpets, six trombones, and two bass tubas), is in itself shocking. And thus the return to reality after the final unison notes crash down is so difficult that applause really does seem out of place (as, indeed, it often does after the performance of any great piece of music).

But this is only one side of the picture. The composer is nowhere near so universally admired as the existence of the Bruckner cult in Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and Holland would suggest. In other countries and other cultures, Bruckner is often regarded with a loathing fully as strong, and perhaps as unreasonable, as the adoration in which he is held in Austria. I have seldom met someone to whom Bruckner was simply "égal," and the violence of reaction which his music calls forth constitutes what must be called the Bruckner Problem.

Bruckner's music produces, and I think will continue to produce, intense emotions, because it was born in a man whose simple, peasantlike exterior concealed a swirling flood of passionate feelings. When the Third Symphony was first performed in Vienna, the audience was so shocked that it first laughed and then angrily walked out of the hall, leaving the composer alone with the orchestra and a few faithful followers. In the United States, people do not generally walk out in the middle of concerts; but I remember distinctly the fury of some Bostonians who were treated to their first taste of Bruckner's Eighth with Koussevitzky shortly after the last war. I was invited to lunch at a house on Beacon Street the next day, and as the discussion about the Eighth grew more and more heated, one man, literally shaking with rage, put down his fork and left the table, choking out as he stormed from the dining room: "It's the most frightful, wicked music I ever heard."

I was exposed to a similarly violent reaction when I paid my first visit to Denmark. We were sitting around the piano—one of Copenhagen's leading conductors, a well-known Danish musicologist, several other musicians, and myself—when the conversation fell on Bruckner. It was then I realized that much of the Bruckner Problem in non-German-speaking countries is political rather than musical. "Karajan came up during the war and conducted Bruckner, I think it was the Seventh Symphony," said the Danish conductor. "I'm sure he did it well, but for us it represented everything about Germany we hate, the marching boots, the concentration
“Surely that’s an exaggeration,” I said. “You can’t mix music and politics that way.” And on the argument went, till I sat down at the piano and began to play the beginning of the Ninth Symphony. The company listened attentively, but after a few minutes my host came over. “Please don’t play it,” he said, pushing a glass of cognac into my hand; “it really makes me ill.”

Several years later I was in Prague, talking to members of the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra. We were discussing the group’s repertoire, and I asked if they did any Bruckner. “During the war and before, the German Philharmonic Orchestra here [now the Bamberg Symphony] played a lot of Bruckner; but it was for the German population. We Czechs can’t stand Bruckner; it reminds us of the Occupation.” And the subject was very abruptly changed.

Actually, this confusion of art and politics in connection with Bruckner is partly the result of the Austro-German attitude which, as I have tried to convey, borders on worship. If Bruckner’s music represents (as I think it must, at least subconsciously) the essence of German spiritual life to the Austro-Germans, such peoples as the Danes and Czechs probably react against it more for what it represents than for what it is. Dragging politics into the Bruckner Problem has only served to make it worse.

It does not help matters to include Bruckner with the parochial, highly nationalistic composers who sprouted forth at the end of the nineteenth century, such as Delius, Sibelius, Smetana, Elgar, and Nielsen—composers whose present popularity exists almost exclusively (and even Sibelius is hardly an exception any more) in the cultural milieu to which they belonged. In other words, the English do not dislike Bruckner for the same reason that the Austrians dislike or, more truthfully, are bored by Elgar. The problem of Bruckner is surely one that is, or should be regarded as, purely musical. Austrians sometimes try to persuade doubting foreigners that in order to savor Bruckner you must have seen St. Florian, the great Benedictine Abbey in Upper Austria where Bruckner was organist; you must have soaked up the atmosphere of Upper Austria, the lilting country-side, and so forth. This is surely rubbish, just as it is foolish to say that to like Delius you must lie on the grass by the Thames on a summer evening. Of course it is obvious that the Ländler, from Mozart and Haydn down to Mahler, has had a strong effect on Austrian music; but you can like a Ländler or a waltz without ever having set foot on Austrian soil. And to confuse the Bruckner Problem with local “Kolorit” is certainly as bad as to bring politics or Weltanschauung into the affair.

The first thing that labels a Bruckner Symphony as out of the ordinary is its huge length compared to that of previous symphonic works. The Eighth Symphony, for example, is almost three times as long as Beethoven’s Fifth. This, in itself superficial, observation means that the listener must concentrate...
no Beethoven and were to read a scholarly German thesis on Beethoven's musical inheritance, you might imagine that composers have been a combination of Haydn and Mozart but with more ff's. Bruckner's language, though we can easily trace its sources, is highly original; once you know it, you could turn on the radio and spot Bruckner at once even if the piece were one you had never heard. For like all great synthesizers—Mozart is perhaps the most celebrated example—Bruckner knew instinctively which elements of his heritage to accept and which to reject.

The enormous forms in which his music is cast are necessary because the material he presents is highly complex; it is also complicated, which is not the same thing. Thus, in the Finale of the Eighth Symphony, the coda unfolds itself like the reading of the Archangel at Doomsday; and at the very end, preceded by jagged timpani fanfares, every principal theme in the symphony comes in at once in a final and apocalyptic flash of grandeur. But to arrive at this point, to make this last affirmation of doomish grandeur, one must hear the whole edifice capable of receiving, at the end, such an overwhelming superstructure. One of the things that bewilders many people about Bruckner is this very size; we must always remember that he worked his Ninth Symphony more or less for the desk drawer—how much more or not at all. By conjuring up the tempo of worldly sophistication, a hard, peasant's accent (his crude, primitive German was a sort of society joke in Vienna), and a generally uncouth appearance, Still, this naive exterior obviously had nothing to do with the visionary grandeur of his music, and the argument connecting Bruckner and romanticism can be effectively countered by citing other romantic figures such as Mendelssohn or Tchaikovsky, whose music has not experienced any difficulty in crossing the borders of the countries in which it originated.

