

Two Letters by Anton Bruckner

Jürgen Thym

Bruckner ALS, 13.XI.1883

Lieber Freund!

Auf Gerathewohl schreibe ich; denn Ihr Brief ist versteckt. Weiß weder Ihre Adresse noch sonstigen Charakter von Ihnen. Danke sehr für Ihr liebes Schreiben. Omnes amici mei dereliquerunt me! In diesen Worten haben Sie die ganze Situation. Hans Richter nennt mich jetzt musik [alischen] Narren weil ich zu wenig kürzen wollte; (wie *er* sagt;) führt natürlich gar nichts auf; ich stehe gegenwärtig ganz allein da. Wünsche, daß es Ihnen besser ergehen möge, und Sie bald oben hinauf kommen mögen! Dann werden Sie gewiß meiner nicht vergessen. Glück auf!

Ihr A. Bruckner

Wien, 13. Nov. 1883

Dear Friend:

I take the risk of writing to you, even though I cannot find your letter and know neither your address nor title. Thank you very much for your nice letter. All my friends have abandoned me! These words tell you the whole situation. Hans Richter calls me now a musical fool, because I did not want to make enough cuts (as he puts it). And, of course, he does not perform anything at all; I stand alone at the moment. I hope that things will be better for you and that you will soon succeed then you will surely not forget me. Good luck!

Your A. Bruckner

Vienna, November 13, 1883

Lieber Freund!

Auf Gnade noch schreiben ist,
dann Sie selbst ist verurteilt.
Wird wieder Ihre Adressen und
postigialgaranten von Ihnen.
Danke sehr für Sie über
Schreiben. Omnes amici mei
dereliquerunt me! Zu diesen
Mentoren haben Sie die ganze
Situation. Herr Duxen
müht mich jetzt nicht. Kannen
weil ist zu wenig Dingen selbst,
(wie in pag 1)

Bruckner, ALS, 27.II.1885

Hochgeborener Herr Baron!

Schon wieder muß ich zur Last fallen. Da die Sinfonie am 10. März
aufgeführt wird, so komme ich schon *Sonntag den 8. März früh* nach
München und werde wieder bei den vier Jahreszeiten Quartier nehmen.
Ich bath Hl[*] Hofkapellmeister um ein paar Vorproben, weil die

geheimen Schwierigkeiten in dem Werke sehr viele sind und dgl. Da könnte dann Sonntag ganz gut eine Probe stattfinden, wenn es HI von Levi genehm wäre. Dürfte ich HI Baron bitten, dießfalls eine Fürbitte einlegen zu wollen!? Zudem sind in der Partitur einige Verbesserungen gemacht worden.

HI Landgraf befindet sich besser, und sendet herzliche Grüße; auch vereinigt er seine Bitte mit der meinen. HI Landgraf sagte mir, ich soll HI Baron aufmerksam machen, daß es sehr gut wäre, mich vor dem Concerte in einer außerordentlichen Versammlung des Wagnervereines mit den PT[**] Mitgliedern desselben bekannt zu machen, was mir *vielle Freunde* erwerben würde. Eben so mit den Mitgliedern des H[eiligen] Gral. Ich bitte daher recht innigst um Hochdero Hülfe in dieser so wichtigen Angelegenheit. Gewiß würde ich die Herrschaften nicht so belästigen, wenn ich nicht die Situation als so wichtig erblicken würde. Mit dem Ausdrucke meines tiefsten Respektes verbleibe ich meine innigsten Bitten wiederholend

Euer Hochgeboren HI Baron

Dankschuldiger A. Bruckner

Wien, 27. Febr. 1885

Illustrious Baron:

Again I have to burden you with something. Since the symphony is going to be performed on March 10, I will arrive in Munich on *Sunday morning (March 8)* and will again be staying at the Vier Jahreszeiten Hotel. I asked Herr Hofkapellmeister for a few rehearsals in advance, since there are many *hidden* difficulties etc. in the work. Thus a rehearsal could very well take place on Sunday, if it is convenient to Herr von Levi. Could I ask Herr Baron to intervene on my behalf!? Furthermore, there are several corrections in the score.

Herr Landgraf feels better and sends cordial greetings; he also supports my request. Herr Landgraf asked me to let Herr Baron know that it might be very good to introduce me to the distinguished members of the Wagner Society, which might enable me to win *many friends*. Similarly, also with the members of the Holy Grail. Thus I beg for the help of your Highness in this very important matter. I would not burden the gentlemen if I did not consider the situation so very important. With the expression of my deepest respect, and repeating my heartfelt requests, I remain your Illustrious Baron's most grateful,

A. Bruckner

Vienna, February 27, 1885

[*] HI = Herr

[**] PT = praemisso titolo

The two letters published here for the first time were written during a crucial period in the life of Anton Bruckner (1824-1896): the midlife years in which he fought for recognition of his music, especially his symphonies, by the musical world at large. In fact, the letters may be considered representative of two different stages in the reception of Bruckner's work: neglect and misunderstanding, on the one hand, and a gradual turn toward acceptance of Bruckner as a symphonist, on the other.

After having served as an assistant teacher and organist in the Austrian province until his midforties, Bruckner moved to Vienna in 1868 to teach organ and music theory at the Conservatory. In 1875 he accepted an appointment, initially unsalaried, as lecturer of music theory at the University of Vienna in addition to his duties at the Conservatory. Bruckner, who retained the habits of mind of a simple man from the peasantry of Upper Austria, must have seemed odd indeed in the context of the brilliant intellectual and artistic circles of the Austrian capital. Little blessed with social and political skills, he was unable, even after he had caused a stir as an organist and improviser in Paris and London in 1869 and 1871, respectively, to transfer the success he gained internationally into recognition at home.

