

VANITY FAIR



January - 1922

Conrad Nast Publisher

35 cts • \$3.00 a year

The Music of Anton Bruckner

A Note on the Works of the Most Neglected of Symphonists and a Plea for His Revival

By PAUL ROSENFELD

THERE is no major symphonist, Brahms, Schubert and Tchaikowsky excepted, whose work is not neglected by the conductors of the American orchestras. Even here in New York, where two resident and two visiting orchestras play regularly, Beethoven himself is known to the concert-public principally through five or six of his nine symphonies. Only the eldest, or the next eldest, inhabitant, can remember when last the second and the fourth of the nine were performed in town. Mozart is even more shabbily treated. Once, or, at the utmost, twice a year, a program holds the Jupiter, or the g-minor symphony. The rest—is silence; silence unbroken. But, when compared with Haydn, Mozart is as one being rushed. Since ever the departure of the terrible Dr. Muck, Haydn the symphonist remains very much in the abodes where the eternal are, and returns but seldom to earth.

Unlike the man-eating Doctor, the lions of the podium now rampant are very insensitive to the beauties of the adorable Haydn; they are too busy savouring to the full the subtleties of the c-major symphony of Schubert, the *From the New World* of Dvorak, to penetrate the scores of one of the most perennially fresh and delicate of composers. Smaller, though scarcely less brilliant men, fare quite as illly at their hands. Scarce ever are to be heard the symphonies of the generous and colourful Borodin. Sibelius is miserably neglected. So, too, are the modern Frenchmen. The hard, scintillant b-flat symphony of d'Indy is the rarest of visitors. That of Dukas is entirely unknown. Unknown are the works of Magnard. Meanwhile, the program-makers invariably find opportunities galore for bringing before their audiences the indecent exposures of Tchaikowsky.

The Neglect of Bruckner

BUT of all symphonists, it is Anton Bruckner who is most severely mistreated through the indolence of the conductors. Though the symphonies of Haydn and Mozart remain almost entirely unheard, these gracious giants are known to the public of the orchestral concerts through their concerti. Moreover, in the chamber-music hall, both figure from time to time on the programs of string-quartets and pianists. Borodin and Sibelius, for their part, are known through songs. The modern Frenchmen are represented by works in various forms. But Bruckner wrote little besides symphonies. As composer, he is principally the composer of nine massive compositions of the sort. The body of his chamber-music is a very slight one. The chief of his compositions other than his symphonies are a few church-works, the Peasant Te Deum, and three instrumental masses. In performing him with great infrequency, the orchestral leaders are consequently effectively depriving the man of the life rightfully his, and us, the public, of the music of a titanically powerful and weighty artist.

It is indeed a sort of elemental, unsophisticated spirit which, much like the genii of the Arabian Nights corked in a jar, is being kept fast under the dust of orchestra libraries. Bruckner's symphonies have scarcely to commence heaving their mighty volumes through time, before we are made conscious that we are

come into the presence of some immense and taurian strength. The vast span and breadth of his themes and groups of themes and Bruckner's lung-capacity make the majority of composers appear asthmatic; the rhythmic hurl, curve, and freshness of his rude, lumbering and troll-like scherzi-subjects; the Homeric delight in sheer ruddy sonority, in the blasts of the re-enforced brass choir—so well instanced by the finale of the fifth symphony; the cubical bulk of so much of his music, make it appear to the fancy as though something restrained, but not eliminated by the years of civilization, had broken forth to disport itself again.

The contemporary of Wagner and Brahms and Franck again and again brings to mind, not so much the refinements of his own century as the uncouthness of the Allemanic tribesmen, his ancestors, who smeared their long hair with butter and brewed thick black beers. As much as any of his artistic forbears, Bruckner, for all the magnificences of his orchestration, remains the Upper-Austrian peasant, uncultivated, clumsy, naive, come into the fields of music. One of his works, a Te Deum, is qualified with the adjective "Peasant"; all his work, so heavy-limbed and slow-blooded, deserves the title. The spirit of lightness, of the graceful dance, of the delicate jest, of the subtle half-statement, present in so many Austrian musicians, in Mozart, for example, is absent almost entirely from his work. Absent, too, is the gayety and charm and sweetness of Schubert, the composer to whom Bruckner, particularly in his predilection for certain soft orchestral effects, is most related. The later man's dance is all hoofs, all heavy springs and drunken fury. Even the trios of his scherzi, tender, dreamy and intermezzo-like, have a certain predominant homeliness and humbleness. The good-natured, sluggish South-German farmer dreams across his sunny land. Only, once the slow, ox-like power is got in motion; once the Bruckner orchestra begins piling up its great square volumes, then mountainous things commence to occur. The great gradual climaxes of the adagios of the symphonies, the long powerfully sustained ecstasies with their wildly and solemnly blaring brasses, have something almost terrible in their vehemence and amount. The great battering-rams are slow to get in motion, but once heaved forward, they crash down walls.

