. . . of musical things

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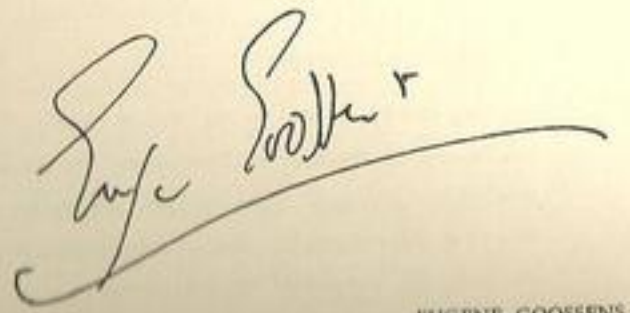
Foreword

These lectures, given at my invitation to the students of the N.S.W. Conservatorium of Music in Sydney, provide a very welcome addition to current musicology. Their eclectic nature and the diversity of topics covered in them are sufficient indication of the author's wide approach to the aesthetic side of musical art. I find his treatment of the varied subjects discussed both stimulating and provocative. In this day of much confused thinking, these lectures should — and undoubtedly will — throw a refreshingly new light on many vexed topics.



EUGENE GOOSSENS

Acknowledgments

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A.S.

Contents

LECTURE VI

Anton Bruckner — A Composer Between Two Chairs

"Is there on Thy psalter,
Father of love, one tone
Which his ear would welcome?
O, then, quicken his heart!"

Wolfgang von Goethe

In childhood, in our early musical education, we are introduced to the composers in such a way that they usually appear to us as always riding on clouds, far removed from the imponderabilities of earthly, everyday life. As we grow up and become more intimate with music, we decide that, somehow or other, we have seen these composers through a veil. In considering matters as we consider them here, we have to tear down this veil, or at least try to look behind it — sometimes to the disadvantage of the composers. In the modern and sociological approach to the aesthetics of music, one leaves behind such cloudy impressions, as well as the praising tirades of certain biographers, and comes right down to earth, considering these people as — just people.

Coming right down to earth means employing such a homely and, at the same time, characteristic expression as I have used for the title of this lecture: "Anton Bruckner — a composer between two chairs".

It is a down-to-earth expression to say that someone is sitting between two chairs. When Saturday night comes, and boy friend No. 1 rings Mary and says, "Are you coming to the movies with me tonight?", she says, "Well, I don't know yet. You'd better ring me back." Then she waits until the other boy friend rings up and asks her to go to the movies. If neither rings up, she is sitting between two chairs — or, as we also say, she has "missed the bus". Call it "missing the bus", call it indecision, call it "can't make up one's mind" — that is the meaning of sitting between two chairs.

Imagine a composer's mind which, for sociological reasons, is between two chairs. Obviously, this will be reflected in his music, and consequently something which creates a feeling of inner uncertainty will be transmitted to the listener. You may like it or you may not, but when the human mind is confronted with a feeling of uncertainty it tends to dismiss the matter rather than take it to itself. One usually dismisses uncertain influences.

To go back to our down-to-earth example of Mary and her boy friend, if she says 'I will meet you at eight sharp", that is a decisive statement. If she says, "I will meet you . . . eightish", that makes the boy friend rather uncertain, and he says, "What does this mean?" If she says, "I will ring you back," she makes the matter so uncertain that the boy friend probably says, "I couldn't be bothered with her any more" — and then she has no boy friend.

The fact that Anton Bruckner is adored by some as one of the greatest writers in music, and dismissed by others as a mediocrity, or just "can't be bothered with", results aesthetically from the fact expressed in the phrase "sitting between two chairs". I have expressed this pro and contra to you very gently, but were I a speaker such as our delightful Dr. E. Floyd, I might say as he said last Sunday, the name of Bruckner "means starting a bonfire". Though I do not know exactly what this could mean in music, he obviously wanted to indicate that something is not quite clear when it comes to Bruckner.

We have to find and analyse the aesthetic and sociological reasons for all this uncertainty — "bonfire", "problematic" — about Bruckner.

