

Producer Robert Simpon

INTRODUCTION TO THE 1887 VERSION OF BRUCKNER 8
by Deryck Cooke (broadcast of Sunday, September 2, 1973)

In 1885, the famous Wagner-conductor, Hermann Levi, directed a performance of Bruckner's Seventh Symphony, at which the composer was present and received a tremendous ovation. Bruckner, at the of sixty, was just beginning to taste recognition; and more seemed likely to follow, since Levi declared that from now on he would work for his acceptance as a great composer. The two men became firm friends, and the humble Bruckner referred to Levi as 'my artistic father'¹.

But two years later, in 1887, when Bruckner sent Levi his newly-completed Eighth Symphony, he received a violent shock: Levi didn't take to the work at all. Completely cast down by this unfavourable verdict from his 'artistic father',¹, Bruckner set to work on a revision of his score, which he completed in 1890: this is the version of the Eighth that we know today, either in the straight edition of Leopold Nowak, or in the edition of Robert Haas, who brought back one or two features of the original version.

What particular objections Levi had to the Eighth, if any, we don't know. It is, of course, a far more massive and complex work than the Seventh, which he so admired, and it seems most likely that he was just bewildered by it. But Bruckner felt obliged by Levi's negative reaction to recast the work considerably; and so his original 1887 version is different in many respects from the 1890 revision which we know today. It was never published or performed; but last April the International Bruckner Society issued the score and parts edited by Nowak and in a little while we shall hear the First world performance of it.

There are four important, large-scale differences from the revision, as well as a thousand-and-one differences in detail, which I haven't time to touch on. If you know the work well in the revision as I do, you'll continually be jolted by differences of melody, harmony, rhythm, and orchestration. This is, of course, because we do have the revision firmly in our heads to start with; but I think there can be little doubt that Levi's negative reaction to the original, even if it was not specific, was lucky for Bruckner in the long run: it impelled him to overhaul the work, and make it much finer. Indeed, the two scores provide a fascinating example of a great composer at work, continually improving on his first thoughts, both on the largest and the smallest scale.>

An example of a small-scale improvement occurs right at the beginning of the work. Bruckner's Eighth Symphony is a C minor symphony which begins out of the key, in B flat minor, before shifting up to the home key of C by the end of its first thematic phrase.



In the revision, this daring harmonic process is stabilised by a brief figure on the clarinet, at the end of that first phrase, which establishes the home key of C quite firmly:



Well, in the original version of the symphony, that clarinet phrase is simply missing:

1. TAPE: 1887 version; bars 1-10

(0.24)

One more example of a small-scale difference, before we pass on to consider the crucial large-scale ones. The second group of themes in the first movement contains this sequence on the woodwind:



Some twenty bars later this sequence returns powerfully on the ^{Trombones,} ~~trumpets~~ and in the original version it's, ^{practically} ~~practically~~ the same, except that the sequence moves up a third, instead of down.



But in the revision, the melodic line, ^{the harmony, and the rhythm are} altered too:



Here, as so often, to use Hans Keller's terminology, the original represents the background, the revision the foreground.

Well, now for the large-scale differences, and first I should mention the re-orchestration: apart from allotting certain lines to different instruments in the revision, Bruckner used triple woodwind as opposed to the duple woodwind of the original, and gave the four Wagner tubas a much ^{less} prominent role in the opening movement. The first large-scale difference in the music itself is the whole centre of the opening movement - the approach to the recapitulation, the recapitulation itself, and the restatement of the recapitulated opening theme. The whole process begins with a reference to the lyrical main theme of the second group:



This continues in sequence, but gathers tension by repeating the first phrase of five-notes, with rising modulations:



Now in the revision, this lands, surprisingly, on the chord of the dominant seventh in the home key of C, pianissimo:



A long working-up of tension begins, based on the five-note phrase; and the first two notes of the opening theme are repeated mysteriously in the bass, in C minor:

9.

This arouses our expectations that the recapitulation is imminent, and that it will, as all good recapitulations do, restore the home-key of the movement - in this case C minor - by bringing back the opening theme in full, in that key, and not in B flat minor, as at first. You remember that the opening theme began in B flat minor, out of the key.

But the bass suddenly begins to ascend ominously; I can only play the outline of the score:

10. *8 vas*

The C minor tonality has disappeared, and the bass arrives on the note F. This is the dominant of B flat minor; and the working-up passage continues, ^{melodically} a semitone higher now, in that key, more powerfully - obviously in its final stage:

11.

And so, the recapitulation arrives in B flat minor, with a fortissimo statement of the opening theme's first phrase, in that key, as at first, and not in the home key of C minor. This is the climactic duel between the two keys, with the defeat going to C minor: let's hear this whole passage from the revision on the orchestra now - one of Bruckner's great strokes of genius.

