

A Classics Club monthly publication of the FACTS ABOUT MUSIC

## THE MEN OF MUSIC

No. 33

ANTON BRUCKNER  
(1824-1896)

*Austrian composer*



It seems strange that Anton Bruckner, a simple, naive, solitary, and devout figure, his thoughts fixed on his Creator and eternity, should have aroused such feelings of hatred. Treated by his followers with almost reverential devotion, his detractors were utterly contemptuous of his achievements.

His ardent espousal of the cause of Wagner brought down the wrath of Eduard Hanslick, who went out of his way to ridicule the composer, even taunting him on his "Emperor Claudius head". Hanslick thought it ludicrous that Bruckner, steeped as he was in counterpoint and ecclesiastical lore, should be swept off his feet by Wagnerism, and considered he was leading a double life. The two sides of his nature—the formidable contrapuntist on the one hand, and the enthusiastic Wagnerian on the other—seemed incompatible.

A totally different view was held by Felix Weingartner, who wrote after Bruckner's death: "Think of him thus going along his way toward the goal he had set himself, in the absolute certainty of not being noticed and of attaining nothing but failure—and then compare him with our fashionable composers borne on by daily success and advertisement. . . . Then bow in homage to this man, great and pathetic in his naivete and his honesty. . . ."

Bruckner, the son of an indigent schoolmaster in Upper Austria, was born in 1824. On his father's death, he was sent to the Volksschule in the village of St. Florian, becoming a chorister in the Foundation of the Augustine monks. Taught the piano and organ by the organist and choirmaster, he also received violin lessons.

At the age of sixteen he went to a teachers' training college at Linz and later became a pupil teacher. The life of a village schoolmaster proved uncongenial and after a successful performance of his Mass in B flat minor at St. Florian, he decided to take up music as a career. His appointment as organist of Linz Cathedral was his way of escaping from the boredom of teaching.

While at Linz, Bruckner took the opportunity of visiting Vienna for a few weeks each year to continue studying counterpoint. He also studied modern composition and orchestration with Otto Kitzler, director of music at the theatre at Linz. Kitzler's performances of *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Tannhäuser* transformed the impressionable Bruckner into a fervent Wagnerian.

Bruckner was tremendously active during his stay at Linz and it was the production of his First Symphony in 1868 which changed his life. Through the good offices of Johann Herbeck, director of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna, he was appointed teacher of the organ and theory at the Conservatoire. Later, he became court organist and lectured at Vienna University.

A frequent visitor to Bayreuth, where he was well received by Wagner, Bruckner also undertook a journey to London, where his improvisatory gifts astonished his hearers. He gave five concerts at the Crystal Palace, in addition.

Apart from his teaching appointments, his life in the Austrian capital was largely devoted to creative work, but the success of his music was retarded by the hostility of the Viennese press, led by Hanslick. He had his champions, however, though it must be confessed they did him more harm than good, for he permitted them to carve up his symphonies and re-orchestrate them in a Wagnerian style.

The real Bruckner was unknown until 1932, when his works began to be published in their original form. It was then seen that his orchestration was the result of a natural intuition. He was, of course, a master of all the contrapuntal devices and made much use of them. The infirmities of old age prevented the completion of his Ninth Symphony, a work on which he was engaged on the day of his death.

His wishes were respected regarding the disposal of his remains, and he lies beneath the organ he loved so well, at St. Florian.

GORDON CARSTAIRS