

It is hard to understand why Bruckner, of all people, should have been (and in some quarters still is) a "controversial" composer. Yet the fact remains that his symphonies have been hotly debated ever since they appeared. What are the reasons?

Usually it is the new, unfamiliar style, the unconventional philosophy, the "ism" which generates zealous proponents and equally zealous antagonists. But the style of Bruckner's musical language actually never was sufficiently novel to warrant all the violent debates. In fact (though rather superficially seen) a Bruckner symphony's only obvious challenge to the familiar run of music is its length, and length alone can hardly be considered a valid reason for hot tempered disputes. A piece of music either bores its audience to the point where nobody wants to hear it again — a result which can and often has been achieved with quite short pieces — or it holds the interest of the listener, in which case it is obviously worth listening to. The boring piece will die and sink into oblivion, its fate bewailed only by its unfortunate creator. The challenging piece will continue to aggravate, to please — to live.

Let us, then, look at what the critics had to complain about. First they accused him of trying to out-Beethoven Beethoven. How, they preached, can anyone improve what is already perfect? And besides, why should anyone want to write like Beethoven in the first place, in an age blessed with the incomparable achievements of Wagner?

The "Brahminen" pounced on Bruckner for exactly the opposite reasons. How, they raged, dare he desecrate the purity of the symphonic form with lascivious Wagnerian harmonies, leitmotifs, and length? He is but an incompetent, blasphemous imitator who neither understands the symphony nor Wagner.

To this the Wagnerites added: how can he be so boorish, so insensitive, as to force the soaring spirit of Wagner's style into the strait-jacket of the symphonic form?

Actually, however, the critics often merely utilized Bruckner as a convenient battleground on which to fight their wars over Brahms and Wagner. Hardly any of them seems to have examined Bruckner's music on its own merits, uncomparing with other composers' works.

Moreover, for 30 years Bruckner's symphonies were available only in incredibly heavily distorted editions. The original versions (*Urfassungen*) did not see publication until 1934! In these old revised versions Bruckner's music had been smoothed out and "Wagnerized" by his editors, primarily the conductor Ferdinand Löwe, with the intention of making it palatable to the general public. Not only was the instrumentation changed, but the actual harmonies were cleaned up until much of what had been genuine and original was expurgated. To give but one example, the chord, E-F#-G#-A-B#-C#, at the climactic outburst at the end of the *Adagio* of the Ninth Symphony, was watered down to a simple E-Major triad—merely a loud noise instead of the monumental, stridently dissonant culmination it had originally been.

After the first performance of the *Urfassung* of the Ninth Symphony in the USA (New York, 1934, Klemperer conducting) the renowned critic, Lawrence Gilman, wrote that, compared with the "sandpapered" Löwe version, known till then exclusively, the original version constituted a "consecrational disclosure."

Thus, fortunately, there also existed critics, conductors, and music lovers who were well disposed toward Bruckner, and as his fame grew (and continues to grow) the balance is beginning more and more to change in his favor. Let us listen to Donald Francis Tovey, as he describes Bruckner's music in his incomparable *Essays in Musical Analysis*: "If we clear our minds, not only of prejudice but of wrong points of view, and treat Bruckner's [music] as a kind of music we have never heard before, I have no doubt that its high quality will strike us at every moment."

What Tovey considers the "wrong points of view" he illuminates at another place, and with this explanation he has given us one of the most useful and penetrating keys for the understanding of the greatest stumbling block on the road toward the proper appreciation of Bruckner's music: the seemingly endless successions of short sections out of which the enormously long total structures are composed. Tovey says:

"The trouble is that Bruckner's mind moves no faster than in four-bar steps of moderate *alla breve* time. These steps the mind of the alert listener accustomed to classical symphonies takes for whole themes. We then wonder at their shortness of breath, and we marvel at the effrontery of the Brucknerite who claims that Bruckner is 'lapidary', 'pyramidal', and a master before whom Brahms dwindles to the proportions of an insect. The Brucknerite is wrong about Brahms, but he is right about Bruckner, whose four-bar phrases should be regarded as atoms, or at most as molecules. Nor should we be surprised that such giant molecules build themselves up into very simple forms; for art is not biology."

