

When Bruckner died in 1896, aged seventy-two, he left his Ninth Symphony unfinished. The first three movements were complete, but the finale was only a mass of disconnected sketches. Sensing that he might never complete the work, he thought of using his *Te Deum* as a choral finale; but this was a counsel of despair, since the *Te Deum* is in C, and has no organic connection with the symphony. Yet the three-movement form of the Ninth is strangely satisfying; and strangely appropriate, too, in a symphony dedicated 'to my dear God', in that Bruckner carried his ideas for its consummation with him into eternity, and took his musical leave of life in the form of which he was such a supreme master, the symphonic *Adagio*.

Most of Bruckner's symphonies were first published in editions which misrepresented his intentions, containing alterations made by pupils or colleagues, or by Bruckner himself at their persuasion. The Ninth is the worst case: the first printed score of 1903 contained unwarranted changes in the form, harmony, and orchestration, made by the conductor Ferdinand Löwe after Bruckner's death. Although this was the form in which the symphony made its first contact with audiences, today it is ignored, and we always hear (as on this record) Bruckner's own score, which was published by the Bruckner Society in 1934. The orchestra is a normal one, with triple woodwind, except that there are eight horns, four of which, in the *Adagio*, take over Wagner tubas.

The Ninth is at once the most profoundly moving of Bruckner's symphonies and one of the most advanced works of its period, in its exploration of unusual tonality, harmony, and dissonance. Into the vast cathedral-like architecture of Bruckner's symphonic form there intruded at last something of the disturbing emotionalism of the late romantics. But this emotionalism was translated into Brucknerian terms, as the intense desire of a deeply religious man, nearing the end of his life, for union with his Creator. There is turmoil, perplexity and pain in this music; but at the heart of it stands Bruckner's still unshaken faith, which eventually finds the peace it is seeking, in the final bars of the *Adagio*.

The first movement is extraordinarily far-ranging in form, even for Bruckner, and transforms the traditional form into something entirely individual and unique. It presents straight away two strongly contrasted themes: a dark, brooding horn-motive, and, following immediately, a blazing fanfare, also for the horns. Then the violins work up a new figure in a long, tense crescendo, which erupts into a great fateful octave-theme for the whole orchestra in massive unison.

From the traditional viewpoint, this opening passage represents the familiar procedure of (a) an introduction, leading to (b) the first main theme of the movement proper; but from the Brucknerian viewpoint, it stands as a single entity in itself, a 'first group' of themes, opening the movement without introduction. The octave-theme does not lead to anything further, as it would do if it were a 'first main theme'; being the final theme of the first group, it is simply followed by a dying-away passage which comes to a halt.

The second group follows, bringing a complete contrast. A gently-flowing string paragraph, full of inward yearning, reaches a climax with a broad, passionate violin melody, and then itself returns to round off the whole period. Soon, quiet woodwind phrases, against shimmering strings, foreshadow the third group, which brings another complete contrast: it materializes as a mysterious, rocking unison theme, which also encloses within itself a broad violin melody. After this third group, the exposition ends with soft horn-calls clouded with a strange haze of dissonance.

Such is the wealth and complexity of the material that Bruckner lays down as the basis of his first movement; but once the listener has it all firmly in his head, what follows—beginning with a return to the opening horn-motive—is easy

to grasp. Nevertheless, it should not be expected to follow the orthodox plan of (a) a development of the original material, followed by (b) a full restatement of it. As often with Haydn, this simple procedure gives way to the more subtle one of continuous development and restatement in one. The movement, which is a kind of unavailing struggle of light against darkness, ends tragically, with the blazing horn-fanfare from the opening now in dissonant conflict (on the trumpets) with the rest of the orchestra.

The other two movements are less complex in form, though more adventurous in style. The menacing demonic scherzo and its wierdly flickering trio show Bruckner at his most amazingly original, in melody, harmony and orchestration alike. Most amazing of all, perhaps, is the scherzo's introductory passage: the eerie woodwind harmonies, with a held trumpet note piercing through them and pizzicato string arpeggios bounding above and beneath—this was completely new and revolutionary in 1896, and still sounds fantastically evocative today.

The *Adagio*, as always with Bruckner, alternates two large and widely contrasted paragraphs. The first opens with the farthest harmonic exploration he ever made: its angular main violin theme is supported by strange harmonies deriving from Wagner's *Tristan*, played by the solemn Wagner tubas, though the result is a new music altogether, full of an anguished spiritual longing peculiar to Bruckner. This first paragraph culminates in a visionary climax with fortissimo brass fanfares, and yields to the second—a broadly flowing string theme of a profoundly heart-easing character. The first paragraph returns, and is developed at length; then the second returns, to bring the culmination of the movement. The string theme, transfigured in Bruckner's inimitable way with swirling string figurations over a pizzicato bass, works up deliberately to a tremendous climax. Normally, the outcome would be a blaze of glory, but here it is pure tragedy. The anguished opening theme intrudes threateningly, fortissimo, and creates grinding harmonies which break off on a ferocious discord made up of all the notes of the minor scale played simultaneously. After an echoing silence, the quieter elements of the movement take over and carry the movement to a serene conclusion, mingling resignation with calm contentment.

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