



The Organ of St Florian

Anton Bruckner

IN another part of this book I have called Bruckner and César Franck 'twin-souled', a good enough figure in its context but not entirely apt. The two composers lived and worked at the same time, but they really had little in common except devotion to the organ and religion. Bruckner was very much the peasant by nature; Franck can never be thought of as a peasant. Along with his Walloon blood went a conscious culture. He was not naive and unworldly in Bruckner's way. The chromatic melody of Franck lapses often into sentimentality or into the sensuous. In Bruckner there is no weak or lush chromaticism, no sentimentality, certainly little or no sensuousness. Architecturally, Franck may be related to the Gothic, Bruckner to the Baroque, though the influence on Bruckner of baroque ornament and baroque insistence on detail has been greatly exaggerated. Is it possible to think of a baroque mountain?

Franck at his prayers is not without awareness of himself; he strikes an attitude, ready for portrayal in stained glass. Bruckner is never aware of himself; he is lost to the world in worship. He does not supplicate. He is God-intoxicated. And it is a wholesome intoxication. No fumes, no incense. There is no awareness of evil in Bruckner's music, nothing daemonic. His Catholicism is Austrian and as likeable and humane as Haydn's. When Bruckner is not praising God from a grateful heart, he is enjoying nature. A Bruckner scherzo is genial, rustic, windswept. There is no fresh air in César Franck, no clodhopping yokels, no

dreamy stretches of sunlit countryside. The two men were doubtless twin-souled in piety, but each wore his piety with a difference. Bruckner would probably have regarded César Franck as his superior socially and intellectually; and he would have been right. But Bruckner was the greater composer by far.

Bruckner's music is best approached by way of the Mass, which he used as a form of expression long before he composed the first of his symphonies. The Austrian *Landmesse* is devout and not terrorstricken, sublime by faith, never driven into it by fear of the devil. The duration and immense subdivisions in the outer and slow movements of a Bruckner symphony, the pauses, the beginnings-again, the fervent unisons – all these are features adapted from the Mass as Bruckner conceived and shaped it, influenced by memories in his ears of the organ resonance of St Florian.¹ He left his ninth and last symphony unfinished, the finale movement only sketched. It has become a custom to play the Bruckner Te Deum to round off performances of the Ninth Symphony; and the custom does no hurt to the mood and style of either. The Te Deum follows as naturally as if the symphony had suddenly but not unexpectedly broken into song, not a choring of the cherubim but of an earthly aspiring strong-lunged company of vocal Bruckners. The main formal characteristics are much the same in all the truly representative Bruckner symphonies, especially in the Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth and Ninth. Four movements, and each of the four movements except the scherzo serious, annunciatory in diction, unhurrying in tempo.

In a Bruckner first or final movement an accumulation of imitated figures or insistent broken-chords in sequence is piled up to a gigantic fanfare ending as abruptly as a finale of the mature Sibelius, but in the case of Sibelius the end is

¹ He was organist in the chapel of the monastery of St Florian.

unexpected, while with Bruckner we have some time given up hope that the end will come at all. Bruckner's orchestra is like an organ and choir mingled, magnified and changed into instrumental tone. There is little psychological difference, little difference of content or expression, in one Bruckner symphony from another, though deepening and more subtle thought-processes govern the later ones. Bruckner was a single-minded composer; his theme or text is always much the same. His immense output took the shape of Mass or symphony; his solitary string quintet is a deviation from type, and occasionally strains the chamber medium hard. Though an accomplished organist, Bruckner wrote no solos for the instrument. Also he wrote nothing in variation-form. He conceived in terms of contrasts of tone, with polyphonic and contrapuntal ingenuities keeping the texture varied, usually with a basso ostinato supporting the whole. The polyphony is vocally derived.

Bruckner does not seek God; he has found Him. He is content to praise God; then, his devotions over, he enjoys the *Heimat* of his scherzo, which he does heartily, not like Mahler, looking back nostalgically to a lost innocence and world of *Wunderhorn*. The classic roots of Bruckner are not German; his polyphony stems from Palestrina rather than from Bach. He was not in the German symphonic line; he was not, though an Austrian and a dweller in Vienna, a follower of Schubert. Despite certain first-movement technical and expository traits in his first movements which recall Beethoven, and despite a D minor adagio method similar to that of the slow movement of the 'Choral' Symphony, Bruckner is not Beethovenish in his view of music, or in his psychological make-up. He has neither Beethoven's range of imagination nor his tremendous smithy. There is no anvil in Bruckner, no hammer, no white-heat. Bruckner's music is sturdy, without protest or

rebelliousness. It is sure of itself even if it stumbles, which frequently it does. Every symphony of Bruckner is a mountain, moved very much by faith.