I have mentioned to you many times that the valuation of music is not part of the aesthetics of music at all, it is merely the starting point of aesthetics. When you say that a composer is "great", we follow up and ask, "Why is he great?" The expressions "great", "mediocre" or "bad" applied to a composer are not suitable to an aesthetic approach to music. A composer is not "great". He is *permanent* through certain greatness, or he is a minor composer, meaning a *temporary* composer.

Expressions such as "bad" or "lousy" or "not worth considering" are expressions that one does not use about such an ephemeral art as music. When Lindsay Brown, for instance, wrote of Eileen Joyce in the "Sydney Morning Herald" (June 19, 1948) that —

> "Modest music cannot compete with a circus of changed gowns and ocelot muffs and maternal petting of cherubs in the audience,"

he expressed himself in a way more suitable to music.

I prefer to speak not of "great" but of permanent composers, and on the other hand, of temporary composers. Then there are *modish* composers, those who are in vogue, and *problematic* composers. I could name dozens of composers of whom you have never heard, who in their day were in vogue. No doubt when we are grandfathers, à la Dr. Floyd, we shall remember when Shostakovitch was played everywhere, and we shall tell our grandchildren that he was in vogue in our day. The other type of composer is one who is disputed about, who is problematic.

In a critique on a performance in Vienna, published in the "Neues Osterreich" (New Austria), which came to hand the other day, I read the following:

> "All attempts to make Sibelius popular here have so far failed. To the Anglo-Saxons, Sibelius is one of the greatest modern composers, and the successor to Brahms — but then, on the other hand, they are inwardly very distant to Bruckner and Mahler."

Here you have, in one sentence, the names of three composers who are called *problematic* — who are not generally acknowledged, not permanent or "great" as are Mozart, Beethoven, Haydn, Bach and many others. They are not dismissed as temporary, they are put before us as problematic.

No matter whether they are permanent, temporary or problematic. Aesthetics does not evaluate. It finds the reasons why a composer is problematic. Today, we shall try to find the reasons why Anton Bruckner is problematic, why he sits between two chairs.

I must assume that you know very little of Bruckner. His music is very rarely performed here, and for once I will make an exception and give you a brief discussion on his life. While I do this in my own peculiar way, I shall constantly be referring to the sociological reasons which form the difference influences in his creative life.

I may as well say right at the beginning that his life reads most uninterestingly. His was not an amusing or interesting life like Franz Liszt's, with lots of affairs and amours and dainty frivolities that you read about in the first part of so many biographies devoted to the "life" (gently skipping the second part, devoted to the "works").

Anton Bruckner lived between the years 1824 and 1896, in a time when the Emperor Franz Josef was reigning, a period usually described as the glory and decline of the Hapsburgs. He was born in Lower Austria, of artisan stock. He came from a schoolmaster's home. From this we deduce that he was peasant-like, native, plain, provincial. He had a modest provincial school education. We read, and we know from his later life, that there were hardly any literary influences in his youth. He was not particularly well-read, nor was he influenced by the literary movements of his day. As a matter of fact, this went so far that there is a famous story about it. When Bruckner became an admirer of Wagner, he went to one of the operas, "Die Walküre", and came out in raptures about the music. "But", he asked his friend, "why did they burn Brunhilde?" He had no contact with anything literary.

We are told that a man named J.B. Weiss taught him organ and harmony. Gabriel Engel in Thompson's Encyclopaedia declares Weiss to have been "an erratic musician". He was the musical influence on Bruckner's childhood.

His father died, and there were many children in the family, and through poverty Bruckner became a choir boy at the Jesuit Monastery of St. Florian, an hour away from the next city, Linz. There started his

church association. He displayed a virtuoso ability on the organ and eventually became an organist. The writers say that in his music he always thinks in organ form and organ sounds. There we have the reason for this.

He became dissatisfied with the possibilities of his position, as well as with his own limited knowledge, and started learning theory under a man named Simon Sechter at the Conservatorium of Vienna. He went to endless trouble to go there, travelling backwards and forwards, and saving on food, just to have his lessons. Sechter belonged to the strict and classical school, or what we call the formalist school.

