

Anton Bruckner

"It is no common mortal who speaks to us in this music."

LUDWIG SPEIDEL

BORN: Ansfelden, Austria, September 4, 1824.

DIED: Vienna, October 11, 1896.

MAJOR WORKS: *Chamber Music*—String Quintet in F major; *Choral Music*—3 Masses; Requiem in D minor; Te Deum; Ave Marias, cantatas, male choruses, hymns, offertories, and psalms. *Orchestral Music*—9 symphonies (the ninth unfinished); Overture in G minor.

HIS LIFE

A single star guided the course of Bruckner's life: Richard Wagner. There was something decidedly neurotic about the younger man's adoration and reverence for the master. Before he had met Wagner he would stare for hours at him in silent adoration without having the courage to approach him. On first meeting him, Bruckner insisted on remaining in an erect, standing position throughout a long interview; to sit in the august presence of his personal god was unthinkable. After hearing *Parsifal* he fell on his knees before Wagner and exclaimed, "Master—I worship you." And after Wagner's death he never visited Bayreuth without paying attendance at Wagner's grave and weeping.

Wagner was the source of his creative strength, his inspiration, the touchstone of his own life and efforts. Wagner, the cause of his exaltation was also to be—though indirectly—the reason for his greatest

suffering. The savage and frequently irresponsible battles fought in the name of Wagner in Vienna often victimized the innocent. Because Bruckner had identified himself so unmistakably with the Wagnerian cause, he became the object for the most violent attacks on the part of those powerful forces in Vienna bent on destroying Wagner and Wagnerism. Eventually the triumph of Wagner in Vienna was complete, creating an atmosphere in which Bruckner could be appraised without venom or prejudice; and, by the same token, eventually Bruckner came into his own.

He stemmed from a family of humble schoolteachers. It was for the teaching profession that he was trained, though an exceptional talent for music and a pronounced distaste for all other subjects were evident in him from childhood. He was playing the violin and composing tunes when he was only four. His talent impressed his cousin, who began teaching him to play the organ, together with composition and theory. In his thirteenth year, on the death of his father, Bruckner was sent to the secular music school of St. Florian as choirboy. There, for a period of four years, he received an intensive musical training. The original plan to make him a schoolteacher was not abandoned. After leaving St. Florian in 1840, Bruckner took a ten-month course at the teachers' preparatory school in Linz. He assumed his first teaching position in the mountain village of Windhaag; his salary was about a dollar a month, and his duties included helping out in the fields in his spare time. He was not a very good teacher and he was negligent about his duties in the fields. Before long he was transferred to a smaller school, in nearby Kornsdorf.

Having passed all the examinations for a teaching license, Bruckner was recalled to St. Florian in 1845 to join the faculty of the music school. His official duties did not interfere with musical activity. He played the organ unceasingly, became a virtuoso of the first order, and developed a gift at improvisation which was later to command the admiration, and sometimes even the awe, of Europe's leading musicians. He also started composing in earnest, producing his first large and ambitious work, the Requiem in D minor, which was performed at St. Florian's on March 13, 1849.

By 1853 he had decided irrevocably to give up teaching for music. He settled in Vienna and began to study counterpoint with Simon Sechter. He was so conscientious in his application to study (for one lesson he arrived with a dozen notebooks filled with exercises) that

Sechter had to warn him not to overtax himself. "I never had a more serious pupil than you," the teacher added. Bruckner also worked hard on harmony, fugue, and thorough bass. At last he felt ready to submit to the severest trial a Viennese musician of that period could face: a test conducted by a commission comprising five outstanding musicians. The commission submitted to him a theme on which he improvised with such skill and inventiveness that Johann Herbeck, one of the judges, exclaimed, "He knows more than all of us together."

In 1856 Bruckner became organist at the Linz Cathedral, a post he held for a dozen years. While he lived in Linz he maintained contact with Vienna by regular visits. In 1860 he was appointed musical director of a Viennese choral society, with which organization he made his Vienna bow as a composer. On May 12, 1861, he directed the *première* of his *Ave Maria*, for seven-part chorus.