Bruckner's Mysticism

IT was in service to a strange, untimely mysticism, however, that this uncouth power was mobilized for music. For Bruckner the elemental nature was not only held by the bonds of his Catholic conscience. He lived a strange, unworldly, inner life. In matters of form, perhaps, his music stems fairly directly from Beethoven, in particular from the Beethoven of the religio-philosophical *Ninth Symphony* and *Missa Solemnis*. The later style of the great master undoubtedly stimulated him to his own religious liturgical idiom. But spiritually, his art is far less related to that of any musician, even to that of Schubert, or to that of the pietistic Bach, than it is to the expressions of certain of the old German mystics.

One feels in Bruckner a completer removal from the world of objective reality, a completer tendency to consider all events purely from a psychological viewpoint, a completer habit of perceiving in the outer world merely the image of his own inner, than one finds either in the later Beethoven or in the most Mennonite pages of Bach's cantatas.

Indeed, it is in the company of a seer like Jacob Boehme, say, that one finds oneself instinctively placing the devout, simple, unworldly Austrian. In the square massive symphonies of the modern, as in the jumbled confessions of the seventeenth-century imaginer of the "centrum naturae", the "virgin Sophia" and other fantastic concepts, one glimpses the workings of a similar excessive transformation of the lust of the eye and the other senses into the power of mystical and almost hallucinatory vision. There are pages in the adagios of Bruckner that appear strangely akin to the records of his inner experiences left by the cobbler of Görlitz; to the experiences of the mystic marriages, the perception of fiery symbols, the progression from lugubrious depressed states through ecstasy to tranquillity.

The Inner Light

BUT how it comes that in listening to the performance of ninety instrumentalists on their fiddles, pipes and horns, one should enter through such forbidden doors: that, it is not easy to explain. Perhaps the cause of the strange communication lies in Bruckner's predilection for themes of a chorale or hymn-like character. It is possible that it results from the general austere and yet strangely soft and tender character of his style. His harmony is rich, solemn, stately. He delighted in the use of full grandiose progressions of chords in the brass, through which harp-music sweeps. His climaxes are slow, distended, piercing; it is possible that the solemn tones of the trombones, the sobbing of horns through pulsating chords of shrilling wind and strings, are in some measure the origin of the sensations communicated. It may be that the general character of the work, merely, predisposes one to interpret so the ecstasies. One cannot say for sure. It is doubtful whether any analysis of form, no matter how keen and scientific it may be, can arrive at elucidating these mysteries of art. And yet, one knows full well that just as, in some mysterious manner, the Bruckner scherzi bring one the sensations of being in the open air, of seeing the green earth and grey sky, so, too, the Bruckner adagios give one the sensations of an inner hallucinatory vision. The light that goes up in us from the chanting of the clear, high, loud orchestra in those movements, we are somehow positive, is not the light that comes from the sun. It is not the light irradiated into an hundred tints by the orchestra of Debussy and the other impressionists. It is the dazzling shine that some dreaming men have suddenly seen piercing at them from out an opaque wall, seen flooding upward at night from ground strewn thick with leaves. What visionaries know, that is no longer entirely concealed from us.

Bruckner, nevertheless, was one of those
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The Music of Anton Bruckner

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mystics who—like Blake—produce a robust and healthy art. However far his sunken life may have carried him, the return to the world by means of composition was always a large and full one. Uncouth, ponderous as oftentimes it is, his music always speaks the tongue of the heart. In these symphonies, a human being gives himself completely, creates out of his very vitals, attains without recalcitrancy his passion and his suffering, hurls himself uncalculatingly into the attempt to express the inexpressible. Other musicians of his general sort may freeze and depress with their grey tinklings. Bruckner warms through with the very power of his rhythmic impulse. And, beside the mystically coloured music of his adagios, there stands, as contrast, the out-of-doors freshness of his scherzi, with their wildly stamping rhythms, their sunnily smiling and sentimental trios. And the corner movements of his symphonies tower like square blocks, like huge cumbrous masses of stone, like the unshapen piles tumbled about by the "giants" of prehistoric times. If there is chambered mysticism in the music, there is also enough of life of a different sort to give it relief.

