

Bruckner's Recital Appearances in France and England

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200 Years since birth – 1824-2024

Anton Bruckner



On the occasion of the bicentenary of the birth of Anton Bruckner, the author traces the composer's visits to Nancy, Paris and London in 1869 and 1871.

Writing in *The Musical Times* in 1937, the distinguished Austrian-born British musicologist Mosco Carner outlined many aspects of the visits that Anton Bruckner made on two occasions during his lifetime to countries outside of his native Austria. At the outset, I should like to acknowledge Carner's work on this subject, from which I have drawn, in shedding light upon an aspect of the composer's life that – in this, Bruckner's bicentenary year – continues to remain very little-known.

As Carner claimed, a somewhat curious aspect regarding Bruckner's public organ recitals, is that until World War II France and Great Britain were the only countries where Bruckner appeared as a concert organist, yet were countries in which his music was known only to specialists and very few concert-goers. In various ways, of course, these were not the only countries in which Bruckner's music had – up to that time – failed to appeal to the concert-going public.

In-so-far as the universal availability of commercially-recorded performances of Bruckner's music was concerned, in 1936 – the year before Carner's article appeared – *The Gramophone Shop Encyclopedia of Recorded Music* listed just two complete recordings of a Bruckner symphony – curiously, both recordings were of No 7 – together with just single movements from six other symphonies (the *Scherzo* from the Fifth Symphony played by a 'Salon Orchestra'!). Indeed, it is only since the end of World War II, principally driven by the development of

the long-playing record, that Bruckner's music has become part of what is termed the standard repertoire; but up to the late 1930s Bruckner had failed to gain a footing amongst any but a small circle of admirers, conductors and orchestral managers.

However, it was surely right to point out that Bruckner's concert-giving expeditions to France and Britain took place in the only countries outside Austria during a period – the late 1860s and early '70s – when his own development as a composer had not yet fully begun.

Bruckner's first international appearances as a concert-recitalist were in France, and took place in Nancy and Paris in the spring of 1869. Just over two years later, during the summer of 1871, he was to cross the English Channel *en route* to London where he appeared at the Royal Albert Hall in the first weeks of the Hall's opening. As Carner writes, these trips 'belong to a period of Bruckner's artistic development when he was still young as a symphonist' pointing out the fact that 'he was over forty when he wrote his first Symphony – an extraordinary case of delayed maturity.'

However, this first numbered Symphony, in C minor, was not Bruckner's initial

attempt at orchestral composition: he had completed two earlier symphonies: in F minor in 1863, and in D minor – now known as *Die Nullte* – in 1869. This last work was not fully completed at the time when Bruckner made his visit to France. In a very real sense, therefore, Bruckner's creative musicianship took some considerable time in evolution before reaching, as he surely instinctively knew, the threshold of symphonic composition.

As a genuine example of Bruckner's approaching symphonic maturity, by 1869 he had also written his first setting of the Mass, in E minor. This is, by any standards, a very fine composition, about which Carner comments that the work 'looks back in spirit and technique to Palestrina'.

This rather surprising remark, apposite though it be, points to Bruckner seeking inspiration not from contemporary events or aesthetic movements but from deeper, almost pre-classical, procedures: his ultimate desire as a composer to transmute those procedures into symphonic structures was surely the most profound example of his genius and deep originality as a symphonist – but it took time.

For Bruckner as an organist it was a different matter. As Carner points out, 'From early childhood the organ had been his favourite instrument. At twenty-one, his free contrapuntal treatment of a Haydn theme and his improvisation of a fugue had attracted considerable attention at his examination for a school post. But what developed Bruckner into Austria's greatest organist was the period of eleven years (1845-'56) as assistant schoolmaster at the seminary of St Florian, near Linz. The baroque splendour of this Augustinian

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The organ at the cathedral of St Epvre, Nancy

abbey was completed by its monumental organ, at that time the second largest in Austria.'

As is now tolerably well-known, it was during that decade that Bruckner became one of the greatest organists in Europe, the nature and character of the organ and its repertoire becoming fully embedded within his creative *persona*. Combined with his innate original compositional genius, as Carner stated, the 'stylistic roots of both the Chorale themes in his symphonies and the 'registration' effect of his orchestral scoring are [self-]evidently to be found in his intensive study of the organ during this period.'