The year of 1863 was decisive in Bruckner's life. It was then that he heard for the first time a performance of a Wagnerian opera, *Tannhäuser*. Suddenly he became dissatisfied with his own work and sought the new expression and the drama he had encountered in Wagner's music. He did not abandon the writing of church music, but he now brought to it a new independence, a new romanticism, as well as traces of Wagnerian mannerisms. The first such work was the Mass in D major, which was introduced at the Linz Cathedral on November 20, 1864.

In 1865 he was one of the pilgrims to head for Munich to attend the world *première* of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. With that experience his worship of Wagner became complete. He now met Wagner personally; one can hardly guess what inner conflict took place before he could bring himself face to face with the master! Timidly he showed Wagner the sketches of a first symphony. Wagner appeared to be impressed with both the symphony and the hero worship, and treated Bruckner with genuine warmth of feeling. Bruckner was so touched that he found it difficult to suppress tears of gratitude.

When he was appointed professor of counterpoint and organ at the Vienna Conservatory, in 1868, Bruckner made a permanent home for himself in the Austrian capital. For the rest of his life he was to occupy the some small three-room apartment, attended to by his conscientious maid, Kathi. Ever concerned over her master, she tried to keep him safe from visitors when she knew he was working; and

she tried solicitously to nag him into doing his work in the mornings and reserving the night for sleep.

His first few years in Vienna formed a period of trial and humiliation. Attempts to get a performance for his Mass in F minor proved futile, on the grounds that it was "unsingable." He was more fortunate with the Symphony No. 1 in C minor, in that it was accepted for performance in Linz on May 9, 1868, but neither the audience nor the critics liked it. He had to pay eight months of his salary to hire the Vienna Philharmonic to play his long-neglected Mass in F minor in 1872, and almost a year's salary for a performance of his Symphony No. 2 in C minor in 1873. Despite these sacrifices the concerts did little to enhance his reputation. "I have been compelled to borrow money over and over again or accept the alternative of starvation," he complained in one of his letters.

With his Symphony No. 3 in D minor, which he dedicated to Wagner, Bruckner began to feel the full brunt of Viennese hostility. The anti-Wagner forces now found a logical victim on which to concentrate their attacks. The most indefatigable attacker was Vienna's powerful critic Eduard Hanslick, who described Bruckner's Second Symphony as "insatiable rhetoric." A leading official of the Conservatory solicitously advised Bruckner to throw his symphonies in "a trash basket" and to turn his talent to making piano arrangements! The Third Symphony, accepted by the Vienna Philharmonic, was discarded after a single rehearsal; all the musicians of the orchestra, with a single exception, were opposed to playing the work.

Later, on December 16, 1877, when the Third Symphony was performed in Vienna, it had to be conducted by the composer himself, as no one else wanted to do it. The directors of the Conservatory burst into audible laughter as the music was being played. Others in the audience began expressing their disapproval with loud jeers. Before long, so many people in the audience had left the auditorium in indignation that by the time the symphony was over there were only a handful left. When, after the concluding chord, Bruckner turned around to accept the applause, he saw, to his bewilderment, that there were only twenty-five people left in the large auditorium—seven of them in the parterre. He remained rooted to his platform in a daze, the tears streaming down his cheeks. As he stood there the musicians discreetly made their withdrawal from the stage. A few of the younger men ran up to him, one of them Gustav Mahler,

to express their admiration. But Bruckner remained frozen in his place. At last he brushed aside his admirers with the brusque remark, in his peculiar Austrian dialect, "*Lasst mi aus, die Leut woll'n nix von mir wissen*"—"Let me go. The people don't want to know anything of me."