After this, Bruckner became organist in Linz, another city in Austria. Thus, when he was 32 years of age, he made his first contact with a larger city. There he became a friend of the conductor, Otto Kizler, who introduced him to the works of Wagner. Bruckner was so impressed that he undertook a pilgrimage to Munich to hear some of Wagner's operas performed. Thus began the influence of Wagner's music, Wagner's ideas, Wagner's theories: the influence, in brief, of emotionalism.

After Bruckner wrote his first symphony, he had a nervous breakdown and was threatened with insanity. Fortunately he was cured. However, here we have an indication of a certain instability in his mind and character.

After a lot of trouble, he got a job at the Vienna Conservatorium and became professor there, as successor to Simon Sechter who, you remember, taught him theory and harmony. Bruckner remained in Vienna for the rest of his life. Here we come to the influence of Vienna on Bruckner. He came under public notice, there was public criticism of his works, and he was dragged into public fights, particularly the animosities raging in Vienna about Richard Wagner. This brought him into the well-known quarrels with Johannes Brahms and Eduard Hanslick, to which I will refer again later on.

When he died, Bruckner's wish was respected and he was buried under the organ loft of the St. Florian's Monastery.

Now I shall give you some of his music — the beginning of the first movement of the Fourth Symphony, also known as the "Romantic Symphony". This one record contains many typicalities of Bruckner's music, starting with a tremolo beginning as most of his symphonies do, and stating two Brucknerian subjects immediately in the short space of four or five minutes, and also employing instrumentation of the Wagnerian kind.

Record is played.

With this we come to the first part of our consideration of Anton Bruckner as a composer sitting between two chairs. We will consider

the clash between the native peasant and city life. In 1942, one of the latest biographies of Bruckner, written by Werner Wolff, appeared. It is available in Sydney. Wolff has called his book "Anton Bruckner: Rustic Genius". On the Te Deum, part of which was played last Sunday on the air, Wolff says (p. 259):

> "Briefly, one might say that of all Bruckner's sacred music the Te Deum has the highest sustained tension. Because of its concentrated dynamic power and lapidary style it has been called 'the peasants' Te Deum."

Earlier, he says (p. 107):

> "Although he was living in a metropolis, he remained aloof and lonesome, for he was a stranger by origin, habits and spirit."

Indeed, this man was exceedingly lonesome. He tried to get married several times, but the clumsy way in which he attempted to gain a wife resulted in his remaining unmarried.

He was of strange habits. One thinks of him, dressed in his peculiar, peasant-like way, walking the streets of a city that was then most fashionable. This lonesome man, with strange habits, earthbound and native, was confronted with a Vienna which could not be described better than has been done by Ernst Decsey in a book called "Bruckner — Eine Lebensgeschichte".

I have taken the following quotation of Decsey from Dika Newlin's "Bruckner — Mahler — Schönberg", of which excerpts appeared under the signature of Professor Bernard Heinze in "The ABC Weekly". Decsey said (p. 19):

> "From the point of view of time, Anton Bruckner originates in the sphere of influence of the Emperor Francis. It is the epoch of the "Vormärz" medievalism grown old and grey, fearfully shut off from Europe, held motionless in intellectual stagnation. The word 'freedom' smacks of high treason; life is closely regulated, authority weighs heavily on all forms of existence. Children address their parents formally, with 'Sie'; but members of the commonalty, whether teachers, organists or gardeners, are addressed by their spiritual ruler with the condescending 'Du'.* The 'Handküssen' is the accepted form of intercourse between those of low and high degree; and the humanity of Austria is divided into 'sheep and goats', into aristocrats and non-aristocrats. . . . Emperor Francis, ruler over the whole state (held in an artificial trance by Metternich) like a kind of Viennese landlord, looking out of his palace windows in dressing-gown and nightcap, regarding his peoples as tenants; sometimes mean and petty, and then again rich in favors — that is, so long as the masses do not start to make trouble, but behave themselves and leave him in peace."

* In German "Du" is the familiar "you", while "Sie" is formal. Instead of children being easy and familiar with their parents, they were permitted to address them only by the distant and more eminent-sounding "Sie".

