

THE FIRST FORTY YEARS—THE EARLY MUSIC OF ANTON BRUCKNER

One of the many myths that surrounds Anton Bruckner is that he wrote nothing of value under the age of forty. Indeed, this myth is so pervasive that even today when Bruckner has taken his rightful place amongst the canonical composers, we are unlikely to hear any of his early works. Even Brucknerians hardly consider the early works, indeed some never get beyond the numbered symphonies. In this article I will discuss some of the early work, roughly in chronological order. I will stick to works that have been recorded, so that readers can have the chance of hearing them for themselves. The recordings and other references are listed at the end of the article.

Bruckner was born on 4th September 1824 in Ansfelden, not far from Linz in upper Austria. where his father was a schoolteacher. By 1835, the family had grown to 5 children so Anton, the eldest child, was sent to his godfather Johann Anton Weiss a schoolteacher and organist who lived in Hörsching, about 8 kilometres from Ansfelden. There he studied music and organ and probably wrote his first piece *Pange Lingua*, though this may have been written a few years later. Much later, Bruckner must have thought highly of this very early work for he revised it in 1891 and this version can be found in (4). Bruckner was happy at Hörsching, but in 1836, Bruckner's father became seriously ill and Anton was recalled to Ansfelden. Anton's father died in June 1837. Immediately, his mother took him to St. Florian where he was admitted as a choral scholar under the supervision of the Abbott, Michael Arneth. As Hans-Hubert Schönzeler(24) wrote, "St. Florian represents the very essence of Bruckner and reflects almost every aspect of his musical output, the glory of its baroque architecture, cradled in the hillsides of the upper Austrian landscape, the fervour of the cloistered and mystical catholicism and the sound of the great organ."

He spent the years 1840/41 in Linz where he passed a teacher-training course. In 1841 he became an assistant teacher in Windhaag close to the Bohemian border. He spent 15 months here and wrote his first *Mass (in C)*. This is not the sort of mass we are used to. It is a simple work, only 12 minutes long and is written for a solo alto, organ and two horns. This has been recorded on a Chandos label in (14). (This Russian disc also contains the E minor mass and two religious songs composed in St. Florian, *O du liebes Jesu Kind*, and *In jener letzte der Nächte*.) The mass with these limited forces might sound a bit thin. In the 1920s this mass was arranged for full choir and orchestra by Kajetan Schmidinger and Joseph Messner and part of this arrangement can be heard on a Serbian YouTube upload by means of a Google search for 'Anton Bruckner - Misa u C duru'."

Besides teaching, Bruckner's duties at Windhaag, included other tasks, mainly agricultural. When he objected to transferring manure to the fields, his superior complained to Michael Arneth, who transferred Bruckner to the smaller village of Kronstorf. There he was an assistant school teacher from 1843 to 1845; he continued his study of music and wrote a number of small choral works, including his first of many settings of *Tantum Ergo* which is can be found in (10) and (11) and a *Libera Me* (11),(22). These are richer works both melodically and harmonically than his previous work and we now get a glimpse of the Bruckner we love. Another work of this period is the Mass for Maundy Thursday. This four part mass for unaccompanied chorus contains no Kyrie or Gloria. Later on Bruckner added these movements but these have been lost. So in 1928, Joseph Messner, the music director of the Salzburg cathedral, completed this mass using music Bruckner had already composed for it. This completion has been recorded by the Prague Chamber choir in [22]. Later a further arrangement was made by Taco Sorgdrager who added a string quartet at least for the Sanctus and Benedictus. You can hear this on a Dutch YouTube upload by means of a Google search for 'Bruckner Choral-Messe deel 1 en 2'. I find this a beautiful arrangement. I would like to thank Crawford Howie for helping me to identify this piece.

In 1845, Bruckner passed a second teaching examination and then returned to St. Florian as a teaching assistant. There he stayed until 1855 writing many works including two large scale-works the *Requiem in D minor* and the *Missa solemnis in B flat minor*.