Vienna was, in the 1870s and 1880s, in the throes of an aesthetic controversy between the so-called *neudeutsche Schule* with Wagner and Liszt as protagonists and a more academically oriented school of composition, propagated especially by Eduard Hanslick, with Johannes Brahms as the undisputed figurehead. And the naive Bruckner unwittingly became a player in a gravitational field dominated by artistic and intellectual forces politically more adept than he. Bruckner's

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so kommt ich schon Sonntag
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und werde wieder bei den
meinen Jahreszeiten Quartieren
nehmen. Ich darf ich hoffen,
gallunsten mir ein paar
Wagnereien, weil die gafinn
besinnigen in dem Werke
Gefen miela sind u dgl.

dedication of his Symphony No. 3, with musical quotations from *Die Walküre*, to Richard Wagner, his pilgrimages to Bayreuth to attend the premieres of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in 1876 and of *Parsifal* in 1882, and his joining the Wagner Society in Vienna (honorary member after

1884) no doubt were interpreted by Hanslick and others as expressions of a partisan. The Wagner camp was only too eager to appropriate Bruckner as its "symphonist," setting Bruckner up against Brahms who established himself in the mid-1870s as a symphonic composer (and thereby as Beethoven's heir). In the hothouse climate of Vienna, aesthetic conflicts were fought with unrestrained vehemence and little tolerance; soon clichés of Bruckner as "provincial organist" and of his symphonies as "gigantic serpents"¹ made the rounds and spoiled his chances of having his works get a fair hearing in the Austrian capital. Moreover, the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, which determined access to the concert hall appropriate for performances of orchestral works in Vienna was firmly under the control of Brahms and his associates. The neglect--even harassment--that Bruckner suffered from the Viennese music establishment was indeed scandalous, especially since it was directed at "a man who, unlike Wagner, was largely unable to defend himself."²

This was the sorry state of affairs which provides the context for the first letter published here. The year 1883 early on had dealt a severe blow to Bruckner, both personally and professionally. Wagner's death was felt by Bruckner as a profound loss, especially since Wagner had promised him during their last meeting, which saw the *Parsifal* premiere in Bayreuth, to perform all his symphonies. Under the impact of the news of Wagner's demise, Bruckner composed much of his Symphony No. 7. The Adagio, especially the coda, was conceived as a grandiose lament for the master of Bayreuth. Invigorated by attending another *Parsifal* performance in Bayreuth and vacationing in his native Upper Austria during the summer, Bruckner completed the symphony in September. Hopes for an early performance of the work in Vienna, however, did not materialize. Hans Richter, who had premiered Bruckner's Symphony No. 4 in 1881, became cautiously shy. Even though convinced of the symphonic genius of Bruckner, he was reluctant to venture out again; at least, that is the way Bruckner saw it. When Bruckner showed the new work to Richter later in the fall, the conductor seems to have proposed drastic cuts. The composer did not take the suggestion in the positive spirit it may have been meant; on the contrary, he believed that Richter, whom he considered a supporter, was bowing to Hanslick and company. As the letter to an anonymous acquaintance shows, the year 1883 ended in depression, loneliness, and hopelessness for Bruckner.

By that time, he was nearly sixty years old and still had not experienced recognition of his symphonic works by the music world at large or even, and more importantly, in his hometown.

In the next year, however, the tide turned in favor of Bruckner, not necessarily in Vienna but certainly in other musical centers. Through his teaching at the university, Bruckner had gathered a devoted coterie of acolytes who were tireless in supporting their teacher and, once they had reached leadership positions, actively performed and promoted his work: Felix Mottl, Joseph Schalk, Karl Muck, Hugo Wolf, Gustav Mahler, Franz Schalk, and Ferdinand Loewe. Joseph Schalk and Loewe performed the new symphony on two pianos at a concert of the Wagner Society early in the year, and Schalk took his piano arrangement of the work for four hands on a trip to Leipzig, where he introduced Arthur Nikisch to the score. Nikisch immediately decided to perform the symphony in Leipzig. After considerable delays the premiere took place on December 30, 1884, in the presence of the composer, albeit with horns replacing the Wagner tubas required for the Adagio and Finale. The symphony was a tremendous success with both the public and the critics. A month later the performance was repeated in the presence of the King of Saxony.

An even greater triumph for Bruckner was the performance of Symphony No. 7 under Hermann Levi in Munich on March 10, 1885, mentioned in the second letter. Bruckner had gotten to know Levi, the conductor handpicked by Wagner for *Parsifal*, during several trips to Bayreuth. The composer was invited, as had been the case for the Leipzig premiere, to attend the rehearsals a few days before the performance, and he gladly accepted. Pointing to the difficulties of the work, Bruckner even asked Levi for extra rehearsals and, aided by the mediation of Baron Karl von Perfall, was accommodated. Perfall, court-appointed music and opera director in Munich, was also instrumental in introducing the composer to the members of two private organizations devoted to the legacy of Wagner—the local Wagner Society and the Holy Grail—which no doubt had a beneficial effect on the reception of the work. (Bruckner biographers Göllerich and Auer probably knew the letter published here.)³ The performance was indeed a great success. Bruckner was celebrated by the public and the artistic community of Munich. Friends collected money to have the symphony published, and Bruckner dedicated the work to King Ludwig II, Wagner's great patron. Levi elevated Bruckner in public to the rank of "greatest symphonist since Beethoven's death." Performances of Bruckner symphonies took place in the Hague, in Cologne, Karlsruhe, and New York that same year, confirming the breakthrough that had been achieved in Leipzig and Munich. Bruckner's reception in Vienna, however, remained poisoned by partisanship even in the last decade of Bruckner's life when successes in other musical centers might have suggested a corrective course.