

Flashes of greatness from the 25-year-old Bruckner: a moving, masterly *Requiem*

By JACK DIETHER

THE SMALL but energetic Unicorn company of England (no relation to the long-defunct American label) is currently undertaking not only to offer us those up-to-date Mahler interpretations of Horenstein but just as worthily to fill in a few of the long-standing gaps in the repertoire itself. Its recording of Joachim Raff's *Lenore* Symphony as conducted by Bernard Herrmann, e.g., is a rewarding item in this category which is too likely to be shrugged off by our hard-pressed domestic labels. The new release at hand is another; and I would urge Brucknerites to consider importing it if they wish to round out their libraries with two early works which, though admittedly formative, are nonetheless fascinating.

Bruckner's *Requiem* dates from 1849. It was his first full-scale work with orchestra. He was then 25, and already teaching in St. Florian. But in terms of Bruckner's very protracted apprenticeship as a composer that means he had not yet encountered his most important mentors, Sechter and Kitzler. As the conductor Hans-Hubert Schönzeler says in his own liner note for this recording, before the mid-point of the century "Bruckner was still steeped in the music of the great polyphonic age, of Haydn, Mozart and Schubert; he had only just discovered Mendelssohn, and

Beethoven was still, on the whole, unknown territory to him. . . . The very opening of the work points irresistibly to Mozart's [*Requiem*] in the same key; [and yet] there are already flashes of the later, great Bruckner to come."

Thus there is, on one hand, almost as much difference between this *Requiem* and Bruckner's last symphonies as between the early and late works of Charles Ives. At the same time it is just as moving and masterly in its own way as an early Ives work, just as strongly and inexorably imbued with the particular spiritual qualities we at once recognize as Brucknerian. The *Agnus Dei*, for example, is an *Adagio* of intense beauty, perfectly rounded out in just 33 bars (duration: five minutes), and reaching an awesome climax at "*Lux aeterna*". Schönzeler points also to "the great double fugue of the *Quam olim Abrahae*, written at least six years before he even commenced his thorough contrapuntal studies with Simon Sechter."

Equally touching, and characteristic of Bruckner, is the purely musical orientation of the personal event that led to his venturing a *Requiem* at that time, as retold by Schönzeler: "When Bruckner returned to St. Florian as a schoolteacher after the unhappy years in Windhaag and Kronstorf, he rapidly made friends.

BRUCKNER: *Requiem in D minor* (Critical Edition, ed. Nowak); *Four Pieces for Orchestra*; Barbara Yates (soprano), Sylvia Swan (contralto), John Steel (tenor), Colin Wheatley (bass), Ronald Harris (horn), Derek James and Colin Busby (tenor trom-

bones), John Pritchard (bass trombone), Robert Munns (organ); Alexandra Choir and London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Hans-Hubert Schönzeler. Unicorn Stereo 210 (English import). (36½, 12 mins.)



An undated photograph of the young Anton Bruckner

Foremost amongst these was Franz Sailer [notary and official clerk of St. Florian Monastery], who greatly admired Bruckner's talents, and particularly his organ-playing. In Sailer's home, Bruckner was a frequent guest. Sailer owned a Bösendorfer grand piano which Bruckner often played, and which was his great envy, for on more than one occasion he remarked: 'If only I could afford an instrument like that!' Then Sailer suddenly died and bequeathed his piano to Bruckner, in whose possession it was to remain, and on which he composed every one of his later works. . . . The [*Requiem*] was to receive its first performance [at the Monastery] on the anniversary of his friend's death—September 15, 1849."

In its orchestration too, the work is distinctive amongst Bruckner's output. It is written and scored for soloists and chorus with alto, tenor, and bass trombones, string orchestra, and organ continuo. Yes, a continuo part—a full generation after Beethoven's death! To this suitably austere accompaniment the *Benedictus* adds a brief part for solo horn, with an initial motif reminiscent

of the opening of the *Larghetto* in Beethoven's Second Symphony. Oddly enough, the basic scoring for strings and trombones almost complements that of Bruckner's E minor Mass for winds and brass, only the trombone trio being repeated. (The E minor Mass is without solo singers, except for the priestly intonations *ad lib.*)

The present recording, produced by Robert Simpson at Holy Trinity Church, Brompton, is additionally welcome to me because I had known the *Requiem* only in a dreadful German import (Garnet 40-104) by Hubert Günther and the Rhenish Chorus and Orchestra. The persistently leaden quality of this latter—even where the words and music of the *Dies Irae* envision the dissolution of the world in flames!—was unbelievable. The aforementioned apogee in the *Agnus* was similarly wasted. Now, on Unicorn, the conductor, orchestra, singers, and recorded sound all do full justice to the score. The vocal soloists have no very extensive passages, but they are all gratifying; Günther's were uniformly grating.

The shorter work on this record was composed 13 years after the *Requiem*, at a time when Bruckner was occupied as cathedral organist at Linz and, as composer, was engaged in his studies with the second of his two great teachers. This was the municipal theater conductor Otto Kitzler, who instructed him in form and orchestration and who also (so decisively for his style) introduced him to the music of Wagner. As "student exercises" Bruckner wrote, in 1862, a String Quartet in C minor and the Vier Orchesterstücke or Vier kleine Orchesterstücke, as they are variously known.

A few record collectors will know the latter in an old Polydor 78-rpm recording by the Berlin Municipal Orchestra under Ludwig K. Mayer. The pieces are headed (1) *Marsch*, in D

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minor; (2) *Moderato*, in E flat; (3) *Allegro non troppo*, in E minor; and (4) *Andante con moto*, in F. For the most part they are little more than graceful romantic miniatures showing that by this time Bruckner had advanced stylistically into the realm of Schumann, though already a more adept orchestrator.

But perhaps, as Schönzeler suggests, "their main interest lies in the fact that here Bruckner for the first time touched upon that field which he was to make his life's work: pure and absolute orchestral music." And it is doubtless with that idea in mind that the conductor presents them in an order different from the published sequence. He plays them in the order 2-4-3-1, thus saving for the end the most considerable of the four—the piquantly nocturnal March in D minor, which "already contains a passage that recurs much later in quite a different context, in his Symphony No. 8." Anyway, as delivered by the LPO with its finest panache this concluding item is definitely a party "fun piece" liable to invite speculation ranging from smugglers' choruses to Hoffmannesque prowls; and it has an absolutely delicious Trio. □