

Bruckner's final Finale

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Introduction

Most Bruckner symphonies exist in more than one version (up to five for Symphony 4). One would think that his last symphony (numbered 9) could only exist in one version, since he died before completing it. However, there exist more versions of it than of any other (at least 15 on one website:

<https://www.abruckner.com/discography/symphonyno9indmino/>), owing to attempts to complete the final movement by many composers. Why he did not complete it, started as it was nine years before his death upon completion of the 8th, is a distressing tale reflecting the status of one man (Hermann Levi), the insecurity of another (Anton Bruckner himself) and the incompetence of two others (the Schalk brothers). Bruckner submitted the just-completed 8th to Herman Levi, who had successfully conducted the 7th, but he found it incomprehensible and suggested revisions. Today, the holding of any person in such deferential awe is itself incomprehensible; a work rejected by one conductor would be eagerly taken up by another. Bruckner's initial depression was followed by attempts to revise not only the queried 8th, but also the 1st, 3rd and 4th: an effort that delayed his attempts to finish the 9th. While three movements were completed within three years, ill health slowed Bruckner's progress on the Finale, many folios of which were taken from his rooms by souvenir hunters after his death, and thus were separated from each other and widely scattered or lost. Joseph Schalk, Bruckner's pupil, failed to undertake the task entrusted to him of correlating the remaining Finale folios, which his brother Franz then kept, despite Bruckner's Testament that they belong to the Court Library (now the Austrian National Library).

There is much debate on whether the widely performed, 'headless torso' three-movement, pure Bruckner, form is sufficient as his final testament, and whether completing the Finale should even be attempted. As Bruckner was definitely writing a four-movement symphony; suggested that his Te Deum could be used as a final movement, should he not live to complete it; knew precisely what he was going to include in it, from playing a piano version of it to his doctor Richard Heller; and left most of it in a playable [and evidently reconstructable] form; my view is that completing it would be a greater act of homage to the man and his vision than of not doing so. I have compared 12 of these versions (see Table below).

Methods

Making valid comparisons of any versions of music is challenging, as this should require the change of only one variable a time (here, the composer/editor/reviser). However, this tenet is compromised in a comparison of the different Bruckner 9th Finales by many other variables that can affect what is heard. Except for the Profil recordings, each version was recorded by a different orchestra; under a different conductor; in a different recording venue with different acoustics; by a different recording company with different equipment. Although inter-listener bias was removed by my being the only one, music appreciation is also affected by other factors, such as the time of day and one's mood. The latter is important, because when listening to these

Bruckner's Ninth I am acutely aware of my displeasure at Levi, whose response has prevented us from hearing what would have been the composer's own Finale; of my empathy for the composer's situation on his last day; and of my admiration for the composers who have attempted to fill in the gaps in this great piece. In an attempt to reduce such psychological biases, I always listened in the early afternoon after a meal, and immediately following consumption of two squares of at least 70% chocolate and a double espresso, in an attempt to bring me to the same state of stimulated satiety during assessment.

I have always been doubtful about that starkly dissonant chord; how could a composer of such pleasant music write such an obvious 'error'? Was it a sign of a frail man with a failing mind? Yet this point has never been raised by trained musicians, some of whom even consider it a herald of musical trends to come. As the rest of the music does not disappoint, it must reflect a deliberate attempt by Bruckner to conjure up musically his inner demons (fear of not completing his masterpiece for his 'beloved Lord?'), but also of his vision of overcoming them towards the end of the piece. As a non-musician I was unable to assess accurately the musical structure (which bars were Bruckner's or the completer's; how the pieces were stitched into existing bars, etc.), and thus was more concerned with impression of the overall flow of the music and its effect on me. In assessing the various versions I therefore considered as most satisfying those capable of invoking his emotions of pain and ecstasy, and the extent of their eliciting a similar response (including weeping) in me.

I listened initially to the versions in chronological order, but only two discs per session, to avoid listening fatigue. The final movements were never heard alone, but in sequence after the previous three, to accommodate myself to the acoustics of the recordings. After making a preliminary ranking, I reworked my way through the list, listening to two adjacent versions (in the reverse order if previously heard together) to confirm or change my initial assessment. All discs were played on a Pioneer LX-500 universal disc player and listened to on Sennheiser HD820 circumaural, closed-back headphones, driven by a Lehmann Linear headphone amplifier.