It is one of the ironies of musical history that Bruckner should have fallen among Wagnerians. They used him in the controversy with Brahms; they set him up in a high place, as they thought. They even altered his orchestration, making a Bruckner adagio sound like the 'Trauermarsch', and his first movement climaxes like the cohorts of Wotan entering Walhall. Varied nature herself could not make two men as unlike as Wagner and Bruckner in essential stuff. Bruckner, 'half God, half simpleton', as Mahler called him, the non-erotic (musically) Bruckner, never protean and always Anton – what has he the slightest in common with the composer of *Tristan*, *Parsifal*, the creator of Kundry, Brünnhilde, Siegfried, Hagen, Hans Sachs? Bruckner was drawn fervently to Wagner's music, nevertheless Wagner was his anti-Christ, if only he had known it!

II

The instrumental symphony came to consummation with Haydn and Mozart. Beethoven fertilized it with drama and humanity; and the denouement was achieved by power of heroic conception of man's destiny. Beethoven created what the Germans called the *Apotheosis Finale*. But from Beethoven the classical symphony branched away in two broad directions: Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms gave it the stamp and flavour of the *Mittel-Deutsch* bourgeoisie. After his first symphony, Brahms avoided the 'Apotheosis' finale and the heroic gesture; the finale of his fourth and last symphony is strictly a musical apotheosis. Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms each composed German music of the middle classes; and they observed the symphonic logic

of the great school in which they were nurtured. Schumann's adventurings with a connecting theme and a continuous procedure of tone from one movement to the next was in no way a flirtation with the symphonic-poem's illustrative purposes. Bruckner did not grow from this branch. With Schubert was born the Austrian symphony, not heroic or ethical but inspired by nature worship, with romantic implications. To the Schubert symphony Bruckner brought not a 'Menschlichkeit' feeling, not a call to the awakening if not embracing millions. He brought a religious note deeply felt, patient and trustful; and though it was a personal note, he expressed it without a hint of the egoistic attitude and romanticism. He was not a romantic; his Catholicism has no *Dies Irae*, no winding-sheets and no charnel houses. It is generally a gemütlich spiritual experience we are given by Bruckner, exalting us but never inflaming our minds with awful visions. Outside his own country, Bruckner has had a chequered posterity. No Italian could sit through music as untheatrical as a Bruckner symphony or a Bruckner Mass. No Frenchman could listen for long to music so little connected with the world of wit and women as Bruckner's. German-Austrian conductors have introduced Bruckner to America. In England he is gradually proving that he is not merely long-winded and platitudinous, though, as a fact, he is not infrequently both. The stumbling-block is, of course, the long extent of Bruckner's movements, portentous and discursive, the whole passing slowly and monumentally. Even in an opening allegro Bruckner is unhurried, static.

Of course, the duration of a Bruckner symphony is connected with the character and extent of the material treated, and to the way the mind of the composer works. It was an original mind. The simplicity of Bruckner has been overdone; it was a simplicity of nature, not of musical imagination. The argument and syntax, the unfolding and folding

of a Bruckner symphony asks for close and intent musical thinking; his logic is less formal than that of say Brahms. It is even a relaxation to attend to Brahms's compartmental exposition, development and recapitulation technique after following Bruckner along his labyrinthine ways. We are not able confidently to go through a Bruckner movement guided by the recognizable first-subject and second-subject finger-posts, each unmistakably marking the crossroads. A Bruckner 'subject' is usually a group of themes, two or three themes, the sequence of the group making it hard to separate one theme from another. Roughly, Bruckner's ground-plan of a first movement is this: Statement, A B C; development; A B C, A modulating into the recapitulation, as a climax not as a mechanical recall. Bruckner's enlargement of symphonic-form, his two- or three-theme groupings in expositions, which naturally demand space for development; his structure by a key-sequence very much his own; his comprehensive patient view; his sudden changes from loud to soft; his contrasts of full organ tone and solitary wood-wind echoes; his use of silence as a reinforcement of expression – all these are traits of the style that is the man. We should try to understand them and to realize that a redundancy here and there, an obvious device such as an inversion, dragged in to keep things going in a sticky moment, are inevitable characteristics endearing in time, like a greying hair, a stoop, a limp, even a stammer. These things don't go deep – and Bruckner has depths worth our while to plumb.

Not only is Bruckner at once known by his way of stating and developing his case; his tone is immediately recognizable, even a common chord or interval of a fifth. The tone is, as we have seen, sometimes very like an organ tone. The instruments are interchanged in the manner of the organist's registration. We can almost see Bruckner pulling out the

stops. To ears fresh to Bruckner, the abrupt silences may well imply that the structure is insecure, that Bruckner has lost the thread of his discourse. A silence in Bruckner is called in German an *Atempause*; a pause to take in breath. Bruckner himself said that when he wanted to say something especially significant it was necessary for him first of all to create a silence. An intake of breath! – inspiration literally. While Bruckner thus meditates and is still, we might bear in mind, if we are of the heathens, George Henry Lewes's story of the drying-up of Goethe in a speech; but Goethe was not embarrassed. He simply turned his mind's eye within himself and waited five minutes until his next idea occurred to him. The intensity of his meditation held his audience spellbound. So must it seem in the great silences in a Bruckner symphony. The conductor must see to it that during the tone-pause the rhythmic pulse can unmistakably be heard. In the chapel of St Florian, resonance sustained the tone when Bruckner cut off a great swell. When he composed for orchestra he still heard music in his sudden silences.

