

ABOUT THIS RECORDING -- A PERSONAL VIEW

This performance of the Loewe edition of Bruckner's Ninth Symphony, by the "Vienna Orchestra" under F. Charles Adler, is one of exceptional beauty. It has a spiritual quality which seems to result from an approach combining a remarkably patient pace with a carefulness of playing that one usually associates with chamber music. It might be that the conductor was making the most of a somewhat anemic orchestra, but, in any case, what is contained in these discs is a profoundly contemplative rendition of the score -- a rendition that invites a high order of mental participation on the part of the listener.

As for Loewe's emendations, the unprejudiced ear will find that they are not without considerable appeal. Comparing this version with the original is a bit like viewing the Matterhorn in the Spring and again in the Fall: the mountain is the same but the foliage is somewhat different. According to Bruckner biographer Werner Wolff (Anton Bruckner, Rustic Genius, E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1942), Max Auer "could not refrain from admiring the conductor's skill in revising the Ninth", and quotes him as saying "The rough Bruckner has become elegant through Loewe." Loewe made his emendations during the course of rehearsals in preparation for the symphony's première performance on February 11, 1903, and had them incorporated into the first edition of the score, which was published by Ludwig Doblinger in August of that same year.

Loewe was a master orchestrator -- one should make no mistake about that. Bruckner himself referred to him as "my Berlioz", and entrusted him with a number of tasks. The first edition of the Fourth Symphony was, for the most part, Loewe's work, and was done with Bruckner's approval and participation, although the absence of his signature on the engraver's manuscript has been interpreted as a withholding of total endorsement. Be that as it may, the printing proceeded with the composer's permission, and it seems likely that it was this approbation on Bruckner's part that led Loewe to presume a "license" to make similar changes in the Ninth, since the changes follow the same pattern as in the 1889 edition of the Fourth: e.g., more variety in instrumental textures -- accomplished through more doublings on the one hand and dramatic contrasts on the other (note the antiphonal effect between the winds and the strings in bars 505 to 508 of the first movement); a thorough re-writing of the tympani part, adding interest and drama at critical moments (note the endings of both the first and second movements), and a first and second ending for the Scherzo -- all of these being consistent with the emendations made for the Fourth Symphony. Some of the emendations were made to facilitate performance, such as taking the pizzicato eighth notes from the strings in the Scherzo and giving them to the woodwinds (which works quite well), but most were undoubtedly made to conform to Loewe's own orchestral sensibilities. While many of his emendations are indeed felicitous, a few seem ill-advised, notably the removal of the sustained dissonant woodwind chords that set the mood for the opening of the Scherzo, and the abrupt crescendo/diminuendo indications governing the chords and trumpet blasts in bars 17 to 24 of the Adagio, resulting in a curious "wowing" effect that undermines the solemn declamatory character of the passage. (This is scarcely noticeable in Adler's recording, but obvious in the broadcast performances by Hans Knappertsbusch that have come down to us on recordings). Most unfortunate is the melodramatic fpp (with a violent pizzicato note) at bar 207 of the Adagio immediately after the great climax: an ill-conceived intrusion that contradicts what should be the awesome silence of the moment. Other emendations are quite wonderful, however, such as the breathtakingly exquisite treatment of the second part of the Trio, this being the result of a slight reduction in tempo ("Etwas ruhiger"), not indicated in Bruckner's original, and a delicate re-touching of the instrumentation. (Such serenity may not have been part of Bruckner's conception, but it certainly is welcome!).

These first edition versions, prepared by Bruckner's devoted pupils, deserve to be heard from time to time, in part because they represent the way that the world first came to know these pieces, and also because they give us important insights, through dynamic and agogic indications in the score, as to the conductorial practices of Bruckner's day. There are other reasons, however. In the case of the Fourth and Fifth symphonies, many listeners find the stentorian brassiness of the original versions a bit too harsh, and their sustained intensity oppressive. This writer has personally witnessed negative responses to both of these works on the part of audience members, and even one critic, for precisely these reasons. The early editions, on the other hand, are smoother and more restrained in their use of the brass, and are probably more accessible to the average concert goer. This consideration alone should justify their occasional performance, particularly in the case of the Fourth, which is certainly an authentic Bruckner score.

Speaking personally, the two most beautiful performances of the Fourth that I ever heard were by the Philadelphia Orchestra in Carnegie Hall under Eugene Ormandy (not my favorite conductor, but curiously good with Bruckner) and by the New York Philharmonic in Avery Fisher Hall under Joseph Krips. In both performances, the audience was in the palm of the conductor's hand. Ormandy did the Nowak edition and Krips the Loewe. For reasons indicated above, it takes a world-class orchestra to put across the original version of the Fourth, and the robust sumptuousness of the Philadelphia, ^{succeeded} completely, with a richness that overcame any sense of harshness (also true in its recording). With respect to the Krips performance, however, the New York Philharmonic indeed played well, but it was more the felicitousness of the orchestration than the richness of the orchestra that made the performance so absorbing and compelling. I say this because, not long after that, I heard the same orchestra in the same hall, this time under Rafael Kubelik, perform the original version of the same symphony, and observed substantial numbers of people walking out during the finale, so uningratiating was the result. I cannot say that the orchestra played badly, but rather that the unrelieved intensity of the performance, instead of exciting the audience, led to a tonal monotony that people eventually found annoying. When one is engaged in conversation with someone who speaks very loudly, one is likely to become more aware of the loudness than of the substance of what is being said, and so it is with music.

Getting back to the Ninth, it is only fair to note that the problems cited above, relating to brassiness or sustained intensity, do not apply to Bruckner's original score of this piece. Indeed, beginning with the Sixth Symphony, these questions cease to be of serious concern. Loewe's extensive re-touching of this score was undoubtedly motivated by a desire to enhance the piece's reception in the music world, and he probably felt that his emendations revealed more clearly the beauties inherent in the music, and that they would have been approved by Bruckner, were he still alive, as had been the case with the Fourth Symphony.

That F. Charles Adler chose to record the Loewe edition undoubtedly relates to the fact that he and Loewe were personal friends. I have spoken with Hannah Adler, the conductor's now-deceased widow and the last of his wives, and, according to her, Loewe "stood up" (her words, meaning he was best man) for one of F. Charles' weddings back in the early 'twenties.

As to the recording, it was made in the early 'fifties by the Vienna Symphony (according to Hannah Adler). What is here presented is a virgin copy (played through once to check for defects) of the second production run (identifiable by the absence on side 2 of a separating band between the end of the first movement and the beginning of the Scherzo). I must apologize for all of the "snap, crackle and pop", but there is a lot of surface noise on all copies -- though not so much as to prevent one from enjoying the music. I hope that the listener will find this recording as absorbing as I do. Suffice to say, it is not for Bruckner purists -- but it is for people who appreciate beauty, and who might like to see the Matterhorn in the Autumn as well as in the Spring.



F. C. Adler

Photo Willinger Berlin Dorotheenstr.61.