

When Anton Bruckner wrote a symphony his purpose was much more than simple musical expression: it was, in Alfred Einstein's memorable phrase, "a coming to terms with God". The romantic approach to music usually demanded some kind of associated idea, and it was to literature and poetry that most of the composers turned in their quest for an idea which would stimulate the musical imagination. In this sense, Wagner, Schumann and Liszt were "literary" romantics; Bruckner, on the other hand, cared little—and probably knew little—about literature. He had only to look within himself to find that music was inseparable from the religious devotion that governed his life.

But he was a romantic, none the less: which means, simply, that he was of his time. Since Beethoven, the symphony had been expanding in shape and duration, and what it gained in momentary power and effect it lost in relevance and control. A single movement by Bruckner is often longer than a whole symphony by Haydn; and the orchestra employed may be anything up to four times as large. The paradox is that although the austere classical works are at once—from the listener's point of view—more intimate than their romantic equivalents, it was the romantic composer who sought consciously—some would say self-consciously—to express the most intimate emotions. Bruckner's "coming to terms with God" is a long and sometimes noisy process, and it is so for a non-theological reason, because Bruckner adopted without hesitation the musical style and idiom of the late romantic period in which he lived.

It is often said that his music is naïve. Certainly the observation may be true of the man himself—the little Austrian schoolmaster who had slight interest in and no understanding of the world around him, and who once dedicated a symphony to God. But a naïve faith is surely one that cannot countenance a struggle, which turns a blind eye to temptation and the powers of darkness? In the Seventh Symphony there is an intense struggle: the first movement, although it opens with a long, soaring string melody, embodies many seemingly disjointed musical fragments which soon disrupt the tranquil vision of its first two or three minutes. And when, eventually, the opening theme makes its final appearance it is no longer in a simple lyrical form; emerging from the roll of the timpani, it rises like a plea for deliverance.

The second movement is the true assertion of faith, its one dominating theme—played, after a brief introduction, by the strings—withstands considerable repetition only by virtue of its extraordinary beauty. But when the final assertion has been made, a mood of quiet humility descends upon the music for the last few pages. These, it is said, were written in memory of Richard Wagner.

In the immensely powerful scherzo one may detect again Bruckner's attitude to the impact of the world. Unlike many devout composers, he had the power to convey evil. And if it is still felt that the finale of the Seventh Symphony is naïve, one can only answer that it will seem less so if regarded in its context—as the counterpart to the tumultuous scherzo. Its opening theme has at first a charming freshness and lightness, though in the course of the movement this version of the theme comes to alternate with the same idea played emphatically—even ominously—by the entire brass section of the orchestra. There is a subsidiary string melody almost in the nature of an instrumental chant: it makes two fleeting appearances which afford moments of repose in an otherwise turbulent movement. The coda is built from the main theme—a gradual climax in which, at the very end, the trumpets penetrate the texture and give the brief opening theme its last triumphant statement.

Here, then, is a symphony in the grand manner: a work whose rich content offers lasting reward to listeners who gives it sustained attention. It is essentially a warm, human faith that is embodied in this great structure; and to say, as Brahms said, that Bruckner's works are 'symphonic boa-constrictors' is to misjudge the spirit of the music. It is recounted that someone once told Bruckner that his symphonies were too long. "On the contrary," Bruckner replied, with unexpected wit, "it is you who are too short."

The truth of the matter is that the bones of a symphony matter little if the heart is good; and if there are times when Bruckner seems to ramble—when, as it were, the intensity of his feeling leads him to write episodes which seem structurally irrelevant—we may forgive him these lapses in remembering that no other composer of the period (save possibly Wagner, in *Parsifal*) managed to write music of such passionate religious fervour.