That is a most pregnant description of life in that city of Vienna, which then ruled the Austro-Hungarian Empire and was a world power. It was here that Bruckner, that lonesome stranger, peasant and pro-

vincialite, experienced city life. This I consider to have been the first clash in his state of mind, and the reaction would be one of several. Imagine a peasant coming to live in a big city. I do not refer to comic strip people like, say, the Lawsons or Dad and Dave, but a native peasant, with good habits, typical in his provincialism. Imagine him confronted with the metropolis of Sydney. So Bruckner was confronted with Vienna. The first reaction of the one who comes from the country might be complete assimilation, to take on city habits and city conceptions. He has an open mind and forgets that he ever had anything native or peasant-like about him. On the other hand, his peasant nativeness might be stronger than the city influences, so that the second reaction might be that, though he lives in the metropolis, he remains exactly what he was, influenced by nothing, forming an enclosed cell within a large, active and strange body. The third reaction might be a problematic wavering, in which he still has the habits of peasantry, but has a desire for assimilation — and yet finds it impossible to assimilate. This last reaction, I believe, was Bruckner's.

This means that in Bruckner there was not one state of mind, but several, and knowing that out of the state of mind the creation is born, here is the first clash — being native at heart, provincial, yet trying to be city-like, in the then sense of the city.

The second clash in his state of mind was between conservatism and mystic Catholicism.

Conservatism is an expression we often use. It is by no means "being reactionary". It is, rightly applied, a very good state of affairs. It can be a state of mind and a mode of living. It can become a conception of life, and so it was in Vienna in Bruckner's day. It was this conservatism, expressed so beautifully in the quotation I read to you, which showed itself in Bruckner in a childlike and pathetic reverence for men of eminence. To us, who live in a totally different generation, the fact that someone is a great composer or a great man does not mean that we bow deeply to him, trembling in his presence. I mentioned in the quotation the "Handküssen", or kissing of the hands. Even today, in Austria, one does not say "Good-day to you", or "How are you?", or "Goodbye". One says — and I translate — "I kiss the hand". Of course, one does not kiss the hand, but one still uses the expression. It came from the old days, from the actual kissing of the hand of emperors and church dignitaries, and from there became such a daily habit that even males use this form of greeting to each other!

To have a medal pinned on, to be decorated — as Bruckner finally was — by Franz Josef, was one of the highest achievements possible, the official recognition of an all-round demanded servility. It is somewhat more humorous, and always seemed to me typical when I was

able to get Austrian papers before the war, to read the birth and death announcements, and find something like the following:

"A child has been born to Mrs. Assistant Gravedigger Smith." The search for titles was not something out of the ordinary. Even the assistant gravedigger's wife would give herself the dignity of her husband's profession. It was a typical expression of the conservatism of those times. To quote again from Werner Wolff's biography of Bruckner (p. 116):

> "Official formalism within the hierarchy of the church and within the monarchy had left inextinguishable traces."

This conservatism in daily life — and I could go on for hours giving you details, but I am sure you follow me with a few examples — was set against Bruckner's simple but very ardent religious devotion to Catholicism.

I have spoken on religions or the influence of religions many times, and I am always careful to say that I am not speaking from a religious point of view, but am showing you the influences of beliefs in our aesthetic considerations. Once I mentioned Catholicism in my lecture on British music. Today, we have it rather more simply, because in Austria there was no fight between the State and the Church, such as I mentioned in connection with British music. On the contrary, the State and the Church understood each other perfectly well, and worked together very harmoniously.

But it can still be contended that conservatism and Catholicism are two different states of mind. Conservatism is something rigid, something strict. It is prescribed. It is pre-arranged. And in those days, any departure from it was punishable.

Catholicism, like practically every other religion, is something loose, something imaginative; it is forgiving, and, towards all, as we know from the great art works of the Catholic Church, it is very tender.

Let us reflect on the mind of Bruckner. Here is the second conflict in his state of mind, the clash between the rigid conservatism of Vienna and the mystic Catholicism of his boyhood.

In considering the music of Bruckner, you find something very strange — you read about it in every biography, but I will show it to you on records. You always read of Bruckner as the greatest of all adagio writers, meaning that he wrote the most expressive slow movements. The slow movements are always said to show Bruckner's religiosity. I shall play for you the beginning of the Second Movement of the Romantic Symphony.