If he was attacked, it was not only because of his music and his allegiance to Wagner. There was something both ludicrous and revolting about him physically. His face was too large for the body, and he wore clothes absurdly too large for the frame. As he walked in the streets of Vienna—his ugly face tense, his eyes gleaming—he appeared almost a caricature of an artist or a mystic. He was the peasant in the great city, and he made no effort to disguise it, never abandoning his small-town wardrobe or his rural accent. Awkward and boorish in social behavior, naïve as a child, he often encouraged intolerant gibes. But even worse were his sickly humility, his perpetual self-debasement, his obsequiousness. He was always bowing and scraping—even to inferiors. A kind word or a generous act from others evoked from him a gratitude so effusive or tearful as to embarrass the benefactor. Impetuous, and extravagant in expressing his emotions, he often made himself a ridiculous figure. A Viennese critic by the name of Gehring referred to him, to his very face, as a "fool and a half." Far kinder was the remark of Rudolf Louis, who could not forget that this man was also kind and soft by nature, "A man of fine feelings might smile at Bruckner's appearance; he would not laugh at it."

Hatred and contempt surrounded Bruckner, and now the pro-Brahms clique took offense at him because he had criticized the Brahms symphonies unfavorably. The Vienna Philharmonic refused one work after another until, as a measure of self-protection, he swore he would never again submit to it another of his scores. His gaze grew more abstracted; the pathetic body became more bent and servile. Only God, Wagner, and his own music kept him alive. For he never lost faith in himself. Despite his defeats he kept on writing, confident in his creative power. "When God calls me to Him and asks me: 'Where is the talent which I have given you?' Then I shall hold out the rolled-up manuscript of my *Te Deum* and I know he will be a compassionate judge," he once said. And he felt the same way about his symphonies.

During the trying period in which his music was being rejected so

ruthlessly he was also undergoing a series of emotional crises brought on by unsuccessful love affairs. Throughout his life he responded only to very young girls. When he was forty-three he loved a seventeen-year-old girl, Josephine Lang. Her parents' refusal to permit marriage was a blow to him. Thirteen years later he was again in love. On a visit to Oberammergau he met and succumbed to seventeen-year-old Marie Bartl. This time parental blessing was forthcoming. But the girl soon tired of the old, eccentric man and before long would not answer his passionate letters.

In old age he sought out his beloved of former years, Josephine Lang. Discovering that she was the mother of a fourteen-year-old girl he proceeded to fall in love with the daughter. He was humiliated to learn that nothing serious could come out of this affair. And when he was seventy he seriously entertained the idea of marrying a young chambermaid who had been solicitous about his health. Only her stout refusal to embrace his religion frustrated this plan.

Thus his lifelong search for the woman to share his life was never successful. But his equally feverish pursuit after recognition was to have a happier resolution. On February 20, 1881, Hans Richter directed the first performance of the Fourth Symphony in E-flat major. It was received with unqualified enthusiasm—the first time one of his symphonies was favorably accepted. The victory for which he had been waiting so long stirred him deeply. He was in tears as, after the performance, he humbly came to the conductor to express his gratitude. And with childlike ingenuousness he tried to speak what was in his heart by squeezing a Viennese coin into the conductor's hand! "Take it," he said, "and drink a pitcher of beer to my health." Hans Richter thenceforth wore that coin on his watch chain. It was, as he later recalled, "the memento of a day on which I wept."

Even greater enthusiasm greeted Bruckner's Seventh Symphony in E major when that work was introduced in Leipzig on December 30, 1884, under Artur Nikisch. An unnamed critic described Bruckner's reaction to the ovation he received: "One could see from the trembling of his lips, and the sparkling moisture in his eyes, how difficult it was for the old gentleman to suppress his deep emotion. His homely but honest countenance beamed with a warm inner happiness such as can appear only on the face of one who is too goodhearted to succumb to bitterness even under the pressure of the most disheartening circumstances. Having heard this work and now seeing him in per-

son, we asked ourselves in amazement, 'How is it possible that he could remain so long unknown to us?'

Other performances of the Seventh Symphony followed in rapid succession in several European cities: Hermann Levi conducted it in Munich; Felix Mottl, in Karlsruhe; Karl Muck, in Graz. "It is the most significant symphonic work since 1827," was Hermann Levi's sweeping verdict.