REQUIEM

One of Bruckner's early friends at St. Florian was Franz Sailer, who owned a Bösendorfer grand piano which Bruckner would play on. In 1848 Sailer died of a heart attack and bequeathed the piano to Bruckner. This was kept by Bruckner to the end of his life and he used it to compose all his music from then on. Also, Bruckner wrote his *Requiem* in memory of Sailer. This is Bruckner's first important large-scale work and is clearly influenced by the Mozart Requiem. Robert Simpson(25) calls it unmistakable Bruckner. It is scored for solo voices, chorus and orchestra, and as Simpson also says, choral societies wanting an unusual work of no great technical difficulty will find this Requiem rewarding. Luckily, there are now two fine recordings. One by Matthew Best (2), and a recent remarkable disc from the Dominican republic conducted by Susana Acra-Brache (1). This sometimes sounds a bit rough round the edges, but it has such commitment that it becomes very moving. It is even more moving on the DVD where we can see the commitment shown by the conductor and performers. I urge all Bruckner lovers to get this beautiful DVD. Go to John Berky's website, www.abruckner.com and then go to Bruckner CDs DVDs and specials. Best's disc includes other early works Psalms 112 and 114 which we mention later, and Acra-Bache's disc includes the Te Deum and the 1861 Ave Maria. Both discs should be in the library of all Bruckner fans.

MISSA SOLEMNIS

On March 24, 1854 the Abbott Michael Arneth died, and a successor, Friedrich Mayr was enthroned as his successor on September 14. For this occasion Bruckner wrote a Festive *Missa Solemnis*. This was the largest and perhaps the best work that Bruckner wrote before 1864. The orchestral writing is much fuller than that of the Requiem. The influence of Haydn, Mozart and Schubert is apparent. It is a work of great joy that looks forward to the F minor mass 14 years later. As with that mass there are substantial fugues at the ends of the Credo and Gloria and a beautiful Benedictus. A particularly striking moment occurs at the end where a sorrowful Agnus Dei is followed by a chirpy Mozartian Donna Nobis Pacem; a complete change of mood, and the work ends effectively with the hushed word, Pacem.

This work was recorded on an LP in 1984 conducted by Jürgen Jürgens and the Moneverdi Choir of Hamburg. This disc (20) called “Music of the the St. Florian period”, was unfortunately never issued commercially on CD. However I have just noticed that a CD is available from John Berky’s website; and the notes at the end of this article. I will bring in a personal note here. Around 1984, I was in WH Smith in Southampton. In those days, Smiths would have a small classical selection. (These days even HMV has given up on serious music.) I saw this Bruckner disc which at the time I thought was a bit pricey. I bought it thinking I may never have another chance. This turned out to be one of my favourite Bruckner LPs. It also had excellent sleeve notes by David Aldeborgh. I scanned these notes and sent them to Ken Ward, editor of The Bruckner Journal. These were published in the March 2011 issue (23). I urge you to read them. It gives an excellent account of the Missa Solemnis and the other works on the LP. I will not repeat the details in this article except the end bit which relates that after the inaugural mass there was a celebration dinner. Bruckner was not invited to this; after all in those days the composer of the music was just an artisan, and not suitable company for such distinguished guests. Bruckner took himself to the local inn where he ordered a five course meal and 3 types of wine. He settled down by himself with the words, “the Mass deserved it!” He was right. Luckily this work now has a fine recording on a commercially available CD (15).

OTHER WORKS

In 1846 Bruckner set 4 more versions of Tantum Ergo in B flat, A flat, E flat and C which he revised in 1888. These are recorded in (6) and also in (11). For the death of Michael Arneth, Bruckner wrote *Vor Arneths Grab* (12) for male voice choir and 3 trombones and also *Libera me* (6),(8),(11). This latter is the largest of the motets he wrote at St. Florian, a beautiful work in F minor. In 1852 he composed a *Magnificat* written for soloists, chorus and orchestra, which was recorded on the disc of Jürgen Jürgens referred to above (20). This disc also includes the two religious songs composed at St. Florian mentioned in the first section. For more details of these work see the sleeve notes by David Aldeborgh mentioned above. From there I just

quote; “this joyful piece is a mere 77 measures long and lasts for about four and a half minutes but in that short span Bruckner sails through the entire text without pause or repeat, except the final fugal “Amen” which occupies 23 measures. This lively work is never performed and so far has not come out on a commercially available CD, a pity as it is effectively counteracts the notion that Bruckner only wrote monumental works.