During the eleven years Bruckner remained at the St Florian seminary, his practical creative musicianship developed further as he evolved complete mastery of the techniques of organ-playing and, especially, of improvisation. Entering a competition for the position of organist of Linz Cathedral, Bruckner's outstanding success ensured that he was appointed to the post. He remained there for twelve years, after which period he was

appointed professor of theory and organ-playing at the Conservatorium der Musikfreunde in Vienna.

Bruckner's appointments in Vienna took place a year before his first overseas journey, which was to France. Quite clearly, the positions Bruckner held at the city's internationally-admired seat of musical learning demonstrate that he must have been exceptionally highly regarded as an organist, his reputation – carried by visitors to the Austro-Hungarian capital – spreading and extending beyond the borders of Austria. Yet, as Carner further commented, 'Vienna was (and is still) no easy ground for a newcomer, particularly for one from the provinces, no matter how good their reputation. It was necessary for Bruckner to establish his new position on a sound basis and he set about this in the field in which success seemed most certain, namely, as organist.'

This would surely have implied international recognition, and a fortuitous opportunity occurred when in 1867 the organ of the newly built church of St Epvre in Nancy – which counted among its

patrons the Emperor and Empress of Austria – was to be opened with a competition. It was Eduard Hanslick, the widely-feared (amongst composers and performing musicians) leading music critic of the *Neue Freie Presse*, who advised Bruckner of the competition and advised him to enter. Hanslick was later to become Bruckner's most bitter enemy, but long before that Bruckner had decided to compete.

There were strong international political reasons for Bruckner to take part: the monumental staircase in the forecourt of the new church was a gift from the Austrian Emperor Franz Josef I, heir to the houses of Austria and Lorraine. The French Emperor, Napoleon III, together with his wife the Empress Eugenie, had also donated stained-glass windows. In the event, Bruckner's two recitals, on April 28 and 29, were so triumphantly successful that one French newspaper wrote of his appearances as showing Bruckner's creative musicianship to be that of 'Un homme de gout le plus élevé, de la science la plus vaste et la plus féconde.'



The Royal Albert Hall exterior, approximately 1871

(‘A man of the highest taste, of the widest and most constructive knowledge.’)

As we may readily imagine, Bruckner was both surprised and delighted by his success. He soon wrote to Joseph Hellmesberger, who was at that time Director of the Vienna Conservatorium: ‘I have only the judgments of the professionals in my favour – a point on which modesty bids me be silent – and also the applause of the public. Charming young ladies of the highest aristocracy even came to the organ-loft and expressed their appreciation.’

Bruckner was known for his inherent modesty, but his success in the competition soon came to the attention of the Paris-based firm of organ-builders, Merklin-Schütze, upon whose recently-installed organ in St Epvre Bruckner had played. Indeed, on the strength of his success, Joseph Merklin, the company’s founder, extended an invitation to Bruckner to travel to Paris and give a public recital at the factory. However, Bruckner was uncertain, particularly as the leave that he had been granted was coming to an end.

But Bruckner was not so timid as to pass up such a significant invitation entirely: he wrote to Johann Ritter von

Herbeck, his senior professor at the Vienna Conservatoire (Herbeck had then recently, in 1865, conducted the first performance of Schubert’s ‘Unfinished’ Symphony) requesting ‘that my leave may be extended for three days. I send your Excellency, though with a very heavy heart, this request from me and all these gentlemen (the directors of Merklin-Schütze) most humbly, and beg you to be so kind as to do all you can with the authorities to get them to grant what I ask. And will you be so very good as to tell my pupils?’

Naturally, on the strength of Bruckner’s success, permission was ‘most graciously’ granted. Bruckner travelled to Paris and played at the Merklin factory and also at Notre Dame – on this last occasion his distinguished audience included César Franck, Camille Saint-Saëns, Ambroise Thomas and Charles Gounod. In the French capital, Bruckner’s success at Nancy was repeated and – once more – it appeared that his inspired improvi-

sations made the deepest impression.

Bruckner wrote: ‘At the end, I asked for a theme. It was given me by Charles-Alexis Chauvet, one of the greatest organists in Paris, and when I had developed it in three sections, the success was unbounded. I shall never experience such a triumph again.’ Chauvet (1837-’71) was a pupil of Ambroise Thomas, and the dedicatee of Franck’s *Fantasie* Op 16 – he was, in turn, renowned for his prowess in improvisation. It is difficult not to agree with

Carner’s assertion that the success of this foreign trip helped to get Bruckner the appointment of organist at the Vienna Hofkapelle the following September.

