

Anton Bruckner

1824–1896

ANTON BRUCKNER considered himself Beethoven's successor in the realm of the symphony, and there are those who feel that he was justified. These protagonists of Bruckner's music point out his expansion of the symphonic form, his intensification of a poetic idea, and the grandeur and nobility of his musical speech. But there are others—and they are equally articulate—who feel that Bruckner's grandeur is only bombast, that his poetry only overwritten prose, his expansive style and form only so much pomposity. And so, the battle over Bruckner has been waged for many years—and for that matter is still being waged—making him one of the most provocative figures in the music of the past six or seven decades.

Born in the small Austrian town of Ansfelden, Bruckner spent most of his life in his native country. For a while he taught music at the St. Florian secular music school where he had formerly attended as a pupil; it was in this post that, in 1849, he wrote his first talented work, a Requiem. In 1853, he settled in Vienna, with whose musical life he was henceforth to be intimately associated. For a while he served as a choral director; then, in 1868, he was appointed Professor at the Vienna Conservatory, filling this position with great honor for many years. Meanwhile, he heard Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, an experience that overwhelmed him and henceforth made him a passionate disciple of the master. Wagnerian influences are frequently in evidence in his music, while his Third Symphony is openly dedicated to Wagner.

The controversy over Bruckner's music began early—indeed, with the very first performances of his first symphonies. One of the officials at the Conservatory, studying his early manuscripts, advised him to throw his symphonies in a trash basket. The first performance of the Third Symphony was an outright fiasco. The critics were savage in

their denunciation; and famous musicians, among them Brahms, were undisguisedly hostile to him.

Toward the close of his life, Bruckner found a certain measure of recognition and appreciation. Performances of his later symphonies by Nikisch, Hans Richter, Mottl, Hermann Levi, and Karl Muck were comparatively successful. In 1891 Bruckner received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Vienna, and a few years later the Emperor presented him with a stipend and a decoration. His seventieth birthday was the occasion for a nationwide celebration. However—despite this increasing favor—Bruckner still had his hostile critics. And, after his death in 1896, his symphonies still continued to arouse controversy outside of Austria.

SYMPHONY NO. 4 IN E FLAT (ROMANTIC)

*Ruhig; Bewegt · Andante · Scherzo: bewegt · Finale:
Mässig bewegt*

BRUCKNER'S first symphony to achieve success at its première was his fourth; and to this day it has remained the one most frequently performed. Hans Richter conducted its first performances in Vienna in 1881 (seven years after Bruckner finished writing it) and achieved such a resounding success with it that, after the performance, Bruckner came to him weeping with gratitude. As a matter of fact, Bruckner—whose excessive naïveté caused as much merriment in Vienna as his music—came to Richter after the final rehearsal and, in compensation for that magnificent performance, tried to force a gulden into Richter's hand.

Except for its slow movement—a funeral march—the *Romantic* Symphony has a contagious buoyancy throughout. Of all Bruckner symphonies, it makes the most pleasurable listening. The first movement is of broad outline and is highly charged throughout with electrifying thematic material which, at the close, is built into a monumental coda. The Scherzo skillfully uses a hunting subject in music that suggests the Viennese countryside and peasant humors. In the closing movement, the composer utilizes the thematic material of the three preceding sections in a sort of summation which seems to foreshadow the cyclical method of César Franck.