Larger scale works that Bruckner wrote at St. Florian are an attractive setting of Psalm 22 for choir and piano which is on the disc (11) of Thomas Kerbl and a setting of *Psalm 114* which is on the disc (2). The Best recording here might be the first modern day performance of this work. As Robert Simpson writes on the CD notes, “the music has at first an impressive archaic austerity and strikingly simple texture”.

Bruckner did write some easy piano pieces during this time; In 1850 he wrote the *Lancer-quadrilles*, four short pieces based on popular operettas of the day, including *La Fille de regiment* by Donizetti, and *Steiermärker* a Schubert type *Ländler*. In 1856 he wrote a little *Klavierstück in E flat* and in 1854 he wrote two sets of piano duets, *Drei kleine Stücke für Klavier zu vier Händen* and *Quadrille für Klavier zu vier Händen*. These works can be found in (5), (11) and (16) and the sheet music in (27). Other small works are the *Aequali* for 3 trombones written for funerals; these can be found in (4),(12) and two *Totenlieder* in (21).

The last work that Bruckner composed at St. Florian (in 1856) was a beautiful setting of *Ave Maria* (6).

In November 1855 the cathedral organist at Linz died, and after some hesitation, Bruckner applied for the post. There was a competition for the post with two other candidates, but Bruckner was easily the best and he was offered the post. Bruckner spent the next 12 years in Linz. Whilst in Linz, Bruckner became a member of choral society *Frohsinn*, and in 1860 he became their conductor. For this he wrote a number of pieces for male voice choir. Those he wrote before he was 40 years old were *Der Abendhimmel*(1862), *Herbstleid*(1864), *Am Gras*(1861) which was an extension of an older work, *Vor Arneht's Grase* of (1854) written at the time of Michael Aneth's death. The longest and most impressive piece in this genre is the festive cantata *Preiset den Herrn* (1862) All the pieces for male voice choir can be found in (12).

BRUCKNER'S FURTHER STUDIES

With the *Missa Solemnis* and *Requiem*, Bruckner had showed that he was an extremely able composer but Bruckner was not satisfied with what he had achieved. It was suggested to him that he should undertake further study with Simon Sechter one of the world's foremost experts on harmony and counterpoint, who was living in Vienna. A remarkable thing happened. Bruckner stopped composing, (this was one of Sechter's stipulations to his pupils) and spent the next six years studying music theory. (Six years is the time it takes a British student to study for an undergraduate degree and a Ph.D. combined.) This must be the only case in the history of music

where a great composer gave up writing music to devote his time for study. Indeed, I can think of no other case in the history of art or science where a creative genius has given up his craft for so long to study. Upon completing his studies, Bruckner wrote the wonderful seven part a-capella *Ave Maria*. Some consider this the first really great work of Bruckner. (However, after my study of early Bruckner I am no longer sure of this. He had already other masterpieces up his sleeve). But this piece was the work that was most played in Bruckner's lifetime and even today it is often performed. Most discs of Bruckner's motets will include this piece, so recordings are found in amongst others, (1),(2),(4),(6), (7),(8),(10),(21). It is interesting that almost the last work Bruckner wrote before his studies and the first work he wrote after his studies were settings of Ave Maria. This was commented upon by Dermot Gault in his recent book "The New Bruckner" (28): whereas he describes the first setting as a competent work he says of the second setting " We are in a different world. Here at last is the mysterious ecstasy and poignant yearning, the fusion of ecclesiastical solemnity and romantic archaism that Bruckner made so much his own. " Another motet written at the same time is *Afferentur Regi*, (6),(10).

Even though Bruckner was now a world expert in harmony and counterpoint he was still not satisfied! He now studied form and orchestration with Otto Kitzler, the cellist and conductor of the Linz orchestra. A man 10 years younger than Bruckner, Kitzler gave the first performance of *Tannhauser* in Linz, at the end of 1862 and he introduced Bruckner to the music of Wagner. Thus Bruckner never knew any of Wagner's music before his thirty-ninth year. The music he wrote in that year (1863), discussed in the next section, shows little influence of Wagner.

