

# *Bruckner and the Symphony*

BY

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THIS essay attempts to elucidate Bruckner's structural principles and their historical origins, both in general and in relation to the fifth Symphony.

The first necessity is to mark the true extent and limits of Bruckner's debt to Wagner. The latter achieved for the first time a kind of music whose processes were slow enough to accommodate stage action. His success was due to his realization that he must abandon the classical way of handling tonality. When key is used dramatically, as in a Beethoven symphony, the action generally becomes so swift that the design completes itself far more quickly than could the most active of stage scenes. Wagner's use of key, therefore, becomes more colouristic than structural, and he relies upon his drama for the logic of his musical plans. He is thus enabled to give point to recapitulations of music which the hearer was absorbing perhaps two hours earlier.

That Bruckner was profoundly stirred by this discovery is undeniable. Consequently his symphonies have very little in common with the earlier classical symphony or that of Brahms. In this respect he was a pioneer, for he was the first to apply new constructional principles to nineteenth century pure instrumental music. The vague ghost of sonata form may be traced in his first and last movements, but its presence is the result of his clinging to its external symmetries, perhaps without realizing how different were the demands his instinct was fulfilling. To understand these new laws it must be seen that Bruckner was, in composing non-programmatic music on such a scale, forced to discover them for himself. He had lost, on the one hand, the classical way of viewing tonality, and on the other he had no aid from an external plot with stage action. Two simple methods of obtaining symmetry were denied him.

He took refuge in his marvellous faculty for building climaxes. This is the heart of his style and his peculiar symmetries arise from it. In spite of his ability to write a real quick movement (in the choral works and the scherzi of the symphonies, for instance), Bruckner is naturally at home in the slow gradual processes which produce his larger creations. In this element his climacteric powers are most evident. In a way his forms are sectional, for he deploys great groups of themes in opposition to one another, constructing climaxes upon each with a wonderful sense of balance. Otherwise his designs are continuously wrought, for the only section of a movement with any sense of finality is the last. Key with him is less important than with Wagner; his modulation is kaleidoscopic. As Beethoven relies on key for his symmetry, and Wagner upon dramatic stage situations, so Bruckner is completely dependent upon the proportions of his great climax-building passages. In his finest *Adagios* he reverses the procedure in the "coda" sections and descends from a

mighty crisis by long slow stages to a finish of sublime calm. Thus his power is applicable in both directions. Absurdly simple as this seems, it is the secret of the appreciation of Bruckner. On so large a canvas, simplicity of form is essential, however complex the texture may be.

His instinct led him along the right lines, although it is apparent from a study of his scores that he was far from conscious perception of all his difficulties. Tovey has said that Bruckner's symphonies are based on mistaken principles in that there is in them a confusion between sonata forms and shapes demanded by the great time-scale. This is true. Where opinions must differ, however, is on the matter of how far the uncertainties disfigure the works, and how far they are harmless or remediable. It is strongly arguable that there are in the symphonies passages which are obvious insertions, the outcome of a feeling, perhaps subconscious, that without them the movement in question would lack balance. They are, almost all, examples of Bruckner's recourse to the outward features of sonata form when he felt the shapeliness of his design to be in danger. The questionable passages can nearly always be omitted with definite gain in coherence. These redundancies, and certain other minuter ones to be discussed next, are the sole blemishes in the symphonies. Their cure is usually simple, leaving noble examples of great art after the excisions. Not all the symphonies have need of this treatment. The sixth, seventh, and ninth cannot be touched without injury to their excellence.

The next difficulty is the avoidance of stiffness or even complete lack of movement when the music is conceived so enormous. However slow, music must either move or merely take up time. Here also is a matter which gives the hearer, if not Bruckner, serious trouble. The size and slowness of his processes is such that the pulse beats every four bars. Had Bruckner written his works in enormous bars four times the length of the existing ones it would have been easier to grasp his plan at sight. Understanding that Bruckner regards four moderately-paced bars as a unit, one can see an obvious danger in his attitude. The tyranny of the gigantic slow pulse can, as well as being a source of power in itself, cause stiffness if the composer's muse is not working at full pressure at every moment. Sometimes Bruckner will "mark time" for two bars by repeating the material of the two previous measures in order to complete a four-bar pulse. This is unnecessary inside so vast a structure, and a listener who is unable to follow the immensity of the design can find the effect occasionally very trying. Given sympathy and understanding, no one is likely to be put off by a couple of redundant bars here and there. In the great majority of cases the extra bars can be cut out with real profit to the cogency of the music, especially where there are two or more repetitive four-bar pulses together. In that case it becomes a simple matter of turning two pulses into one. The result is to avoid those minor irritations which most English critics are apt to magnify. They do not so much find genuine big faults in Bruckner as exaggerate their own reactions to the small ones. When the little flaws can be remedied so easily let it be done by all means. Critics and public will be happier without knowing why.