Record played.

These adagios are always referred to as bearing the stamp of religion.

On the other hand, his scherzo movements are always said, by the biographers, to show the strong influence of peasant life, because very often they do employ Austrian dances (like Ländlers, etc.), as you will see in the next example, which is the beginning of the Third Movement of the same (Romantic) symphony. This movement has a very typical theme — the fright of every horn player, I hasten to add!

Record is played.

Though you regularly read in the biographies that the second or slow movements have a religious feeling, while the scherzos give you the native undertone, I feel it does not matter what the biographers call these movements, because you can call music anything. I feel that it is completely immaterial, because it does not by any means solve the problem of such a clash as, for instance, that between conservatism and mystic Catholicism, which, as I have tried to explain to you, it would be very difficult to resolve into a single state of mind.

So far, then, we have seen two conflicts, native provincialism as against the city, and conservatism or the State against Catholicism or religion.

The third, and I should say to me the most important, conflict is the clash of two aesthetic conceptions, the conflict of baroque with neo-romanticism.

Vienna has been famous for many things. One is its musical anecdotes. When an event becomes an anecdote, there is always some truth in it. One anecdote about Bruckner that they told one another in the coffee houses is:

> "You know, in his affections, Bruckner rates Wagner between the Bishop of Linz and the Heavenly Father."

There is some truth in that. What was Wagner? What did he stand for at that time? He stood, as you read everywhere, for neo-romanticism. Bruckner actually lived in the times in which neo-romanticism raised its head, and the "officials", the conservatives like Hanslick, battled against this new thing with all the power they had.

Bruckner had an absolute adoration of Wagner. He nicknamed his Third Symphony the "Wagner" Symphony. When he finally met Wagner on his travels, he trembled at the knees because, to him, to meet Wagner was such a very great occasion. Bruckner has often been called "the Wagner of the Symphonies".

To glance at the more formal conception of Bruckner's music, you will see what has been called "the expressive chord", where nearly everything is based upon this chord. In "Das Rheingold", we know of more than 100 bars on an E chord. This Wagnerian idea of the expressive chord with which one can open a world — in Wagner's case, a Teutonic one — has been employed by Bruckner to open a different,

a more mystic world. There, Bruckner, in his own mind — and he was by no means an idiot— felt a clash within himself. He was not influenced in a literary way, and had no wide connection with the outside world. To him, neo-romanticism — if he knew the word at all — meant Wagner. I quote to you from a letter he wrote to a friend, a letter which emphasises this point. He wrote:

> "I would like to do a dramatic work à la Lohengrin — romantic, religious, mysterious, and, above all, free from all impurities."

That was the law of his faith, of any religious faith. But freedom from all impurities was a law utterly contrary to Wagner or to the dealings and doings of Wagner's life. You see how right the Viennese anecdote was!

The laws of Bruckner's life, the state of his mind, were based on a baroque Catholicism. In all the biographies and encyclopaedias and other writings on Bruckner which I read before preparing this lecture, I find a constant recurrence of this word "baroque". Always, speaking of Bruckner, they say "baroque" here, "baroque" there. Newlin, whom I quoted before, states, "Bruckner was a man of the baroque".

What is "baroque"? This word is so frequently used as descriptive of certain composers. For instance, Mr. Goossen's music is often referred to as "a baroque style of music". If we turn to Webster's Dictionary, we find that "baroque" means:

> "of, pertaining to, or designating the style of art and architecture prevailing from about 1600 to late in the 18th century, characterized by the use of curved and contorted forms."

In a musical dictionary, much to my astonishment, I found simply "Baroque: uncouth". We are aware that baroque was also a state of mind. Let us throw some light on this period, with a reflective eye on Bruckner. As a visible style, baroque developed from architecture, not from painting — usually it is the other way round. Peter Paul Rubens was a baroque painter.

I shall quote to you from Sheldon Cheney's "World History of Art", one of the books I recommended to you in the beginning. What does he understand "baroque" to be? He says — and how well this would fit Bruckner's mind! —

> "Under most baroque architectural envelopes there persist classic outlines, marked by pilasters and columns, by grouped windows and arch-of-triumph doorways, by cornices and string courses. But every shred of the original Greek horizontal repose and mathematical clarity has disappeared. The building is restless, loaded, self-proclaimingly dressed up." (p. 732.)