EARLY CHAMBER AND ORCHESTRAL WORKS

The chamber works were *a string quartet in C minor* and a *Rondo in C minor*, the latter being an alternative Rondo for the quartet. The quartet might have been an exercise, but it is in fact a fine piece of chamber music, with many Brucknerian features. They are both included in the disc (13), together with the more famous quintet. These work dates from 1862 as does the *Sonatensatz for piano*, (5),(16).

Also in 1862 Bruckner wrote *Three orchestral pieces* and the *March in D minor* (17). The three pieces were probably exercises but still worth hearing especially as they are very short and full of good tunes. The fourth piece is a march which, remarkably looks forward in a miniature way to the famous Mahlerian marches.

In 1863, Bruckner wrote 3 fine pieces. One was a setting of *Psalm 114* (2),(15) and it is interesting to compare this with the setting of Psalm 112. Now Bruckner uses a full orchestra and double choir. It is a stirring work, beginning with a confident Alleluja accompanied by trumpets. The other pieces were orchestral, the first being the *Overture in G minor* (18). This was evidently a piece following Kitzler's teaching, in a clear sonata form, which puts a lie to some who have questioned Bruckner's ability to write in

sonata form when, in future years, he was inventing his own forms. This piece derives from the overtures of Mendelssohn and is hardly inferior in quality to many of these. Even in this early piece, Bruckner shows that he could write a good ending. Hushed strings are followed by the horn coming in with the main theme just before the final bars. The main work of 1863 is the Symphony in F minor, later known as Symphony 00. It is also known as the Study Symphony and Bruckner later described it as little more than an exercise, although it is much more than that. This is a standard 4 movement symphony, but much shorter and lighter than the usual Bruckner symphony. Just observe the tempo markings: 1. Allegro molto vivace, 2. Andante Molto, 3. Schnell, 4. Allegro. But there are many Brucknerian features, attractive second subjects in the first and fourth movements, a very lively and rhythmic scherzo, perhaps the best Scherzo he wrote until the hunting scherzo of the fourth, and a stirring coda to the finale. This symphony should not be compared with the composer's later symphonies and is much shorter. For this reason it is never played in concerts but it does bear comparison with many other mid nineteenth century symphonies. The main influences are Mendelssohn and Schumann. Indeed, many people hearing the lively finale without knowing what it is would guess they are listening to Schumann. There are worthwhile performance by two good Bruckner conductors, Inbal [9] and Tintner [19]. These conductors have very different timings. Tintner 37:25, Inbal 46:13. The main difference is in the first movement, where Tintner is quicker and does not observe repeats. Here he does follow the Allegro Molto vivace tempo. Even in the finale Tintner is 2 minutes quicker. However, Inbal gives a sensitive, more moderately paced performance which those who love the later symphonies will appreciate .

D MINOR MASS

In 1864 Bruckner wrote the D minor mass, (3),(7), which had its first performance on 21st November 1864, 2 months after his 40th Birthday. This mass is usually regarded in most books about Bruckner as his first important work, the beginning of the true Bruckner. However, it is still as rarely performed as most other pieces of early Bruckner. According to the concert listings at the end of *The Bruckner Journal* I noticed that from March 2010 to March 2011 there was only one performance of this work, whereas there were 5 performances of the E minor mass and 10 of the F minor mass, both these works being written soon after the D minor. This is understandable. The D minor is a fine work but the F minor which is quite similar in form, is one of *the* great masses and has been compared with the Bach B minor mass and the Beethoven Missa Solemnis. The E minor is almost a unique work in music history. It is a 19th century work and yet looks back to Palestrina and the 16th century. The style of the D minor mass and all of his subsequent work is different from the early works described above. They are more trenchant and assertive. The study with Sechter made Bruckner confident as a composer and Wagner showed him what was possible. I don't think that Wagner's influence on Bruckner should be overplayed. The D

minor mass and the 1863 works show little Wagnerian influence, which does manifest itself to a small extent in the early symphonies. Sometimes I think that the Wagner influence had a negative effect and resulted in some problems, such as in the third symphony. No such problems occurred in the early pre-1864 works which as David Aldeborgh wrote, showed remarkable freshness, vitality and inspiration. I am sure that readers of *The Bruckner Journal* will get much pleasure in exploring them.