On of the most infuriating, perplexing, and fascinating of all critical problems

in music has been raised by the publication of two conflicting versions of Bruckner's symphonies.<sup>1</sup> No other music is the subject of so strange a controversy. Bruckner's naïve character is said to have been responsible for the ease with which he was persuaded to alter his works. His symphonies were first written in one form and then on the advice (good and bad) of his friends, were revised and recast. Only one, the sixth, escaped this treatment. The final forms of the works were eventually published, but Bruckner himself, for reasons apparently undisclosed, kept the earlier versions very carefully in manuscript. The fat was in the fire when, in the early nineteen-thirties, some of these earlier, so-called "originals" were published in Vienna. It was held by the publishers that Bruckner submitted to the wishes of his friends only because he believed his work would be more quickly heard and appreciated in the revised (and condensed) forms. Also they maintained that the alterations made in the orchestration of the symphonies were for the benefit of the orchestras of the day, as the standard of playing was not sufficiently high to make the "originals" practicable. Robert Haas, the editor, stated that now orchestras were capable of it there should be no objection to the performance of these earlier and, in his opinion, far superior editions.

To Dr. Heinz Unger I am indebted for the information that the revised scores of the works are in many instances far more difficult to play than the "originals". In view of this, one must naturally be wary of other fallacies which might be lurking in the minds of the publishers of the Haas edition. In support of the case against this particular misapprehension Dr. Unger points out that in the revised score (published in miniature and edited by J. v. Wöss) of the fourth Symphony many of the wind parts originally given to first oboe, first clarinet, first horn, etc., are there written for the second, third, or fourth instruments. This is true of all the other symphonies except No. 6 (the earlier form of No. 7 is still unpublished, and must therefore be left out of consideration). As many of these parts are difficult, and second, third and fourth players are not generally thus placed because of superiority to the "firsts", it is hard to understand how the revised versions could have been made for ease of performance. The scoring of the Wöss editions is more subtle and difficult to bring out than that of the Haas versions, for many passages formerly scored for a whole mass of brass in unison were rewritten and divided between individual instruments. The result is often smoother and more refined, but needs more skill from conductor and orchestra. For the purposes of this essay no more can be said about the alterations in instrumentation, except that the differences between the two editions are very extensive.

Still more interesting are the variations in the actual forms of the music. The earlier versions are invariably longer and almost always less logical than the revised shapes. There is, however, at least one important exception in favour of the Haas edition, to be found in the finale of the fifth Symphony. There can be no doubt that the cut in the recast score seriously upsets the balance of the

<sup>1</sup> See "Anton Bruckner: Simpleton or Mystic?" by Geoffrey Sharp, in *THE MUSIC REVIEW*, Vol. III, No. 1, February, 1942: pp. 46-54.

whole movement. The questions aroused here will now be discussed with the rest of the work. The following remarks must not be regarded as forming a thorough analysis of the music. They are intended to illustrate from a symphony which conveniently raises them, all the issues mentioned above. The reader is advised to obtain a miniature score (Wöss). To have both versions would be ideal. Bar numbers will refer to the revised score as being the more easily obtainable.

Bruckner's fifth Symphony begins with a vast introduction which sets the scale of the whole work. Sustained mysterious harmonies appear over a pizzicato bass, and are followed by a powerful burst of sound, as of trumpets in a cathedral. An excited *crescendo* and *accelerando* moves towards a climax, at which the original tempo is restored. The blaze dies away as if into a vault, and the Allegro starts at B (bar 55) with a quiet but supple theme in the basses. This receives a *ff* counterstatement (bar 79), and a long *decrecendo* leads to a new subject group (bar 101).

Bruckner's secondary groups usually range freely from key to key. This is no exception. After a fine series of themes this section reaches its climax at bar 205. From this it dies romantically away, and the introduction returns, with its alternation of mysterious quiet and grand bursts of tone. The second tutti gives rise to a resumption of the fast tempo and to mighty developments of the main theme, culminating in a great storm (bar 320).

So far Bruckner's instincts are leading him towards the building of climaxes rather than the orthodox establishment of sonata form. Vestiges of the latter are discernible, and in the main the action is fast enough to keep a sonata movement on its feet. But the key system would be diffuse for a good model of sonata style.

This big climax is suddenly interrupted by a chorale-like version of the first theme of the second group. It is impossible to resist comparison with the stilling of the tempest on the Sea of Galilee, so awesome is the effect. The solemn trumpet calls of the introduction return.

Now follows one of the passages which might be judged superfluous. After the brass chords there is a hush, from which a big *crescendo* leads to a restatement of the main theme in the official tonic. This section, from N (bar 348) to the bar before P (bar 381) inclusive, illustrates very clearly the kind of confusion which overtook the composer at this point. Compared as such with the previous climax, it is insignificant, as it has no adequate ancestry. It grows from no soil. The passage is there merely to pacify Bruckner's feeling that without it the movement would lose its symmetry. But symmetries demanded by music in this time-scale cannot be served by arbitrary sonata methods. Both the needs for formal balance and dramatic point would have been met had Bruckner proceeded directly from the solemn brass chords to a recapitulation of the second group with its climax. The first theme would then have been effectively reserved for the final climb upwards. As it happens, the join from the bar before N, to P, is very satisfactory (omitting the solitary E in what then becomes a silent bar before N), and to cut the whole passage results in a clarification of the essence of Bruckner's style.

