

Anton Bruckner's Fourth Symphony was the first one to be performed by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra under its own celebrated conductor, the eager but formidable Hans Richter. Given on February 20, 1881, the premiere performance of this work marked the turning point in Bruckner's long, difficult and stormy career as a symphonist in the progressive Wagnerite camp. Not only his place as a composer, but even his parallel career as professor of music at the University, was vehemently opposed by the influential critic and pedagogue Eduard Hanslick, the leading anti-Wagnerite in Vienna. Bruckner was by then 57 years old, and he still had about fifteen years left, most of them productive.

The premiere of the Symphony in E flat was a particular triumph for Bruckner, since the same place and orchestra had provided the scene of his most humiliating disaster three years earlier. He had then attempted to conduct the Philharmonic himself in the premiere of his Third Symphony, and for his pains had been scoffed at and deserted by most of the audience. Now, in gratitude to the mighty Richter for undertaking his work and, so to speak, intellectually underwriting it, he tipped the Maestro a thaler at the dress rehearsal, adding: "Take this and drink my health with a glass of beer." Richter was overcome with emotion at this simple, naive gesture.

Even the hostile press had to acknowledge the relative success of the new premiere. The arch-enemy Hanslick had taken full advantage of the earlier fiasco to launch his famous series of acid and witty commentaries on Bruckner's successive works, saying of the Third in the *New Free Press*: "The poetic meaning of this gigantic symphony was never revealed to us. Perhaps it was a vision of how Beethoven's Ninth befriends Wagner's 'Walkure' and finds itself, at the end, under her hooves."

Now he chose to approach No.4 with strained politeness. "This paper has already reported," he wrote, "on the extraordinary success of a new symphony by A. Bruckner. We can only add today that, on account of the respectable and sympathetic personality of the composer, we are very happy at the success of a work which we fail to understand." He was to refer to subsequent works sometimes with elaborate and elegant sarcasm or, on one occasion, as simply "exaggerated, sick and perverted."

Hanslick's earlier comment about the "poetic meaning" of the music never having been revealed to him was no mere rhetoric, but characteristic of the programmatic fetish of the time, which demanded that new instrumental sounds be given some kind of literary rationale as distinct from a purely musical one - a demand which seems alien to our thinking today. Mahler was much put-upon by the same fetish about a decade later. In his book *Bruckner* (Grossman), Hans-Hubert Schonzeiler says of it: "Pressed by his friends who adhered to the 'New German School' and considered it essential that all music should have a 'program,' Bruckner tried to put the 'contents' of the symphony into words. It is a feeble attempt at romantic description, including 'Dawn,' 'Horsemen sallying forth,' 'Shadowy forests' and the rest of the romantic trimmings. The only movement to which some sort of program could perhaps be ascribed is the 'Hunt' of the Scherzo, with the ensuing Trio which in one of the manuscripts bears the title 'Dance tune while the hunters are resting.'

As with Mahler's attempted programs, all this was later repudiated except the general subtitle "Romantic" - the only official title borne by any Bruckner symphony. It is an adjective that comes to mind spontaneously with the opening Weberish horn-call over soft string tremolos, an opening which Sir Donald Tovey referred to "a thing of extraordinary beauty and depth." Equally evocative are the mournful C-minor elegy of the Andante and its later metamorphosis in momentary C-major triumph, the patent hunting-calls of the Scherzo and peasant dance in the Trio, or the stylized bird-calls in the Finale. Today we no longer feel any strong compulsion to put all this naively together, making a running narrative out of it: we in the post-Freudian era at least know that "the medium is the message."

The explosive violence with which Mahler ultimately rejected the popular programmatic syndrome - exclaiming, at a formal dinner, "Down with programs! They propagate false ideas!" - has often been cited. The little private quip with which Bruckner dismissed the same phenomenon is less well known, but when Joseph Schalk, the brother of Franz Schalk, had taken it on himself to write a copious literary program to accompany Bruckner's Seventh Symphony, the composer complained to a friend: "If Schalk has to write poetry, why does he have to pick on my symphony?"

In the case of the Fourth, we know that Bruckner *could* not have had an over-all *a priori* program in mind, because at first the hunting Scherzo was not even there! The work was first composed in 1874 with a totally different third movement. It was at that time tried out by the Philharmonic musicians and summarily rejected with such sentiments as "Only the first movement is fit for performance; the rest is idiotic." By 1880 Bruckner had extensively revised the symphony in form and detail, *including* the "fit" first movement, and had wholly replaced the original Scherzo with the "hunting Scherzo" we know.

In the months and years that followed the 1881 premiere, further changes were made in the score, both by Bruckner himself (1881 and 1886) and by his star pupils, Franz Schalk and Ferdinand Loewe (1886-87). The latter couple worked together to prepare the "revised" version (premiered in 1888, again by Hans Richter) that was to become the first published edition of 1890. They made minor cuts and major changes in orchestration and dynamics, all designed to make Bruckner more acceptable to the Wagner/Brahms-oriented public. But that same year (January 18, 1890) Bruckner made a fair copy of his 1880 score, unaltered, and that score was used for the first "critical edition" prepared in the mid-1930s for the Bruckner Gesellschaft by Robert Haas. This is commonly known as the "original version" of the Fourth Symphony, albeit it must be kept in mind that the *actual* original (the *Urfassung* or *original*, as it were) is the very different version of 1874- published last of all, as recently as 1975!

Although the "critical edition" referred to above was published in 1936, it is notable that the 1951 performance by Furtwangler and the Vienna Philharmonic captured on the present record still uses the revised version as published in 1890. That is an essential part of the period flavor and aura with which Furtwangler's Bruckner interpretations are imbued, just as in the case of his great contemporary (and junior by two years) Hans Knappertsbusch (1888- 1965), who knew Richter well. Though considered vastly inauthentic by the criteria of our present-day understanding of Bruckner's musical personality, it recreates for us something just as authentic in its own way, which otherwise we never would be able to re-capture: the Bruckner known to a previous generation, a post-Wagnerian generation - a Bruckner shot through with subtle rubatos and extreme ritardandos, with tapered comers and "hairpin" dynamics *a la "fin de siecle,"*

Among many quasi-Wagnerian orchestral effects by courtesy of Schalk/Loewe, we also hear one or two that sound, rather surprisingly, Mahleresque - still right *au t* of Wagner, of course - such as the soft fanfare motif on B flat and F for horn, spanning an octave and a fourth, heard just before the onset of the final coda (last movement, letter V in the original version). (Compare Mahler III, first movement, figure 10.) Bruckner gave this soft motif to the cellos; yet here the simultaneous "ritard" is absolutely authentic, a fact acknowledged by both Haas and the subsequent Gesellschaft editor, Leopold Nowak.

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