

Few, if any, of the great composers were so late in maturing as Bruckner. The overture in G minor remains, if compared to any of the nine symphonies, a transitional if not a student production. It is surprising to learn that Bruckner wrote it when he was 39, in 1863. He was at the time organist at Linz, studying on the side with Otto Kitzler, who was an enthusiastic follower of Wagner, and the first conductor to present a Wagner opera in his city. It was that performance of "Tannhäuser" in 1863 which, according to all of Bruckner's biographers, profoundly changed the course of his development, showed him new avenues of musical structure and technique, and immeasurably widened his emotional horizons.

While at Linz between 1856 and 1868, Bruckner wrote about forty works, mostly for chorus and use in church, some with accompaniment of orchestra. The first masses were among these, with the D minor Mass (his "first masterpiece") coming only a year after the Overture. Three orchestral movements and two youthful symphonies date also from those years. The Overture was not published, strange to say, until 1921 (edited by Alfred Orel). One cannot say that it deserved such neglect; true, if Bruckner had written no music later than this, he would have remained a very minor master indeed. But as we follow his growth over the years, it is amazing to note the premonitions of his later genius in this early work, those certain touches which could belong to no one else.

The Overture begins with a slow introduction. The alternation of powerful chords in tonic and dominant, separated by quieter interludes, is a classical device, found often in Haydn and Mozart. Yet, the interludes here are of thoroughly Wagnerian cast, chromatic, sensuous, intensely expressive. As the Allegro opens, we are struck by the anachronistic nature of the theme; it could be by Mendelssohn, in shape as well as scoring. Schumann may also have had a hand in it. Developing attractively, it slows to a second theme which again moves in a more Wagnerian atmosphere. The passage at its close is almost a presentiment of Mahler (the "Wayfarer" songs, perhaps). How the music again picks up speed is very typical of Bruckner; we have mentioned the peculiar nature of his symphonic "quickenings" before. There are modulations which are already characteristic of the later composer, but the driving, persistent rhythm is of a type we associate most often with Schubert, especially the great C major Symphony, No. 9. The relationship of Schubert and Bruckner, musically, is a profound one, well worth a special study.

The orchestral blending throughout the work is masterly, the sound grandiloquent without pomposity. The most attractive stroke of the work is reserved for the close: the Coda begins in G major, with the main theme played in very slow tempo by the horns, then the clarinets, then taken up by the full orchestra in a surge toward the finish, in the tonic major. The sonority of this final section is romantic and mysterious, and in the best sense original. Bruckner himself was to recapture and excel the beauty of this scoring in his later music, and Mahler too came to see many of his most inspired visions in these sylvan evocations. Even if the Overture in G minor cannot as a whole be considered "great" Bruckner, it is for us who know the master's mature creation a revealing and often delightful aspect of his musical youth.