

# Music: Peasant Symphonist

Monday, Mar. 27, 1944

There is a legend that the greatest geniuses are acclaimed only long after they are dead. Once in a while it comes true. Last week in Manhattan's Carnegie Hall an audience acclaimed a composer who died in 1896, is still virtually unknown to the musical public, and is regarded by many sincere partisans as Beethoven's symphonic equal. His name: Joseph Anton Bruckner.

The composition that brought cheers from Carnegie Hall's audience was Bruckner's Te Deum. Like all of his major works it is large, vigorous, austere religious—a vast tonal shrine. Its melodies are plain-spoken rather than pretty; it has little sensuous appeal. But when Conductor Bruno Walter, the New York Philharmonic and the 176-voice Westminster Choir rose to its climaxes, admirers felt they were hearing music equaled in cumulative power only by the most massive scores in symphonic music.

Anton Bruckner was born in the Austrian Tyrol in 1824, three years before the death of Beethoven. A great, hulking, oafish man with a huge beaked nose and the manners of a country bumpkin, he wandered about the streets of 19th-Century Vienna pathetically anxious to find anybody who liked his long, earnest, rather complicated symphonies. Practically nobody did. His contemporary, Johannes Brahms, hooted: "Bruckner's works immortal? It makes me laugh." Richard Wagner, whom Bruckner admired tremendously, considered him a bonehead and avoided his company. Few of his important works were published until the last years of his life.

"A Great Sin." Part of Anton Bruckner's trouble was unquestionably his personality. He was living proof that brains and great creative musicianship do not necessarily occupy the same skull. A simple-minded peasant who spent his early life as a schoolteacher (at a salary of 80¢ a month) and church organist, he never got the hayseeds out of his close-cropped hair. His courtesy was a little like that of an uneasy headwaiter. He referred to people he met as "Your Grace," addressed Brahms as "Mr. President." He was always imagining himself in love with some chambermaid or adolescent girl. But in his old age he confided to his housekeeper: "Only once in my life when I was young, did I ever kiss a girl. I have repented it deeply as a sin."

Bruckner loved food, beer (as many as 13 seidels of Pilsener at a sitting), and the waltzes of Johann Strauss. His favorite reading matter was the Bible and a life of Napoleon, whom he enormously respected. He had a dim-witted love of titles, once sent a letter to the University of Pennsylvania offering it the dedication of his Fourth Symphony in return for a doctor's degree. When his offer was ignored, he fell into the hands of a swindler, whom he paid a considerable sum to wangle him a degree from the University of Cincinnati. In his home, next to the bathtub, he kept a bust of himself on a pedestal.

[Text missing] Ninth and Last. Just how this character could have produced music of coherence, let alone greatness, has long puzzled even the case-hardened musical historians. An important wellspring was certainly his peasant piety. He was a Roman Catholic (like Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert before him).

He talked about God as if He were an intimate acquaintance, even dedicated his last symphony to Him. With the resolution of the saints, Bruckner clung to his own musical manner despite a lifetime of disfavor and ridicule.

Long obscured by the tampering efforts of editors and rearranges, Bruckner's work is only now becoming familiar to the public as he wrote it. It consists of nine gigantic symphonies, a sheaf of religious music, and a few odd songs and chamber compositions. Because he admired Wagner's music and loved to write for huge orchestras with extra contingents of brass Bruckner has long had a reputation as a Wagnerian" symphonist. But Bruckner's clear, naive, Austrian melodic style and his love of heaping counterpoint owe far more to Schubert and Bach than they do to Wagner. And Bruckner's pietistic musical world is completely foreign to Wagner's erotic emotionalism.

Before he started on his Ninth Symphony in 1891, Bruckner worried a good deal. At least three previous composers (Beethoven, Schubert, Spohr) had written nine symphonies and then died. Steeling himself with frequent prayer, Bruckner turned out three gigantic movements that many critics now regard as his masterpiece. He died a few months later. His body was interred in a glass coffin in the Augustinian monastery of St. Florian in Upper Austria, where he had once played the organ.