A little further on (p. 734), he says:

> "The baroque style was adopted by the Jesuits of the Counter-Reformation."

This style was adopted by the Catholic Church in a reaction against what is called the "quiet devotion". It was a terribly impressive reaction,

I have seen these expressions of baroque on my many trips round the world. I remember once, when I was a student and had no money, we decided to sleep in one of the cathedrals in Rome. It was so vast that you could sleep there and nobody would notice you. As we lay there, all the services passed before our eyes. The decorative way in which the services are conducted there is so impressive that it is worthwhile to read the words of Paul Lang in his "Music in Western Civilization", in which he says that it was a reaction against the quiet devotion, showing a more "triumphant" church:

> ". . . whose cult was celebrated by richly decked clergy under the vaults of a mighty architecture, surrounded by statues and pictures before scintillating altars ornamented with gold and silver, to the accompaniment of the impressive and resonant music of multiple choirs, orchestras and organs."

Here we are in the midst of Bruckner's youth in St. Florian's, a Jesuit baroque church, one of the most typical edifices in the baroque style, like many that you find in Austria.

There is also such a thing as a baroque State. I have only to refer you to the city of Versailles, and Louis XIV, the Sun-King, wandering through the gardens of Versailles Palace, with all their beautiful niches, corners and statues.

One speaks of musical baroque meaning the age of the "thorough-bass", the style of Monteverdi, Gabrieli, Frescobaldi and others. From thinking of musical baroque, we get such appreciations of Bruckner's music as the statement that "Gabrieli is the key to Bruckner's orchestral style" or that he "descended from and continued the Gregorian style". If, then, Bruckner's mind was torn between admiration for Wagner's neo-romanticism — which was, in its way, the expression of the trend of the time in which Bruckner lived — and a deep inborn love of the baroque — inborn through education, upbringing and for sociological reasons — there you have another contrast between states of mind which could not be satisfactorily united.

This conflict was, at the same time, an expression of the period in which Bruckner lived. Famous in those days was the Brahms-Bruckner animosity. It is a scream, wonderful to read! Those who fought for neo-romanticism said Bruckner's "Amen"; those on the conservative side, who fought for the maintenance of formalism, such as Hanslick and others, said Brahms' "Amen". So they played the two composers out, one against the other, sometimes even making this "musical" question a "political" one. Some say that Brahms and Bruckner have brought romantic music into modern times. Others, like a biographer of Brahms, Nagel, say very carefully, as he does in his book:

> "Brahms had no animosity towards Bruckner. However, he recognised in him a problematic nature which — following Brahms' nature — could not be sympathetic to him." — p. 46.

I believe that is very true.

I have attempted to show you the conflicts in Bruckner's nature, and consequently in his works, by reason of the conflicts between provincialism and the city, conservatism and Catholicism, baroque and neo-romanticism.

If we understand all this, it is no wonder that a listener who is not himself torn with inner conflicts, who does not sit between two chairs, finds it hard to grasp, to re-feel or to be emotionally touched by a creation which bears the stamp of indecisiveness and may lead to confusion in his own mind. As I said before, in the down-to-earth example about meeting someone at a certain time, when one has a straightforward mind and is confronted with a problematic circumstance or with indecision, one's mind discards it rather than looking for whatever beauty might be in that other state of mind and its creations.

This has to be emphasised to you for aesthetic-educational purposes. In our musical careers we are more than once confronted with composers who are simply problematic. The philosophical mind within you, given automatically by the Lord, is inclined to discard the indecisive, the problematic, rather than be bothered with it. But an aesthetic clarification of the reasons for Bruckner's indecisive state of mind (and, equally, the indecisive state of mind of many other composers), which creates music carrying the germ of indecision towards us and towards our emotions, should instead help us to find the beautiful.

To those who would rather discard than search, let me say with Paul Elmer More:

> "Well may the influence of music seem inexplicable to the man who idly dreams that his life began less than a hundred years ago."