*Bruckner's Ninth Symphony*, like Schubert's, remained unfinished. He began sketching the work early in 1889, started on the score two years later, in April of 1891, and completed the third movement, *Adagio*, subtitled *Abschied vom Leben*, on the 31st of October, 1894. Of the last movement only sketches survive. They indicate that Bruckner had intended to close his Ninth with a gigantic fugue. Serious illness retarded the work, and two years after the completion of the *Adagio*, on October 10, 1896, Bruckner died at the age of 72.

The first performance of the work took place in Vienna, on February 11, 1903, under Ferdinand Löwe. Theodore Thomas conducted the first American performance (Löwe version, of course) in Chicago on February 2, 1904.

Bruckner had been quite aware of the possibility that he might not live to finish the last movement. He is not only known to have suggested that his *Te Deum* be

played in place of the *Finale*, but actually began writing an extensive musical transition which was to lead from the *Adagio* into the *Te Deum*. He felt that since the symphony was anyway dedicated "*an meinen lieben Gott*", the *Te Deum* was the most fitting of his works to take the place of the closing movement.

As to the music itself, the similarity to Beethoven's Ninth, which is often pointed out, is not confined to the number and the key only. Both works open with a soft tremolo out of which grows the main theme. Right here, however, the resemblance ends, and it becomes essential once more to be reminded of Tovey's admonition not to mistake every short section for an entity of structural independence, but to give the music ample time to develop and to see each such section in its proper relation to the total structure. Thus, we have 18 bars of D minor during which eight horns very softly play motifs which, taken together, constitute something like a first germinal section. At the 19th bar the music breaks away from the D, introducing a new thought and new, rather remote keys. This section is followed at measure 27 by a lyrical motif which is repeated many times in sequences and imitations, leading, at measure 39, to a motif which consists of an octave skip followed by a slow, melodious mordent, both foreshadowing the main theme. This last motif surges upward, again in Wagnerian sequences, until only the octave skip remains. A sudden typical "*Bruckner piano*" causes a change of texture and adds a new background motif, but a new build-up soon begins, the music increases in intensity and finally soars to a climactic *fff* outburst of the entire orchestra in unison: the brilliant and majestic entrance of the main theme, and the reaffirmation of the main key of D minor.

In other words, all that went on during the first 62 slow measures—a total of 248 beats—was strictly speaking nothing more than a cadence, i.e., the announcement and consolidation of the main key, coupled with a melodic introduction to the main theme, but laid out in the immense proportions commensurate with the vastness of a symphonic structure as only Bruckner conceived it. (By comparison, the structurally corresponding section of the opening of Beethoven's Ninth is 16 bars long from the tremolo beginning to the (rather similar) orchestral outburst which proclaims the main theme. And these 16 bars go, at that, twice as fast. This little comparison is not meant to put one work above the other—it is meant merely to illustrate the difference in the size of the structural components.)

The proper approach, then, to the understanding of Bruckner's music is not unlike that of looking at a large building. It has to be seen from a distance in order to reveal itself as an entity; only distance will cause the details to lose their independence and blend into the whole. Any amount of examining of cornices, gates, spires, windows, even entire wings will not do. They are important to the understanding of the building, but the sum of individual impressions will not total up to the impression the entire structure will convey when seen from the proper distance. Naturally such a view in perspective is easier to achieve in space than in time, but to attempt the latter is highly rewarding. It will not work at the first hearing because memory plays an all important role in "temporal perspective," but repeated hearings will make it possible to single out and interrelate the focal points, and eventually the listener will be able to glimpse the entire grandiose edifice in its proper proportions.

The descriptions of the opening measures given above may act as a guide, but the listener is warned against believing that this is the whole story. He is warned against losing himself in the pleasures of merely puzzling out the theme numbers and modulations. The analytical ear must always be equalled by the willingness to listen with an open heart, with humility, and with the kind of awe we feel when a wise but simple old man speaks. We must remember that it was to "the good Lord" that Bruckner addressed himself in his Ninth Symphony when, at the age of 70, he felt the approach of death and sought to express through his heart, the summing up of his life and the contemplation of last things.