

Of the nine symphonies of Anton Bruckner the Seventh has had the happiest fate. Even late in life Bruckner liked to speak of the work, which he composed between 1881 and 1883, as his favorite. The work suffered less from editing by other hands, and brought Bruckner in his lifetime more success and recognition than any other of his symphonic works. Hans Richter exclaimed already after the first movement, which Bruckner played for him at the piano: "Not since Beethoven has anything like this been written!"—The Seventh Symphony was given its first performance by Arthur Nikisch on December 30, 1884 in Leipzig. After that, the work quickly became a part of the regular orchestral repertoire, especially in Germany, where it is even today the most often heard Bruckner symphony. The Symphony is dedicated to King Ludwig II of Bavaria, the patron of Richard Wagner.

The Seventh Symphony is especially closely connected with Wagner, Bruckner's idol, and not only because of the introduction of the "Wagner tubas" in the Adagio. This slow movement has been interpreted as an elegy on the death of Wagner. Bruckner always encouraged this interpretation, though it is known that when news of Wagner's death in Venice on February 13, 1883 reached Bruckner,

the Adagio, begun on January 22, was already completed, apart from the coda. It was only in the last 35 bars of the Adagio that Bruckner, "immediately on receiving the bitter and sorrowful news," wrote the actual lament on Wagner's death, "in remembrance of his unattainable ideal, the dearly beloved, immortal master of masters." The rest of the movement can, nevertheless, be regarded as a death lament. In a letter to Felix Mottl, Bruckner described how, during the composition of the movement, he keenly felt the approaching death of Wagner: "One day I came home and was very sad; I said to myself: the master cannot live much longer; and suddenly the C-sharp minor Adagio came to me."

Quite a few odd details have come down to us about the composition of the Seventh. The crowing of a cock is said to have inspired Bruckner to the main theme of the Scherzo. The composer is also said to have admitted that the basic theme of the first movement (and of the whole work) is not by him at all, but that one night his old friend from Linz, Kapellmeister Dorn, whistled it to him in a dream and then told him: This theme will bring you luck. At that moment Bruckner awoke, got up, lit a candle, and immediately wrote down the theme.

Luck it certainly brought the composer, though whether the story is true, may be open to doubt, as may other tales about the composition of the work. For example, Hans Richter's comparison of Bruckner with Beethoven, quoted above, is also mentioned in connection with Bruckner's Fourth Symphony, and Wagner who only knew the Third Symphony (which is dedicated to him) is also said to have used very similar words in describing that work.

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Among Bruckner's symphonies, the Seventh occupies a place of special importance, thanks mainly to its melodic content. The main theme of the first movement can actually be called the leading motif of Bruckner's symphonic thought. In the Seventh Symphony Bruckner's characteristic facility for contrasting use of his themes is especially evident. In the careful, powerful structure of the work, and in the sense of unity achieved especially through a return to the beginning of the work in the coda of the Finale, Bruckner's kinship with nature also finds expression in the Seventh, as it did in the preceding symphonies. In the development and coda sections of the work one feels more and more strongly the composer's striving after the light of truth and after sublimation of suffering to joy. The chorale appears, then, not only as the climax and end of a development, but as a clear, dominating beacon of light. In this Symphony too, Bruckner's music is centered around his unshakable faith in God as the strength-giving source of human life.

From the famous opening tremolos of the strings emerges a broad, songful theme of the cellos, supported by the horn. This basic theme

of the whole symphony then returns in full orchestral garb, and is immediately followed by a second theme in B minor: an expressive, "unending melody," first announced by oboe and clarinet and gradually taken up by the other instruments. There follows a gradual ascent to a climax, at which a third theme appears pianissimo, a B minor motif in the strings that quickly passes. All three themes are treated in the development section which is characterized by masterful contrapuntal effects and by constant transformation of the contrasting musical material. The recapitulation begins with an inversion of the main theme. The third theme returns, now more firmly delineated, then the second motif is heard in all its magnificence, followed by a mighty coda with its long organ point on E, and finally by a triumphant return of the glowing theme which crowns and ends the movement.

Low strings and Wagner tubas (used here by Bruckner for the first time in the concert hall) open the Adagio with a profound and serious C-sharp Minor theme, that already speaks of consolation and trust in God. The theme ends with a question, which is answered by a second subject, still more consolatory and peaceful. Bruckner's contrapuntal mastery is again apparent in the development of these two themes, alternating between despair and faith, sorrow and comfort, until in the recapitulation the first theme gains the upper hand and, now in C major, dispels all darkness and doubt. It was at this point that Bruckner is said to have received the message of Wagner's death. The actual elegy that now follows in the coda is again begun by the tubas, but above them is heard a horn melody reminiscent of the main theme of the first movement, with which the Adagio ends in a quiet, consoled, resigned mood.

The A minor Scherzo is dominated by a fast, flying figure in the strings and a signal-like trumpet theme above it. The development retains the dancing, whirling momentum of this movement. After the recapitulation follows the F major Trio, a lyrical, more contemplative contrast, rather similar to the Scherzo in construction, with a central section in which the theme is developed. The return of the fast, rushing Scherzo ends the movement.

Like the first movement, the Finale begins with the tremolos of the strings. The first violins have the energetic, forceful main theme, a transformation and idealization of the basic theme of the first movement. The second subject is a chorale-like theme. The third theme, powerfully set forth by the full orchestra, is clearly another version of the first subject of this movement. The extended development section is dominated by the first subject, and the second subject is even dropped from the recapitulation. After the elaborate return of the main theme follows the coda which harks back to the end of the first movement. With a mighty organ point on E, similar to the first movement, the basic theme of the whole work is once more given out in a spirit of triumph and transfiguration.

Klaus Wagner