After his triumphant successes in France, it was two years before Bruckner was offered a second opportunity of travelling – and appearing – abroad. This was to appear in London, during the Summer of 1871, to participate in an International Exhibition for which the Chambers of Commerce of the participating countries were invited to send their

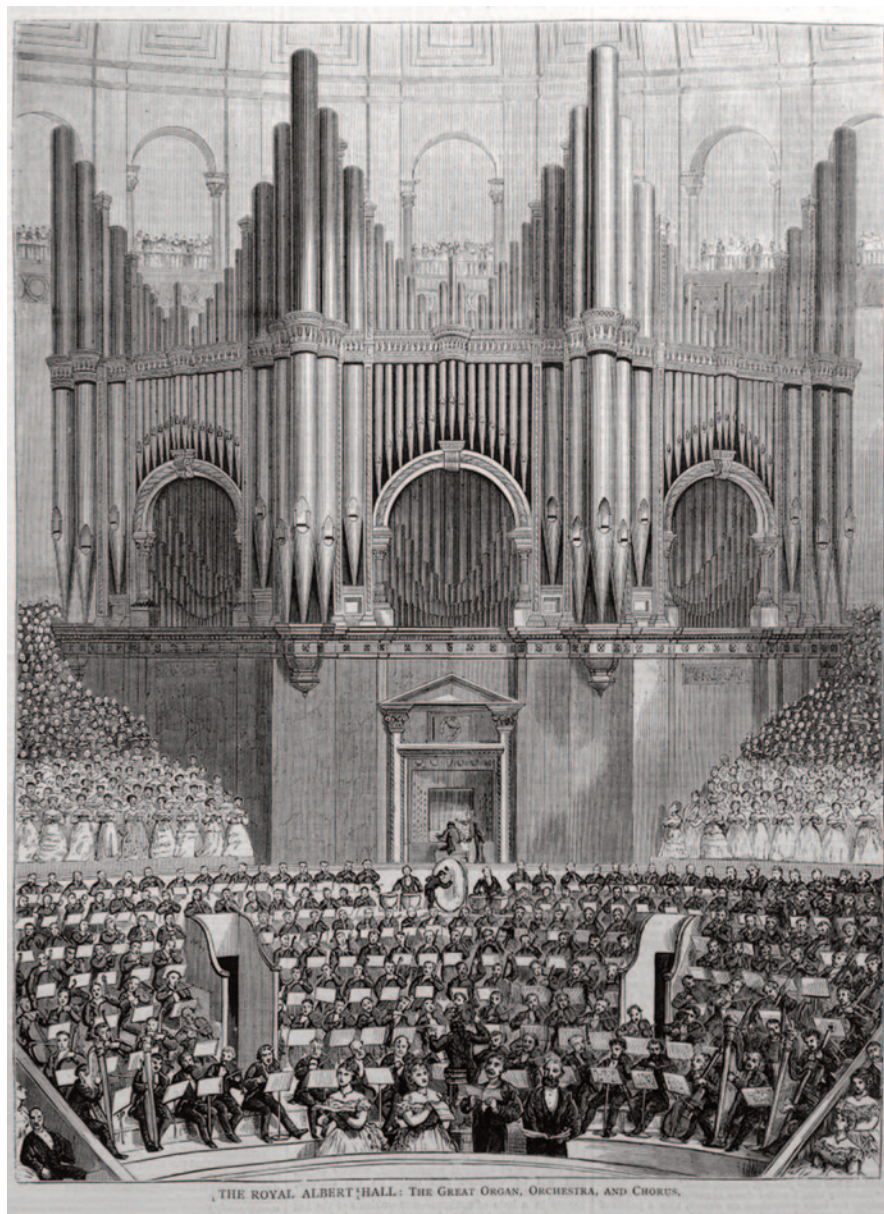
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most prominent organists. The choice of organists from the various countries was predicated upon the fact that the Competition was part of a major Festival marking the twentieth anniversary of the Great Exhibition of 1851, which had of course been held in London and had been the brainchild of the late Prince Albert, who was also the driving force behind the 1851 Exhibition. Prince Albert had died in 1861, and in his memory a great Concert Hall had been built opposite Kensington Gardens, wherein stands the imposing Albert Memorial. The Royal Albert Hall was opened on March 29, 1871 by Queen Victoria (who named the Hall after her late husband) and her son Edward, Prince of Wales.