Meanwhile the death of Wagner, in 1883, was a major tragedy to him. He seemed to have had a prophetic warning of that catastrophe. "At one time," he later wrote, "I came home and was very sad. I thought to myself, it is impossible that the Master can live long, and then the Adagio came to my head." The adagio he speaks of is the slow movement, the funeral march, of his Seventh Symphony—one of the noblest pieces of music he was to write. Biographers who are none too exact chronologically have suggested that this threnody was actually inspired by Wagner's death; this of course could not be so, as it was written a year earlier.

Honor now followed honor for Bruckner. In 1891 he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Vienna. Soon after this he was given an imperial insignia by Emperor Franz Joseph. The story goes that the emperor was ready to grant the composer any reasonable request—a house, a pension. With characteristic humility and naïveté, Bruckner could make only one plea. Could the emperor prevail on the critic Hanslick to treat Bruckner's music less harshly in his reviews? But Bruckner did not require the emperor's intercession. On December 18, 1892, at the first performance of the Eighth Symphony in C minor, the Viennese public interceded for him when it booed Hanslick and sent him scurrying out of the auditorium. That performance proved a triumph for Bruckner in other ways too. The emperor sent a wreath to the concert hall, and after the performance contributed fifteen hundred florins to help get the symphony published. Another wreath came from the Wagner Verein, while Johann Strauss II sent a telegram of congratulations.

Less than two years later Bruckner's seventieth birthday became the occasion for celebration throughout all of Austria. After fifty years of the most intense struggle he had won his battle; but it had come none too soon.

On January 12, 1896, he attended a performance of his *Te Deum*. This was the last time he was to hear one of his works at a public con-

cert. That summer he fell ill. He appeared to have recovered, and was hard at work on the sketches for the finale of his Ninth Symphony, when he complained of a chill. He was helped into bed and given a cup of tea. A few minutes later he was dead.

At the funeral services they played the slow movement of his Seventh Symphony; the requiem he had unconsciously written for Wagner had now become his own. Outside the church stood a man whom Vienna had set as his enemy—Johannes Brahms, now old and sick. For some mysterious reason he refused to enter the church, but he had to pay his last respects. He remained in the street for a while, whispered sadly to a friend "It is my turn soon," and left before the services were over. It is unfortunate that Bruckner could not have been a living witness to Brahms's presence at his funeral, for that surely would have appeared to him the crowning triumph of all.

HIS MUSIC

The Wagnerian imprint on Bruckner's music is unmistakable. Like Wagner, he had a weakness for vastness; his symphonies are of epical design, spacious and monumental. Like Wagner, Bruckner wanted to express sensuous and passionate feelings, to make Herculean leaps toward the grandiose and the sublime. Stylistic traits of harmony and orchestration that are identifiably Wagner's appear in Bruckner again and again; and, as if this were not enough, his symphonies even contain echoes and reminiscences of thematic material originating in the music dramas.

He was influenced and he imitated. This alone would have made Bruckner the provocative figure in music history that he has been—fiercely attacked and just as fiercely defended. But he had other palpable weaknesses. His symphonies are uneven in quality. Time and again he mistook expanse for grandeur, rhetoric for inspiration, declamation for eloquence. Never too critical of his own work, although he was continually revising, he could be tiringly long-winded. With justification he has been called the re-creator of the "baroque" in music—for he piles detail upon detail, and ornament upon ornament, until we often lose sight of his original thought.

And yet, for all his weaknesses, there is strength too. The mystic and the peasant in him speak in his music with often compelling ef-

fect. Some of the scherzos and finales of his symphonies are filled with the lusty peasant vigor of the Austrian folk dance; here we have a Bruckner who is infectious, full of spirit, ingratiating. But even finer are many of the slow movements, in which the mystic unfolds his revelations. Now, stripped of pomp and pretentiousness, his music unfolds vistas of beauty and serenity rarely encountered in symphonic literature. In these pages, as Lawrence Gilman once remarked so aptly, "there is a curious intimation of immortality." Gilman went on to say: "These pages are filled with amusing, consolatory tenderness, with a touch of that greatness of style which we sometimes get in the Elizabethans when they speak of death. . . ."