Still another argument, which one heard more frequently twenty or thirty years ago than one does today, is the old anti-Wagnerian cry. For many years it was the fashion to decry Wagner and, automatically, Bruckner, whose music, as we know, owes much to Wagnerian methods. Yet today Wagner is accepted as one of music's greatest geniuses, certainly not to be classified as a problem any more. This argument, too, does not bring us nearer the core of the matter. "I am tempted to believe," writes a valued colleague, "that there is no explanation for the feast-or-famine attitude towards Bruckner—except that we are perhaps in the presence of a cultural lag that seems to be more laggardly in some milieus than in others."

Granted this is true, someone reading this article a hundred years from now will probably experience the same curious sensations with which we read of mighty and earth-shaking aesthetic battles that took place generations ago: battles with which we can hardly identify ourselves emotionally, so long ago in space and time did they occur. Perhaps one does not doubt for a minute that Bruckner is the greatest symphonist since Beethoven. Bruckner, I am convinced, is here to stay, and it is up to us to face his music squarely. Like the tourist in the Uffizi gallery in Florence who was told by the guard, "It is not the pictures that are on trial, it is you," one might paraphrase, "It is not Bruckner's music that is on trial..." Perhaps the answer to the Bruckner Problem is as simple as that.
OF Bruckner's earlier symphonies (which include two before that designated as "No. 1."), there used to be several microgroove recordings, but all have disappeared except for the former Unicorn recording, with veteran Brucknerite F. Charles Adler, of Symphony No. 1, in C minor, now to be had on Siena 1001. On the whole, No. 1 is not a work, nor this a recording, with which to begin a Bruckner library. Nor is No. 3, in D minor, in spite of its real touches of genius, the Bruckner work with which to start a collection. There are two available recordings of the Third, neither of which uses the original version. SPA offers a two-record set (30/31) with F. Charles Adler (Mahler's Tenth Symphony on the fourth side), now very outdated sonically. Knappertsbusch, another veteran Brucknerite (who, as mentioned in the accompanying article, refuses to accept the original versions), plays the work with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra on a single disc, London CM 9107; and this is clearly the preferred recording.

Beginning with the Fourth Symphony, we are dealing with masterpieces. To me the Eighth and Ninth contain, each in its own way, the essence of Bruckner—all his greatest and most uncompromising thoughts—but the popular pieces are without doubt No. 4, the Romantic, and No. 7, in E—which, incidentally, was the first Bruckner symphony to have been recorded (on 78s, with Ormandy). There are four versions of the Fourth to choose from: Hollreiser with the Bamberg Symphony, part of a three-disc Vox set (VBX 117 or SBXV 5117) which includes the Seventh with Rosbaud (a marvelous conductor far too little known in America); a Decca set—also on three discs and also coupled with No. 7 (DX 146), conducted by one of Germany's leading Brucknerites, Eugen Jochum; a very old Klemperer on Vox (11200), which does not show this great conductor at his best; and a gorgeously recorded, smoothly played version with the late Bruno Walter (Columbia M2L 273 or M2S 622, two discs. including the "Tannhäuser Act I Overture.") I would say that Jochum's is the most faithful interpretation, whereas Walter's has the best sound.

Of the difficult and long No. 5, there is only the beautifully played Knappertsbusch (Vienna Philharmonic, on London's two-disc set, CMA 7208 or CSA 222) and the Third, turns out a stunning Eighth on Artia-MK 210B (two discs). There are now six versions of the Ninth, compiled by Walter's set (SPA 24/25, two records) is the only one not to use the original version, and for that reason it is out of the running. The original version of this symphony is the only possible one, for the revised score destroys much of the autograph's brilliant originality and daring. The only two stereo recordings are Keilberth's with the Hamburg Philharmonic on Telefunken (18043, 3043 in mono) and Walter's on Columbia (MS 6171, ML 5571 in mono). Keilberth is not one of my favorite conductors—for me his heavy, coarse joviality has ruined many a Mozart performance at Salzburg—but I must confess that, even with a second-rate orchestra, he gets nearer the jagged monumentality of the Ninth than does Walter, whose Bruckner is a little too smooth for many Brucknerites. I have also had much pleasure from the Vox record with Horenstein (8040), although the Vienna Symphony (that is what Vox means by "Pro Musica" in Vienna) is not the Vienna Philharmonic. Van Beinum's (Epic LC 3401), like all his Bruckner recordings, simply misses the mark. Loving a work does not, I fear, mean understanding it. The Jochum set (Decca DX 139) has the disadvantage of taking two discs, but this, like all Jochum's Bruckner readings, is an intensely dedicated, selfless performance (if you will compare his with Walter's, you will see what I mean about the Walter—in the latter too many corners, if not cut, are at least rounded off). I once heard Furtwängler do the Ninth with the Berlin Philharmonic. None of the readings mentioned above touches it for depth and intensity. I am still waiting for DG to make the tape recording of his performance (which is known to exist) available on records.