A universal genius, of course, the man scarcely was. Immense though his breath, his ox-like power of sustaining, his rhythmic fury were, he always wanted the balance; the development, the many-sidedness that graduate an artist into the premier rank. One feels how many composers dwarf in stature beside him; his muscles are huger than theirs; and yet they are shapelier, nimbler, livelier than the little stout lumbering man. He seems like one of the Titans who fought Olympus. Beethoven, to take but one from the many who outrank him, in his greater harmony and sense of measure, appears like one of the gods who finally vanquished the Ossa-piling giants. Had Bruckner possessed the hard sense of form which was his master's, it is probable he would have accomplished loftier things. But in the matter of form, Bruckner was not, at least, so it appears to us to-day, a quite successful innovator.

Bruckner's Form

THE corner movements of his symphonies, in particular—for, in the organizations of his scherzi and adagios, the man was quite potent—suffer from a curious dryness, from what appears to us to be brokenness. They appear to be quite inorganic. The works, of course, heave directly into life; Bruckner's attacks are exciting and daring; he begins right in the middle of things. But when, in accord with the demands of sonata-form, he introduces his second subject, or, more exactly, his second group of subjects, one finds that apparently the trajectory has been broken and another one is commenced. It is as though the composer were commencing his work over again. Beethoven made sure that a musical logic demanded, at a certain place, the entrance of the lyrical theme. But Bruckner appears to have trusted to another logic; one perhaps not musical, for the justification of the entrance of the balancing principal. He merely sets a second piece beside the first; and leaves us to reconcile them in our minds as best we may. Not before the arrival of the development section does he commence his own "composition" of the two warring principals.

To what extent this Bruckner's habit was the result of a mere incomprehension of Beethoven's form, due to a deficient sense of balance in Bruckner himself; to what extent Bruckner improved upon Beethoven, and founded his work on firmer aesthetic principals, that remains a very interesting question. There are folk who hold entirely to the belief that Bruckner is the master of masters of sonata form. A cult for the man has sprung up in Germany and Austria, and one can find books aplenty that pretend that the Austrian master is a better architect than either Beethoven or Mozart. We, for our part, recognize in the main a little disconcerted by the corner movements of Bruckner's symphonies. For all their powerful themes and colossal moments, we are always less satisfied by them than we are by the middle movements. To be sure, Bruckner does attain a sort of cubistic effect in merely contrasting his two principals. And it may be that that effect will be very precious to another time; that another time may find that Bruckner possessed the correct theory of sonata construction. It is best to tread a little lightly here; to make no premature condemnations; and to say, with Baudelaire "It might be the unknown god!"

The Misunderstanding of Musicians

MUSICIANS, of course, harp on Bruckner's grotesqueness. There are two composers on whom musicians are most stupid, Moussorgsky, and the Austrian mystic. Every day one meets some solemn performing person who informs one that Moussorgsky could not compose; and one has but to mention the name of Bruckner to him, too, to hear equally inane remarks. Bruckner "was a madman"; did he not most childishly dedicate his ninth symphony *Zum Lieben Gott!* To be sure, the dedication makes one smile. But then, Bruckner had presented his eighth to His Imperial and Royal Apostolic Majesty Francis Joseph I, Emperor of Austria and Apostolic King of Hungary, etc., etc.; and for a devout Austrian there was only one person to whom one might fittingly present a ninth, the Francis Joseph beyond the clouds. Moreover, the "madman" had taken the opening phrase of Isold's Liebestod and fugged it! But then, if Boris is withdrawn from the repertory of the Metropolitan Opera House to the applause of all the Henry T. Fincks; if the conductors of the Metropolitan orchestras neglect above all symphonists Anton Bruckner, one knows quite well the reason. It is that performers and public both are unable to enter into the spirit of either of the composers (in the case of Boris it is entirely the performers and managers and not the public who are guilty). It is that the musicians are unable to feel the life of man with the great tragic resignation of Moussorgsky; to feel it in the fashion of the little man on his knees, struggling for the faith and love and hope commanded of him by his God. The air that wafts through the works of both men is too rarefied for these little lungs.

Still, one would like to see the one or two conductors who occasionally bring a Bruckner symphony to light persevere in their propaganda. One would like them to persevere because each performance must refute, in the mind of some musician or other, the misconceptions that obscure the high value of these symphonic edifices. To many, Bruckner will always pervade any concert hall with "Lenten gloom". But with each revival there will come to be one or two more who find the very opposite of gloominess in his music. And, one day, when some event, some crisis, will make the public a little famished for the high works, for the pure summit gusts and vistas, there will be enough musicians who comprehend the art of Anton Bruckner to bring him to his rightful place in the musical life of the community.



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