ANALYTICAL NOTES

Choral Music. The profoundly religious man speaks in Bruckner's choral music in the same way that the man who worshiped Wagner is heard in his later symphonies. It was through choral music that Bruckner first made his appearance as a composer—with compositions large and small in which a devout Christian speaks with reverence and humility, where religious ardor is often combined with a strong mysticism. Neville Cardus, in speaking of Bruckner's last two major sacred works—the *Te Deum* in C major (1884) and the *Psalm CL* (1892)—describes the composer as a "God-intoxicated man." This is also the Bruckner we encounter in his three *Masses*, the first of which, in D minor, came in 1864. The most distinguished of this trio of *Masses* is the third, in F minor (1868). Scored for solo voices, chorus, and orchestra—and divided into six sections—this composition has been identified as the "Grand Mass" because of its ambitious design and because of Bruckner's expansive symphonic style in writing for the orchestra. Here we find a fusion of Bruckner's strongly Romantic temperament with neomedieval tendencies. The music vibrates throughout with spiritual overtones, and on occasion—as in the *Et incarnatus est*—soars to altitudes of eloquence.

Orchestral Music. The first of Bruckner's symphonies to gain wide circulation was the Third in D minor (1878), the one he dedicated to Richard Wagner. Some of the orchestration reveals Wagner's influence (particularly the way Bruckner uses his brass instruments),

and a melodic episode or two has a Wagnerian profile. But for the most part this is not a particularly Wagnerian composition. The opening subject of the first movement has two sections, the first heard in horn over tremolo strings, and the second presented loudly by the full orchestra. The subsidiary theme, which comes twenty-four measures later, is divided between the first violins and violas. In the development, a good deal of attention is given to a three-note motive with which the second theme opens, while the coda addresses itself mainly to the horn episode of the first theme. After a two-measure introduction, the slow movement opens with a stately melody. Later in the movement we also hear an effective chorale-like subject for the strings. The scherzo is characteristically Bruckner in that the main subject sounds like an Austrian peasant dance. The finale opens with a somber idea which is soon stated by full orchestra. For contrast, a lyrical passage for flute and clarinet in octaves comes later in the movement.

There are several different versions of this symphony, a fact that requires clarification. Bruckner completed the first one in 1873. Between 1876 and 1877 he revised it for its publication in 1878. Then between 1888 and 1889 he made further changes. It is the second version, the one published in 1878, that we hear most often today, though it is true that on occasion conductors present the 1889 revision.

The Symphony No. 4 in E-flat major, known as the *Romantic* Symphony, is the most assimilable of all Bruckner's symphonic works and consequently has proved to be the most popular. Bruckner himself provided the name *Romantic* two years after he had completed the work; he also drew up some kind of program for his music, a program whose unimportance can best be gauged by the composer's later confession that he had forgotten what he had in mind for the finale. The symphony was completed in 1874. When it was introduced in 1881 it was heard in an elaborately revised version, with an altogether new third movement.

There are two important unifying elements in the symphony. The first is the descending interval of a perfect fifth, with which the opening horn theme begins. This interval appears as part of the main theme of the second movement, in the hunting call of the scherzo, and throughout the last movement. The second element is a rhythmic pattern so often employed by the composer that it is known as the "Bruckner rhythm": two quarter notes followed by a triplet of three

quarter-notes in 4/4 time. The rhythm is first found in the second main theme of the first movement, in full orchestra. This rhythm is the spine of the hunting theme of the scherzo movement.

The symphony begins in an atmosphere of rustic beauty, as a broad theme is heard in the horn against tremolando strings. After this theme has been taken up by different members of the woodwind family, the full orchestra announces a second subject, the one with the "Bruckner rhythm." This idea is discussed for thirty-two measures, whereupon another basic theme is heard, divided between first violins and violas. These three subjects undergo involved development. The movement ends with a majestic coda in which the opening horn theme plays a prominent role.