For more details of the works discussed here go to the book by Crawford Howie (26) or the articles by Paul Hawkshaw and Crawford Howie in The Cambridge guide to Bruckner (29).

RECORDINGS AND REFERENCES

- (1) Requiem, Ave Maria, Te Deum, Musica Sacra; Orquesta in Art, Grupo Vocal Matises, Susana Acra-Bache
- (2) Requiem, Psalms 112, 114; Corydon Singers and Orchestra, Matthew Best. Chandos A66245.
- (3) Te Deum, Mass in D minor; Corydon Singers and Orchestra, Matthew Best. Hyperion CDA 66650
- (4) Sacred Motets, Two Aequali; Ealing Abbey Choir, Jonathan Brown Herald HAVPCD 213
- (5) Bruckner Piano works; Wolfgang Brunner and Michael Schoppe ORF cpo 999 256-2
- (6) Bruckner Motets; Petr Fiela, Czech Philharmonic Choir, Brno. MDG 3221422=2
- (7) Mass no. 1 in D minor, Motets; Gardiner, The Monteverdi choir, Wiener Philharmonic, Deutsche Gramophon
- (8) Bruckner Motets; Robert Jones, Choir of St. Bride's Church, Naxos, 8.550956
- (9) Symphony in F minor; Radio Sinfonie Orchestra, Eliahu Inbal, Teldec classics, 0630-14193-2
- (10) Bruckner Motets; Robert Jones, Choir of St. Bride's Church, Naxos, 8.550956
- (11) Chöre—Klaviermusik; Thomas Kerbl, LIVA034
- (12) Männerchöre; Thomas Kerbl, LIVA 027
- (13) Bruckner Chamber music; L'Archibudelli Vivarte SK 66251
- (14) Mass in C major, etc; Valeri Polyanski, Ludmila Kuznetzova, Russian State Orchestra CHANDOS, 9863
- (15) Missa Solemnis, Psalm 112, Psalm 150; Anton Rickenbacher, Bamberg choir and orchestra
- (16) Bruckner Piano works; Fumiko Shiraga BIS CD1297
- (17) Three Orchestral movements, March in D minor; Franz Schmidt, symphony No 4
- (18) Symphony No.0, Overture in G minor; Ricardo Chailly, Radio-Symphony-Orcheset Berlin Decca, 421593-2
- (19) Symphony No.00 (F minor); Tintner, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Naxos 8.554432

- (20) Missa Solemnis, Magnificat, Two religious songs; Jürgen Jürgens, The Monteverdi Choir Hamburg, Israel Chamber Orchestra
- (21) Bruckner Motets, Duncan Ferguson, Choir of S. Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh
- (22) Anton Bruckner, Motetten, Choral-Messe, Josef Pancik, Prager Kammerchor
- (23) David Aldeborgh, Anton Bruckner Music of the Saint Florian Period, The Bruckner Journal, March 2011, pp15-18.
- (24) Hans-Hubert Schönzeler, Bruckner, Calder&Boyers Ltd, London 1970
- (25) Robert Simpson, The Essence of Bruckner, Victor Gollancz, London 1992
- (26) Crawford Howie, Anton Bruckner, a documentary biography, (volume 1) from Ansfelden to Vienna. The Edwin Mellor Press Ltd 2002.
- (27) Anton Bruckner, Gesamtausgabe, Band XII/2, Werke für Klavier zu zwei Händen, Musikwissenschaftlicher Verlag Wien.
- (28) Dermot Gault, The New Bruckner, Ashgate, Farnham, 2011.
- (29) Paul Hawkshaw, Bruckner's large sacred compositions, in The Cambridge guide to Bruckner, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Except for (1), (11) and (12) all these discs should be available, e.g. from Amazon or ArkivMusic. You can purchase the discs (11) and (12) from the Brucknerhaus Linz at www.brucknerhaus.com. Go to "Shop". You can get (1) and (20) from John Berky's website, www.abruckner.com On this site go to "Store" and then down to CDs-Bruckner CDs, DVDs and specials.

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