III

The Bruckner symphonies move along much the same track. Usually the beginning is a string tremolo, a sort of pedal. Then we hear a call, probably a brass descent of a fifth, a quintuple rhythm; Dr Redlich has called this call a 'signal'. Let us be picturesque and respond to it as a 'Fiat lux'. Out of the subterranean embryo the music emerges and germ-notes assume the groups, the whole propelled by ascending and descending scales, Jacob's ladders. The main episode ends in a full close. Then comes the counter group, and the contrast is occasionally disillusioning for a while. Wood-wind echoes of cadences already heard, while plucked strings mark time, suggest a

fall of temperature. Sir Thomas Beecham described his reactions to a Bruckner movement in pungent language: 'I counted six pregnancies and five miscarriages.' It needs an optimistic analysis of a Bruckner first movement to set out to persuade us that Bruckner's grip never faltered, even if the analysis should be as academically exact as one by Dr Redlich: 'The first movement [of the Ninth Symphony] represents even thematically the sum-total of Bruckner's D minor world of tragic expression. In subtlety of harmonization, exploitation of the relationship of the mediants, and also in the adventurous use of wide interval-skips ... all three completed movements surpass anything previously written by Bruckner. Harmonic teasers such as the famous initial chord of the scherzo, the Neapolitan dissonance in the concluding bar of Movement I, and the ecstatic shout by the horns in the ambit of a ninth, in the adagio ...' The point is the distinction, or lack of it, in the material handled. Bruckner's material frankly is frequently far from distinguished. Unisons, running scale-wise, detached cadences given fresh registration, persistent repetitions of fanfares — there is much of these reach-me-downs. A great long-spanned tune, self contained, is not common in Bruckner. A melody as immediately convincing, a heavenly visitation, such as the cantabile 3/4 string theme of the adagio of the Seventh Symphony, is scarce in Bruckner. Like all composers not capable of inventing long-spanned melodies, Bruckner is reduced to the last and great resort of polyphony and all the devices of inversions, augmentation and so forth. The thing hard to explain is that most times he asserts himself; genius makes good a shortage of talent.

It is easy while discussing Bruckner to fall into contradiction or apparent inconsistency. If we are walking on a mountainside we are likely to come across at least a few barren stretches leading nowhere, then the broad view

unfolds the wonderful vista. It happens like this as we traverse the range of Bruckner symphonies. I have just expressed the opinion that Bruckner was not a fruitful melodist; and the Fifth Symphony will support me here. But the adagio of the Eighth Symphony looms again before me, the most rapt, heartfelt, slow movement since the adagio of Beethoven's Ninth. But is this great movement compact really of melody, or is it not by a consummate art of cadence and echo, of beautiful harmonic contrast and interchange of the organ stops, that Bruckner erects a 'Heilige Halle' of tones calling to tones from the depths to the heights? The beginning of the movement has been likened to that of 'O sink hernieder' in the love duet of the second act of *Tristan und Isolde*; and there is momentarily the same hush, the same throb in the gently syncopated string harmonies. But if the passage is any relation at all to Tristan and Isolde it is one without sex. This music, plummet-sounding, is 'beyond these voices'; the throb turns to a spreading glow as the full orchestra becomes radiant, the sun on the mountain at dawn. We need the German language to describe the metamorphosis; 'das ganze Orchester in strahlenden A-dur in hohe Regionen empor-schwebt' (the quotation is from Werner Wolff's admirable study: *Anton Bruckner — Genie und Einfalt*). The main theme of this movement consists of two elements or germ-cells, and in the first statement of it opulent sweeps of the harp suspend the cadence. The reiterations are not mechanical now. If ever Orsino should have cried 'That strain again', it is in the course of this Adagio. But it isn't the food of earthly love; rather it is the love of the gods as they remember some existence on the lowly, friendly and passionate earth. Another contradiction which trips the commentator on Bruckner is the existence in his music, almost side by side, of the prosaic and the poetic. Prose — I mean good and noble

prose cast in long paragraphs – gives way to sensitive coloured measures of rich strings and horns evocative of distant fields – Elysian probably. Maybe these moments in Bruckner when he forgets his godhead and becomes an ordinary mortal genius are less metrical poetry than blank verse of potent imaginative voltage, as in the slow movement of the Eighth Symphony. The elaboration of this movement, its paragraphs and parentheses, its simple plastic generating motion, its absolute originality of thought and method, constitute one of the abiding beauties of nineteenth-century music.