And so, after that massive threefold recapitulation of the opening first phrase, the music eventually reaches the home key of C minor, but with a feeling of discouragement, because the recapitulation - the main centre of the movement, which normally restores the main theme in the home key - has been out of the main key, as the beginning was.

The whole basis of that tremendous passage is the conflict of the two keys - the feint at a recapitulation in the home key of C minor and the clouding over of that tonality, and the eventual emergence of a recapitulation in B flat minor. But this is completely missing in the original version of the symphony, which is incoherent from the tonal point of view. The whole passage begins exactly the same, with the reference to the lyrical main theme of the second group, in the same key; but the rising modulations lead, not to the unexpected dominant seventh of C but a semitone higher, to the not at all unexpected dominant seventh of D flat, a key which anyway has no connection with the basic argument of the movement.

The modulations are in any case surer in the revision, leading to the dominant seventh of C logically, through melodic whole-tone steps - D flat, E flat, F.



In the original version, the harmony is less pure, less exact: the modulations move melodically to the dominant seventh of D flat, not by whole tones, but by a semitone and a minor third - D natural, E flat, G flat.



And now, since the implication is the key of D flat, and not C, the tonal argument has lost its way. And especially since the working-up passage in D flat -

is at the same pitch as the eventual B flat minor approach to the recapitulation:

This ~~can't match~~ ^{can't match} the dynamic rise in pitch of a semitone, as in the revision:

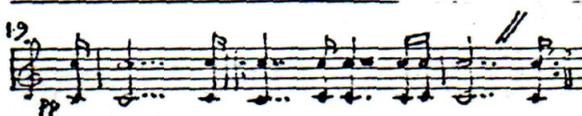
And although the bass ascends, between the two, as in the revision, it ascends more sluggishly; and the melodic line loses its impetus, by dropping the inexorable five-note figure for a four-note one when the ascent begins. Again, I can only play the outline of the score.

Here's the whole passage from the original version on the orchestra: I think you'll find that it's sadly inferior to the passage which from the revised version/we've just heard: the threefold recapitulation of the opening theme's first phrase is essentially the same, but the approach to it isn't properly thought out.

In both versions of the symphony, this is the thematic recapitulation - a fortissimo threefold statement of the opening theme's first phrase in B flat minor, leading to C minor. And in both versions it's soon followed by a tonal recapitulation - a full statement of the whole opening theme in the home key of C minor. In the revision, the music between these two points is masterly. You remember we left the music of the revision with the flute trailing disconsolately downwards in C minor:



Against this background, pianissimo trumpets play the rhythm of the opening theme on a monotone of C -



and a swirling passage follows, out of which the tonal recapitulation emerges - the full statement of the whole opening theme in the home key of C minor. But this recapitulation is disguised: the oboe certainly begins the theme at the C minor pitch, but casually, almost unnoticeably, while the flute and the high strings, pianissimo, are in the middle of playing mysterious harmonies in other keys. Bruckner found it best, in the revision, to make little of this moment: he decided to save up the fortissimo statement of the opening theme in its home key until near the end of the finale. Here's the passage from the revision now, on the orchestra; I'll speak over the record, to indicate the unobtrusive entry of the oboe with the C minor recapitulation of the opening theme.

4. GRAMS: ST 722, side 1, continue (2.00)
(Haas, bars 251-303)
(speak over music, at bars 281-2: 'tonal recapitulation on the C

In the original version, one feels that Bruckner is rather at a loss to deal with this situation. After the threefold recapitulation of the opening theme's first phrase, he continues immediately with two further statements of it, pianissimo, which are surely redundant; and only after this does he introduce the trumpets playing the rhythm of the opening theme on a monotone of C. Then a quite different and less effective swirling passage leads to the tonal recapitulation - the full statement of the opening key in C minor - which is not disguised at all. It's pianissimo, admittedly, but it's in the cellos and basses, as it was at first; and its entry is advertised by preceding it with six statements of its first two notes, as in the approach to the recapitulation, which are again redundant. Here's the passage from the original version now, on the orchestra.

5. TAPE: 1887 version, bars 259-314 (2.00)

One point I should make is that in revising these passages, Bruckner shortened them a little: the revision has six bars less in the first passage, and three less in the second. But where he lost most of the thirty-six bars that disappeared from this movement was at the very end of it, by a very bold stroke indeed: he cut out the last thirty fortissimo bars of the movement entirely, and replaced them with four new bars, making the movement end quietly.

The Eighth, as we know it today, in the revision, is the only symphony of his in which the first movement doesn't end with a triumphant blaze of sound. It ends tragically, with whispered references to a figure of its opening theme:

6. GRAMS: ST 722, Side 1, last half-minute (0.30)
(Haas, bar 405 to end)

But in the original, this ^{closing} passage, left appropriately open, is followed by a bar's pause, and then by thirty bars of fortissimo. These are based on a double augmentation of the opening theme's first phrase, in its original form, leading from B flat minor, now harmonised as G flat major, to C major. This is a truly magnificent passage - just as impressive an ending to the movement, in its way, as the pianissimo one we have in the revision. Bruckner probably removed it because he felt it forestalled the blazing C major ending of the whole symphony; but it's a pity that it had to go. I won't play it for you now, because you can't miss it in the performance which will follow.