Excising the section N, then, we come to a restatement of the second group in different keys. This is complete. When it has run its course, the first theme reappears in a really magnificent coda which culminates the movement tumultuously. In the orchestration there are many divergences between the two versions, but the form is the same in each.

Bruckner's full mastery is apparent in the slow movement, rich with his own peculiar religious fervour and serenity. Detailed description is not needed here, as no problems are raised during its course. The third movement, scherzo, is highly original, containing as it does a daemonic element in close opposition to simple rusticity. It is noteworthy that it begins with precisely the same notes as the previous movement. The trio is an extraordinary inspiration, full of light mysterious fantasy.

In its earlier form the finale is undoubtedly one of Bruckner's finest achievements. The logic of the revision is hard to discern. For where is the sense in stating a huge second group of themes and then abandoning it for ever? This is an outstanding case where knowledge of the first version is essential, and it is valuable to study both editions in parallel.

This Symphony follows the precedent of Beethoven's ninth in recalling fragments of previous movements before embarking on a design based on new material. Bruckner's method, however, is not quite the same. The successive appearances of the older themes are interrupted by an incisive figure formed from octave jumps. This figure eventually is taken up by the basses and turned into a fugue subject. A climax is then reached, and the fugal writing is abandoned as the music sweeps down to a point of rest on the dominant.

A lyrical second group begins in D flat major and goes through many phases of key and expression before being swept out of earshot by a massive tutti, based on augmentations of the octave figure. This strides across several pages, eventually subsiding into an impressive darkness. A moment of suspense, and then a striking chorale, gloriously harmonized, suddenly lifts the music into higher regions as it bursts out in the brass.

After poising for a few moments, Bruckner starts the great passage which is the core of the movement. This is a very powerful fugue, based on the first phrase of the chorale. Each entry of the subject is accompanied by a halo of beautiful counterpoints, none of which is used as a "countersubject" in the strict sense of the term. The fugue gathers momentum, is joined by the octave theme, and gradually approaches a great apex, passing through many mysterious developments. Some of the most wonderful of these are missing in the revised version, and to restore them is an absolute duty.

In the first-written score the fugue climbs to its big crisis, and there is a sudden decline into a state of hushed expectancy. Then the symmetry and spaciousness of the design are established by a most unexpected reappearance of the second group, coming as a welcome relief from the toils of fugue. The group is stated in full, followed by the grand architectural tutti as before. This in its turn generates energy for one of the greatest codas in any symphony since Beethoven. The chief theme of the first movement lends itself to the excitement in combination with the octave figure, and gradually an immense climax

is created, at the height of which the mighty chorale surmounts the entire work.

Now in the later version, the culmination of the fugue leads directly to the coda, the recapitulation of the second group being cut out. The form as it thus stands might be regarded as tripartite, with a disproportionately short middle section and an enormously elongated third part. Such an analysis hardly convinces the finer senses which demand some justification for the second group, too small for a middle section and too large to be ignored. In spite of its length the earlier form is undoubtedly right. Also its performance has a financial advantage, for, unlike the revision, it does not require an extra battery of brass to deliver the chorale at the end.

Before leaving this symphony an observation must be made that the finale contains a few small rhythmic redundancies. The first of these occur in the second group (and likewise in its restatement). The passage from bar 75-80 inclusive (revised score) would be much more fluid were its two-bar repetitions broken up by the excision of bars 78-79. Similarly bars 96-97 and 102-103 are a hindrance to the fluency of the music, having been obviously inserted to complete needlessly rigid four-bar groups. The removal of bars 133-134 (*poco rit.*), thus allowing the tutti to break in two bars earlier, seems a legitimate course. By this means a better sense of articulation is secured. This kind of cutting would clarify rather than interfere with Bruckner's thought. But no cut, however small, should be made in a Bruckner symphony without the deepest possible study, and the clearest understanding of all the principles involved in each individual case. One cannot generalize about cuts.

It cannot be too strongly urged that without long knowledge of this music its true value may not be assessed. This is not to say that it presents grave difficulties to the listener. On the contrary, the influences of the composer's mysticism, naïve sincerity, and Upper Austrian environment are all discernible at first hearing. The "atmosphere" of Bruckner's music is obviously compelling, and his sense of beauty easily understood. Each of his symphonies is a cathedral in sound. Given opportunity of establishing itself here, his work would undoubtedly do so by virtue of its universal qualities of grandeur and serenity, and of the great surge of rich humanity which permeates it all; while prolonged study reveals the depth and power of its art.

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