Results

Nine composers have attempted to complete Bruckner's Ninth symphony; they are (initials in alphabetical order) Benjamin-Gunnar Cohrs (BC), William Carragan (WC), Nors S Josephson (NJ), Sebastien Letocart (SL), Giuseppe Mazzuca (GM), Peter Jan Marthé (PM), John A Philips (JP), Gerd Schaller (GS) and Nicola Samale (NS). Some worked alone (WC, NJ, SL, PM, GS), others together in various combinations (NS/GM, NS/JP/BC/GM). Some provide details of the changes made (NS/JP/BC/GM, SL, GS), others a general idea of their thought processes (WC, NJ, PM). Some produced one version (NJ 1992; PM 2006; SL 2008), others have made several revisions (WC 1983, 2003, 2006, 2010; GS 2015, 2018; NS/GM 1984, 1988; NS/JP/BC/GM 1992, 1996, 2005, 2008, 2012).

Listening to these pieces was easy (and pleasant!) but making the comparisons was difficult. The enjoyment of a piece of music, no matter how good, can also be reduced by a poor quality recording. The results in the Table below show that I preferred an NS/JP/BC/GM attempt, with NJ second. I preferred the NS/JP/BC/GM versions to those of WS and GS, and the later versions of both WC and GS, but the penultimate version of NS/JP/BC/GM. I found both SL's and PM's interesting, but the latter was more PM than AB.

Conclusions

If there is merit in making a comparison of the different 'complete' symphonies, should I be the one doing it? As a non-musician, I belong to the oft-maligned 'I don't know much about music, but I know what I like' brigade; but I feel that I know something of the value of music, since as a research scientist I regularly found that the stress from the unrelenting concentration required during the work on weekdays, weekends and evenings could be alleviated by a similar intense concentration on 'Classical/Romantic' music. I certainly can do no worse than professional reviewers whose assessment of the same Bruckner Symphony (No. 3 by Nelsons on DGG) can be either great praise (http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2017/Jun/Bruckner_sy3_4797208_JQ.htm) or excoriation (<https://www.classicstoday.com/review/cd-hell-nelsons-insults-bruckner/?search=1>)!

Others may well disagree with this ranking; even I found each version to be satisfying when heard on its own for the first time upon arrival. Any of the recordings of the complete symphony in the top half of my list will probably be an acceptable addition for those who have as yet only experienced the three-movement version.

Comparison of the Finales of completed versions of Bruckner Symphony No. 9 in D Minor

Rank	Composer(s)	Revision	Conductor	Orchestra	Record Label	CD number
1	NS/JP/GC/GM	2008	Layer, Friedemann	National Theater Orch./Mannheim	Musikalische Akademie	2008
2	NJ	1992	Gibbons, John	Aarhus Symphony Orch.	Danacord	CD DAD OCD 754
3	NS/JP/GC/GM	1992	Eichhorn, Kurt	Bruckner Orchestra Linz	Camerata	CMCD 15002
4	WC	2010	Schaller, Gerd	Philharmonie Festiva	Profil	CD PH11028
5	NS/JP/GC/GM	1996	Wildner, Johannes	Neue Philharmonic Orch./Westfalen	Naxos	8.555933/34
6	GS	2018	Schaller, Gerd	Philharmonie Festiva	Profil	CD PH18030
7	NS/GM	1984	Inbal, Eliahu	Radio Symphony Orchestra Frankfurt	Telarc	2561 68022-8
8	NS/JP/BC/GM	2012	Rattle, Simon	Berlin Philharmonic Orch.	EMI	CD 9 52969 2
9	WC	1983	Talmi, Yoav	Oslo Philharmonic Orch.	Chandos	CD 8468/9
10	SL	2008	Couton, Nicolas	MAV Symphony Orch.	Abruckner.com	BSVD-0104
11	GS	2015	Schaller, Gerd	Philharmonie Festiva	Profil	CD PH16089
12	PM	2006	Marthé, Peter Jan	European Philharmonic Orch.	Preiser	CD PR 90728