In the Hall is situated the giant organ built by Henry Willis, the Hall itself having been erected close to where the 1851 Exhibition was held. On learning of the invitation sent from London to the Vienna Chamber of Commerce, which was accompanied by a detailed description of the Willis organ, Bruckner applied to be considered as the city's representative. There was a competition amongst Austrian organists, as a result of which Bruckner was unanimously chosen.

Bruckner arrived in London at the end of July. How he made the Channel Crossing alone from northern France to London is not known, but it is most probably the case that he sailed to Dover (the shortest crossing) and then by train (on the London, Chatham and Dover Railway) to London. In high summer, the weather would most probably have been fine and sunny for a trouble-free Channel crossing.

Bruckner may have crossed the Channel on a longer route, to disembark at Gallions Wharf in East London on the Thames, where a large Inn, known as *The Gallions*, abutted the quay where passengers disembarked. Outward-bound passengers would sleep overnight at *The Gallions* before beginning their journey (this was where Weber died in 1826): the site is now a Docklands Light Railway Station. From there, a horse-cab service would have taken Bruckner to Finsbury Square. It is perhaps more probable, however, that Bruckner would have made his way to London by train from Dover to Victoria (as Liszt did in 1886 – alighting at Penge station), but by whatever means, Bruckner – alone – arrived at the German-owned Seyd's Hotel in Finsbury Square



The Royal Albert Hall's organ, approximately 1871

(not far from the Albert Hall) on Saturday, July 29th.

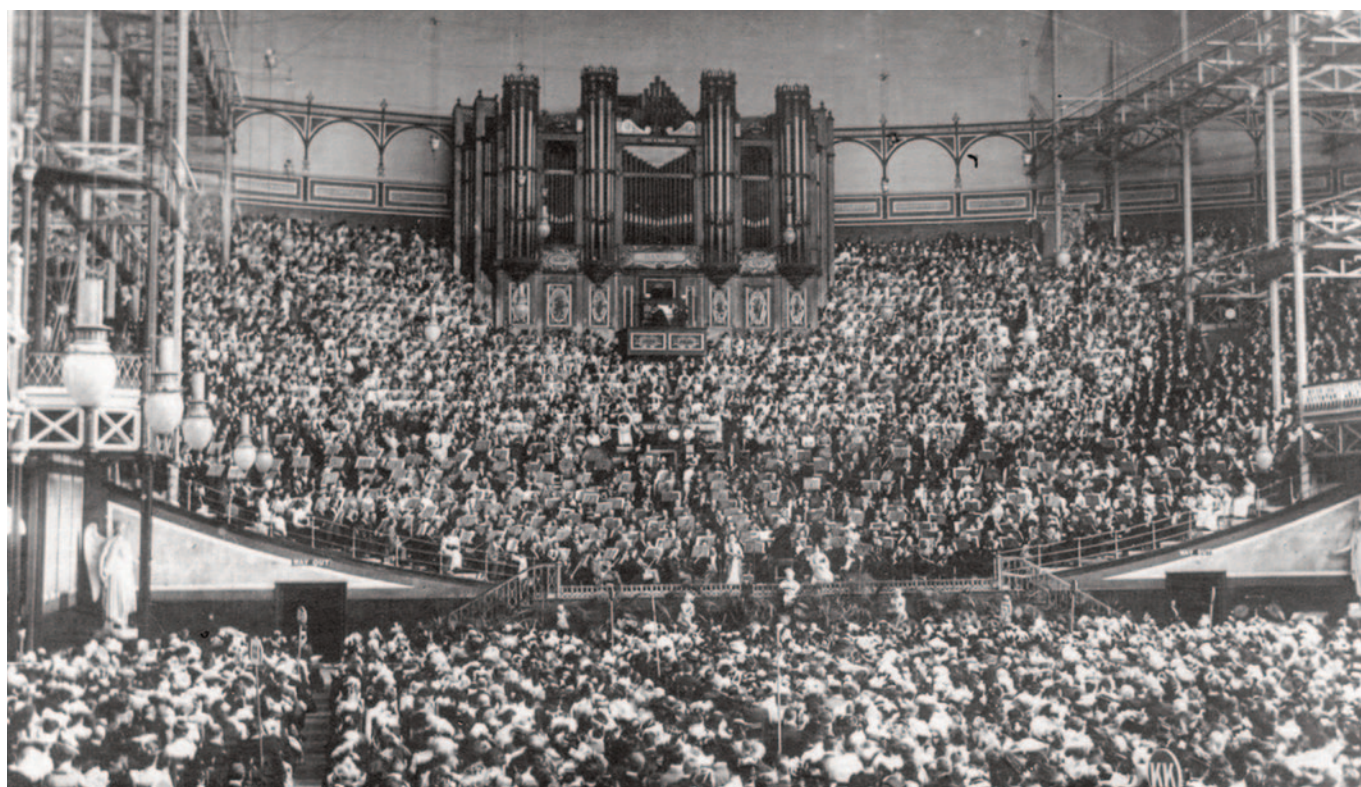
A journey from Vienna to London in those days was not a straightforward matter (Bruckner, of course, did not speak either French or English) and, as Carner wrote, 'Bruckner, ever timid, implored a friend to travel with him. "Then we can come back in fine style by way of Switzerland," he wrote temptingly. But nothing came of this.'