The second movement opens with two measures of muted chords in the strings, after which a melody of compelling beauty appears in the cellos. After ten measures the woodwinds adopt the melody against pizzicato basses. A chorale passage, suggestive of a religious hymn, is then heard in the strings, a transition to the second principal melody of the movement, a song for violas against a background of plucked strings in violins and cellos. After a development of this basic material a powerful climax is evoked when the third theme, which had originated in the violas, is blaringly taken up by the brass against a sweeping tide of sound in the violins. As the movement draws to a close the music fades away with an expressive passage for the strings, followed by soft phrases for horn, oboe, and clarinet. A gentle rumbling of the kettledrums is the background; as the movement ebbs, only the throb of the drums is heard.

The third movement, a scherzo, is music of the forest and the hunt. A fanfare for horns is the core of its opening section. The principal theme of the trio has the buoyancy and spirit of an Austrian peasant dance; it is heard in flute and clarinet. After the trio the first section returns in a somewhat concentrated form.

Bruckner utilizes his finale as a kind of summation of all that has transpired; but new material is continually interpolated. We hear first a sustained passage for woodwinds and horns against quivering strings. An echo of the scherzo's hunting theme is brought up by the horns. Then the principal theme of the movement is thunderingly proclaimed by full orchestra. This material is worked out, brought to a climax, then allowed to subside until only a few soft pulsations of the kettledrums are heard. After a pause a few introductory measures

bring on the second main new theme of the movement, played by flutes and clarinets in octaves with a countersubject in the violas; this theme has an emotional affinity to the melodies of the second movement. A powerful *tutti* passage for violins and brass leads to the development of all ideas already stated. A brilliant coda reaches the culminating point in full orchestra. The strings then return with a recollection of the third theme of the first movement. An elegiac melody appears in the horns against muted strings. The feeling now grows more poignant and intense as a crescendo evolves in full orchestra to bring the symphony to a close.

The Symphony No. 7 in E major (1883) is another of Bruckner's symphonies that has gained favor with concert audiences. The principal theme of the first movement appears first in the cellos and after that in the violins and woodwinds. It is built up with great power into a resounding climax. The second subject, a tranquil melody, is given by the oboe and clarinet. Both ideas are worked out freely, and often skillfully, as idyllic passages are contrasted with forceful ones. The slow movement is the finest section of the symphony and one of the most moving pages written by Bruckner. The main melody, which has organ-like sonorities, has a hymnlike character. It is followed by other lyrical ideas equally solemn and majestic. The scherzo begins with a lilting dance tune and continues with a more dramatic subject; the main idea of its trio is a pastoral tune for the first violins. The two principal themes of the finale are presented by the first violins. The finale has a heroic character, filled as it is with tempestuous moods, and it concludes with an overpowering coda.

The symphony with which Bruckner achieved his greatest success during his lifetime—the Symphony No. 8 in C minor (1886)—is also the last symphony he lived to complete. (He wrote only the first three movements of a Ninth Symphony, in D minor. When performed today it is sometimes the practice to use Bruckner's *Te Deum* as a finale.)

The Eighth Symphony begins in a questioning mood and progresses from that to unrest and agitation. But before the movement ends the music becomes a mighty lamentation in which the soft-spoken first theme (originally consigned to the lower strings) is transformed into a threnody for the oboe. The second-movement scherzo has robust, peasant good humor. The most eloquent movement is the

third, an adagio—one of the longest as well as one of the most expressive movements found in any Bruckner symphony. First comes an exalted song on the G string for the first violins. Then follow two more affecting melodies, one in the cellos, the other in the tubas. For some reason never explained, Bruckner interpolates the rhythm of the “Siegfried motive” from Wagner’s *Ring* before the movement ends. The finale opens with a ceremonious fanfare in D-flat. Several changes of key follow before the main subject in C minor is heard. There is a good deal of contrapuntal interest in this movement, as three basic ideas are presented and developed. When the symphony comes to an exultant conclusion, material from earlier movements is hurriedly remembered.