The outer movements of the Eighth Symphony and the Scherzo are fine enough, but the Adagio inevitably stands as a lonely peak; self-contained perhaps, rather than lonely. The first movement, though, is an astonishing example of Bruckner's power to build mightily out of sequences, imitations, repeated short insistent note-groups, contrasts of weight and spareness, culminating as usual in a blazing fanfare reinforced by striding brass. The Scherzo, too, is a tour de force of rhythmical persistence; but the long maze of a trio is entirely unlike any other contrasting middle section ever given to a scherzo. The more we study Bruckner the more we should guard against confusing the man's simplicity of heart and intelligence with the musical instincts which led him into involutions of thought, always symphonic, compared with which the thinking of a Brahms, an Elgar, a Vaughan Williams, is direct and immediately made logically clear to the plainest mind. There was in Bruckner that subtlety of introspection and independence of explanatory verbal clauses that is often the mark of solitary and not sophisticated men.

From the Fifth to the Ninth Symphonies, Bruckner concentrated on the adagio as the structural and emotional culmination, leaving himself with little to do in the finale,

except make music. He seeks to link his finale to the whole by thematic connection, but after the tension of the adagio a sense of anticlimax sets in. It is a matter of opinion which of the Bruckner symphonies has the greatest or greater adagio; each is unparalleled since Beethoven for profound and varied introspection. As I say, I chose the adagio of the Eighth Symphony, but there is the poignant 'Vale' of the Ninth, the piercing beauty of the cry of the heart of the Sixth, with its pathetic oboes, the processional grandeur of the Seventh. Bruckner was an adagio man; his quick movements, we have seen, tend to suggest a congenital slowness of gait, physical and mental, temporarily speeded-up. The ruminations of Bruckner in these adagios inspire key-relationships unprecedented at the time of their composition. Never do they interpose between us and the raptness of the expression. They are not exploited demonstratively; they lift veil after veil on the deepening note of trust and the mystery of the spiritual. In a Bruckner adagio, clause is succeeded by sub-clause; the music turns inward. The argument is not easy to follow. Like religion and matrimony, Bruckner needs faith.

IV

Again we must not be too sure in our generalizations about Bruckner. He was a lonely man, as far as a man can be lonely having Bruckner's love of God; he lived a lonely life. As a composer he had no school, no ancestry and no successors. But though he pursued a single track, it was a mountain on which he meandered; consequently his view could be extensive enough. He is a very humane composer; his Catholicism does not breed a separating mysticism. He worships without ritual, incense or any hint of sacerdotalism. He has humours which because wit does not sharpen

any edge keep him perpetually likeable. No composer invites a more friendly response than Bruckner; even his recurrent prolixity is engaging, for the simple reason that he doesn't seem to care whether we are listening to him or not. His scherzi are 'frisks' and fatherly. Dr Johnson would enjoy them. He tries to dance with us. The tumult of his outer movements, the stride of brass and the grandeur of an orchestral great-swell, create the impression of pageantry, not a pageantry of pomp and circumstance (Bruckner's love of country never ran to Elgar's patriotism), but of gusto for the visible sensible world, mantle of invisible God. If his music is never erotic, it is not without a love of all creatures, love of Adam as well as of Eve, but in an Eden that has grown no sophisticated apple. If ever a composer was a good man it was Bruckner; the naivety of this expression suits the case.

We can also overdo the organist influence in Bruckner's technique. His orchestration is masterful, with a sure ear for instrumental character. His judgment of dynamics is seldom at fault. He opens the heart of wood-wind; his brass is majestic or stirringly triumphant in turn, never merely brilliant or spectacular. His writing for strings, especially lower strings, is beautifully nuanced and harmonized. The Bruckner tone is weighty on the whole; the suggestions of organ registration do not lead to any impurity or weakening of the Bruckner orchestral tissue, which is absolutely masculine. We can overdo, too, the controversy about original and revised editions of Bruckner. The core and essence of what Bruckner had to say to us is not crucially affected by the presence or absence of cymbal clashes or choirs of tubas. Even Bruckner's own revisions throughout his lifetime did not change fundamental stuff. A blasting operating on a mountainside leaves the face of the land more or less unchanged after a year or two. His material

contains nothing with a banal association. The simplest ingredient is untouched by the dross of the world. He remained apart from the romantic movement of his period and all its indulgences, histrionic or real. He opened no fresh paths, or was not aware of them if he himself did happen to wander along new paths. Here, maybe, lies his greatness, which no neglect can hurt. A mountain is none the worse if only a few, with aid of the right stamina and persistence, have climbed it.