However, it seems that the successful journey was entirely trouble-free for Bruckner, and he appears to have taken to Victorian London almost immediately. The warmth of the reception he encountered in the city in 1871 – doubtless mainly in response to his musicianship – was probably heightened by the fact that a few months earlier, Otto von Bismarck had succeeded in bringing about a united German Empire. With celebrations in

London of the late Prince Albert's legacy following the opening of the imposing new Albert Hall, all things Germanic were at that time the height of fashion in the capital – but not, as we shall see, a fashion that extended universally to the suburbs.

Nonetheless, the welcoming creative atmosphere Bruckner found in London must have been inspiring, for it was during the couple of weeks he was at Seyd's Hotel that he began the composition of his Second Symphony. The bi-lingual English-German Hotel no longer exists, but a plaque commemorating Bruckner's stay has been erected on the building which now occupies the site.

The International Exhibition conditions required of Bruckner were that, beginning on August 2nd, 'he was to play twice daily for a week for a fee of 150 guineas,' including travelling and hotel expenses.



The Crystal Palace organ

Having unpacked, Bruckner lost no time in seeking out the new Willis organ at the Albert Hall, for on the afternoon of the day he arrived he went to the Hall to try the organ. Being a Saturday, the manager of the Hall pointed out to Bruckner that he had arrived too late to play the instrument, as there was very little steam up (the organ was blown by steam) which meant that he could play only as long as the steam lasted. Unperturbed, Bruckner seated himself at the organ and began to play. Accordingly to the story, the manager was so impressed by what Bruckner was playing that he had the fires stoked up and alerted various friends to come and hear this remarkable organist. When Bruckner had finished he found to his astonishment that he had a considerable audience.

This spontaneous event was the first of Bruckner's public appearances in London. Such was the impact he made that Dr Hans Sittner, writing for the Bruckner Festival in London in 1964, claimed the composer was 'encouraged to think that England might become his spiritual home and that his compositions would be appreciated.'

But Bruckner was not the only international organist to appear at the Royal Albert Hall at that time, for six other organists had been engaged to play as

their country's representative during the following weeks. These included WT Best, the official organist of the Hall, who had opened the series on July 18, as well as Saint-Saëns from Paris, Alphonse Maïlly from Brussels, George August Löhr from Budapest (British-born, of Hungarian parentage), Wilhelm Heintzen from Stockholm and the Norwegian Ludwig Matthias Lindeman.

Following Bruckner's spontaneous practice-recital on July 29, he appeared officially at the Albert Hall for the first time on August 2. This was, of course, the height of the British summer, during which season public concerts were rarely given – and when established music critics were often holidaying abroad. But the Austrian's debut was chronicled by the journal *Musical World* in the following somewhat reserved announcement: 'Herr Anton Bruckner, Court Organist at Vienna, and Professor to the Conservatorium of that city, has arrived in London to play on the great organ of the Royal Albert Hall. The dates of his performance will shortly be announced. It takes some little time to become acquainted with the details of so large an instrument. Herr Bruckner's strong points are said to be classical improvisations on Handel, Bach, and Mendelssohn.' Be that as it may, the programme of Bruckner's official London debut was:

Toccata in F major, BWV 540 (Bach); Improvisations upon the foregoing; Fugue in D minor (Handel); Improvisations (original); Improvisation on Bach's Fugue in E minor (BWV 566).

It is quite clear from this programme that one can see Bruckner's predilection for improvisation, his command of which discipline, regarded by all who heard him, as being amongst the greatest masters. Carner quotes a very human story that shortly before his journey to London Bruckner explained to a pupil, in Upper Austrian dialect: '*No, i werd net lang den Bach einwerggln, das sollen die machen, die ka Phantasie haben, i spiel fiber a frei's Thema*,' which might be translated idiomatically as: 'Noa, I doan't care for grindin' out lots o' Bach. They can do that as 'as no imagination o' their oawn. I plays always as I likes.'