I won't play you any of the Scherzo, either, because it's essentially the same music in both versions. The chief differences are that the original is sixteen bars longer; it shows Bruckner even more obsessed - too obsessed - with his main theme; it lacks some of the delightful detail of the revision; and there are one or two startling harmonic weaknesses, especially one descending sequence of chords that sets my ears on edge every time I hear it.

But we shall have to hear the Trio, because in the original it has a quite different opening theme. Let's listen to the first section of the Trio immediately, as we know it from the revised version. Note that halfway through, at the entry of the full orchestra fortissimo, the second theme begins; also note, during this, the triplet figures given to the trumpets, and in the quiet closing bars, the magical effect of harp and legato horns:

7. GRAMS: ST 772, side 2, beginning of central quiet passage (1.52)
(Haas, bars 1-44)

In this revised version
~~Bruckner only~~ ^{altered} the second theme in detail: in the original it's four bars longer, the trumpets have duplet figures instead of triplets, the horns are staccato, and the harp is not there at all. But the first theme is completely different: the bar-lengths and the general drift of the tonality is the same, but the actual tune is not such a fine one. Still, it's nice to hear a Bruckner tune that you've never heard before, and this one is beginning to grow on me.

8. TAPE: 1887 version, bars 1-48 (2.06)

There are other ^{differences} ~~differences~~ in the second part of the Trio, but we must pass on to the Adagio now, in which another of the large-scale changes is to be found. There are plenty of small-scale ones too, but I'll concentrate on the climax of the movement. I should say, to start with, that in the original version, the harp is not missing, as it is in the Trio of the Scherzo; and the climax is further enhanced by a piccolo - which Bruckner never used in his other symphonies, and which disappeared in the revision - and by ^{six} ~~four~~ cymbal clashes, which in the revision he reduced to two.

Everyone who knows Bruckner's Eighth well recognises with a thrill of expectation a certain moment in the Adagio when the movement begins to move towards its climax, which is one of the greatest in all music. This is the moment I mean:



Let's hear this whole passage now, in the revised version. Note, as the climax draws near, the excitement of the ascending brass chords; the tremendous tension of the two bars of preparation on a German sixth, till the movement seems ready to burst, and the sudden splendour as the movement's great fanfare-theme bursts in in E flat major, a tone higher than the movement's home key. And note also, when the climax is over, how the strings enter, and continue where the fanfare-theme broke off.

9. GRAMS: ALP 2054, side 3, beyond halfway (2.40)
(Haas, bars 221-256)

In the original version, that same climax on the fanfare-theme arrives, not in E flat major, but in C major; again Bruckner must have changed it so as not to anticipate the fortissimo C major ending of the whole symphony. The passage also begins the same, but between the beginning and the climax, the music is entirely different, four bars longer, and much inferior. At one point it brings in the fanfare-theme fortissimo, and develops it, thereby much reducing its effect at the climax; also, there are no rising brass chords, and no tense German sixth preparation at the last moment.

The one thing that is impressive is the strings' continuation after the climax - the subtle way their phrase restores the key, from a much more far-away tonality. By changing the key of the climax from C to E flat, Bruckner made it much easier for this phrase to provide a natural continuation.

Here's the passage, then, in the original version.

10. TAPE: 1887 version, bars 237-276 (2.53)

When we come to the finale, we find that Bruckner, in the revision, made no large-scale changes, but only a lot of small-scale ones: in fact, whereas he wrote out the first three movements again, producing new scores, he retained the original score of the finale, revising it by crossing out, adding, and pasting over. He made it 62 bars shorter, but Robert Haas, in his edition of the revision, restored thirty-eight of these bars, as he restored ten of the thirty-eight bars lost in the Adagio, and rightly so, I think. These were cases where Bruckner didn't recompose the music more tautly, but took a blue pencil and simply crossed out a complete passage: he undoubtedly did so under the influence of Josef Schalk, who worked with him on the revision, and is known to have advocated such cuts.

In the finale, the most striking small-scale differences occur in the coda. At the pianissimo beginning of the coda, the original contains ^{some} brass lines which were deleted in the revision; and at the fortissimo conclusion, the symphony doesn't end with a mighty orchestral unison, as the revision does. The revision, ^{in outline,} ends like this:



But the original just stops:



But the most important change was that, just before the final fortissimo blaze, the original version has eight bars of pianissimo trumpet fanfares - a most beautiful and original piece of scoring - which disappeared in the revision. This is one of the features that Bruckner could perhaps have retained with benefit. Anyway, here's the end of the symphony ^{now,} in the original version.