During the following week, Bruckner gave no fewer than six recitals at the Albert Hall with such success that August Manns, the noted German-born, British-naturalised conductor of the Crystal Palace Saturday Concerts in South London engaged him for four more. Carner went on to quote a letter written by Bruckner on August 23 to an acquaintance in Linz. It is one from which we can obtain further first-hand details of his stay in London:

'Just finished. Played ten times; six

times at the Albert Hall, four times at the Crystal Palace. Tremendous applause, endless every time. Encores demanded. In particular I often had to repeat a couple of improvisations. Both places the same. Heaps of compliments, congratulations, invitations.

Kapellmeister Manns of the Crystal Palace told me he was astonished and that I was to come again soon and send him my compositions ...

Yesterday I played before 70,000 people* and had to give encores as the Committee asked me to – for I didn't want to, in spite of the tremendous applause. On Monday I played with equal success at the concert ...

N.B. Unfortunately the critic of The Times is in Germany: so hardly anything will be written about me now. Please let the Linz papers know something of this.'

*This was at the German National Fete at the Crystal Palace on August 19 1871 – honouring the unification of Germany, as we have noted, earlier that year.

Bruckner's postscript demonstrates clearly that he considered it important to have his recitals written about by the critics, but – as we pointed out earlier – his appearances took place at a time when the major critics were not in London. In the circumstances, the leading daily newspaper dailies published merely little more than bare announcements. There are no surviving local newspaper reports from South London at this period regarding Bruckner's appearances. In addition, as these recitals were ostensibly part of the festivities surrounding the Exhibition, and were thus seen to be a part of visitors' attractions, none of the programmes, no matter how eminent the organist, were taken very seriously in musical circles.

For example, in the already mentioned *Musical World*, we find reports of a surprisingly disdainful, even pompous, nature, with comments such as music by 'second-rate foreigners' with the 'modest mediocrity' of some of the foreign organists, with – most astonishingly – demands for 'a little discretion in the selection' of the artists concerned.

Despite such rampant chauvinism in the face of the large audiences that Bruckner's appearances appeared instantaneously to have commanded, he seems to have succeeded comparatively well, as we can see in the single genuinely positive report in the *Musical World* of the series:

'He has



Photo: Wikipedia

Birmingham Town Hall's organ

given us a grand extempore Fantasia, which although not very original in thought or design, was clever, remarkable for its canonic counterpoint, and for the surmounting of much difficulty in the pedal passages.'

Despite the welcoming nature in Britain for the unification of Germany, the *Musical World* continued: 'There can be nothing said extemporaneously upon the National Anthem of Austria, and still less upon the "Hallelujah" Chorus of Handel; nor do we think any improvisation with any effect can be given upon the Toccatas of Bach or the Sonatas of Mendelssohn. Great composers exhaust their themes. Nothing can be added to the "Hallelujah" Chorus, nothing to a toccata of Sebastian Bach.'

As we pointed out earlier, regrettably, there are no surviving reports in the local press of Bruckner's appearances on the great Crystal Palace organ, but we may be sure the building itself would have greatly impressed him. Nor do we have any particular knowledge of the impressions that London made on Bruckner – apart from his visits to Crystal Palace, we have no details of any sight-seeing by him. Yet the capital's impact on the rural Austrian must have been fully positive – after all, it was inspiring enough during those four

weeks for him to begin his second Symphony on August 10 at Syed's.

At the end of August, Bruckner left London with a firm intension to return in 1872 for a tour of the provinces – especially visiting Birmingham, with strong connections to Mendelssohn and the great Town Hall Hill organ of 1834, an instrument which had been played by Mendelssohn and where his oratorio *Elijah* and Second Piano Concerto in D minor had received their world premieres. But nothing came of this.

Astonishingly, it was not until four years later, in 1875, that Bruckner received from the Royal Exhibition Commission a medal commemorating his successful collaboration. On just one later occasion, in 1886, Bruckner considered coming to London to conduct his Seventh Symphony, in place of Hans Richter, who was taken ill. But this did not happen, and apart from several trips to Germany to attend performances of his own works, Bruckner's visits to France and England were the only occasions on which he travelled abroad.

Over the following decades, organ-playing occupied less and less of Bruckner's interests as he devoted more time to original composition. As he said: 'What my fingers play is forgotten, but what I have written will not be forgotten.'