

Earl Doherty describes the
special satisfaction of approaching

Bruckner

and explains how to do it with minimum
pain and maximum pleasure

by Earl Doherty

The Philharmonic Orchestra devoted its entire concert to a new symphony by Bruckner... I found this newest one, as I have found the other Bruckner symphonies, interesting in detail but strange as a whole and even repugnant... Everything flows, without clarity and without order, willy-nilly into dismal long-windedness... It is not out of the question that the future belongs to this muddled hangover style — which is no reason to regard the future with envy. So wrote Eduard Hanslick in 1892 at the Vienna premiere of Anton Bruckner's Symphony No. 8 in C minor. This antagonistic critic was Bruckner's personal demon, and a key figure in the composer's difficult struggle for acceptance during his thirty years in Vienna.

Almost a century later, that struggle has been won. But there are many even today who have not come to terms with Bruckner's music. Echoes of Hanslick's comments can still be heard. "His symphonies are too long... they seem formless and repetitive... there are too many climaxes... all his symphonies sound the same..." These objections judge the composer by yardsticks other than his own, but they must be addressed in any discussion of his music.

There is, I believe, a special satisfaction to be derived from listening to Bruckner. The very length of the symphonies creates a sense of involvement in the gradual unfolding of a grand musical design. There is a particular kind of experience that can only be felt within a scale such as this, like a novel that spans a generation, or a broad mural that the eye must take in slowly. There are the long climaxes and powerful codas that create an exhilarating sensation of great heights and distant horizons. One also feels in touch with something of an elemental nature, for Bruckner's music, more than that of most

composers, seems to communicate on this level. Finally, the listener experiences a profound serenity, not only in the adagios, but as an effect produced by the course of an entire symphony. It is an experience that comes from having shared in some fundamental expression of the human spirit.

Heady stuff, perhaps. Yet most commentators find themselves using such imagery, simply because the music so thoroughly evokes it. In my analysis of the structure and content of the symphonies — some of it objective, some subjective — I hope to cast a different light on the criticisms quoted earlier. I also hope to win the unconverted reader over to a new consideration of the music.

The most common complaint against Bruckner is that he wrote the same symphony nine times. Despite the many differences in atmosphere and detail among them, there is a superficial element of truth in the accusation. But the composer was striving to expand and perfect his personal vision through successive works, and this involved casting the symphony into a new mould. There are consequently certain weaknesses to be found in many of the works, especially the earlier ones. Perhaps only in the Eighth, despite Hanslick's evaluation, did he achieve the perfect form he was aiming at.

Each of the symphonies opens in an atmosphere of mystery, usually with a shimmering tremolo on the strings, or a softly pulsing rhythmic figure. It is as though the symphony is starting to breathe. Against this background rise fragments of themes, exploratory phrases. Through a long crescendo tension builds, until it flares into a grand statement of the main theme, usually one of primeval shape and power. This subsides and passes into a contrasting lyrical section.

What I have described is the basic symphonic structure of



Bruckner The Man

by Earl Doherty

The difference between the character of the man and the character of the music is nowhere so great or so astonishing as in the case of Anton Bruckner. The listener who knew nothing of the man might well imagine that the music was composed by a figure like Beethoven: dynamic, assertive and grand in manner and outlook, in short a colossus among his contemporaries. The reality is quite the opposite.

Bruckner was a simple and unsophisticated person, almost childlike in his shyness. His naïveté was a source of amusement to his friends and a source of derision to his detractors. He had an ingrained deference to figures of authority or to those whom he felt were of a higher station than himself. Toward Wagner he was embarrassingly adulatory. It is said that he would never sit in that composer's presence. Even toward Hanslick, the critic who made his life in Vienna a hell, and whom he feared in an almost pathological way, his behaviour was always obsequious. No other great composer has possessed so self-effacing a personality.

Born in 1824, Bruckner was the son of a village schoolmaster in upper Austria.

He never lost the crude dialect of his native province, nor his rustic bluntness in speaking. In cosmopolitan Vienna, to which he came to work when he was 44, he never felt at home. His country clothing, with baggy trousers and a jacket that seemed two sizes too big for him, matched behaviour that was often gauche. He showed little interest in literature, the theatre, or non-musical arts. Wagner's music had a great influence upon him, but he often did not understand the librettos or the underlying meaning of the operas. Indeed, he once asked, after a performance of *Die Walküre*, why they had burned Brünnhilde.

Despite an aptitude for organ music as a young man, he pursued the humble career of a schoolmaster, and even considered becoming a court secretary. Although he studied musical theory and composition, he had no clear sense of commitment to music. While a few early compositions were competent and even promising, they gave no premonition of the flowering of his later genius. The First Symphony and the three great masses came only after he reached the age of 40.

Bruckner was subject to nervous disorders and depression all his life. His sense of insecurity and lack of self-confidence were reflected in a mania for collecting diplomas and certificates, for which he was always applying and undergoing examinations. His lack of self-confidence also made him easily influenced. The periodic revisions to which he subjected many of his symphonies were usually advised by supporters, who were striving — as they saw it — to improve his works and to make them more palatable to contemporary audiences. Even after his death,

there were further and often drastic revisions by certain editors and conductors, a process that was not corrected until a movement back to the original manuscript versions began in the 1930s. Only recently have the echoes of this problem faded away.

He was an honest man; kindly, straightforward, and with a warm sense of humour. In his later years he had a devoted circle of pupils and friends, a circle that included many prominent musicians and conductors. He never married, though he always hoped to find a woman who would accept him. As he grew older, he was constantly proposing marriage to women who attracted him and who were usually much younger than himself. They inevitably turned him down. He remained celibate all his life and admitted to having kissed a woman only once — which, however, he feared had been a sin.

The centre of his life was his Catholic religion. Bruckner's belief in God was ever-present and unquestioned. He would interrupt his classes to pray when the Angelus was rung, and he dedicated the Ninth Symphony to "dem lieben Gott". His symphonies are in no way religious, or even pious, but Bruckner would have said that all things, including his music, came from God.

The paradox of Bruckner remains. His impulse to compose — to express with undaunted assurance those exalted inner visions that had no reflection in his awkward, earthbound daily life — came from a wellspring of creative genius and humanity that was independent of his outward personality. The explanation for such a phenomenon has so far eluded biographers and analysts. Perhaps it always will. Fortunately for the listener, this in no way compromises the music. □

first and second subjects. But Bruckner has brought the structure much further. Because he is embarking on a long journey, with an opening statement of unfolding, germinating character, he must expand the standard first subject into a *group* of themes, or, as in the case of the Seventh Symphony, present a single long theme that contains a wealth of elements. The second subject, to provide sufficient balance and contrast, must also be expanded to embrace a number of themes. Finally, again with an eye for proportion, the standard codetta passage that ends the exposition may become a complete theme or theme-group as well.

All of this, quite naturally, creates a long exposition, involving a kind of development within itself. Consequently, the composer cannot treat all of this material in a regularly developed section and then recapitulate the whole thing. This would make it totally unwieldy. Most of his first movements, therefore, telescope the development and recapitulation — doubly necessary because he intends to place a great emphasis on his closing coda.

Four major peaks dominate the movement: the crescendo to the first-theme statement, a buildup to a plateau within the

development, culminating in a final climax to the development which merges into the recapitulation, and the coda, which feels like a final heave to the summit, towards which all the preceding peaks have been leading. Between these heights, the hills and valleys will vary in contour, depending on the material and its treatment.

The balance over the length of this 'skyline' is critical. Not only must it be properly crafted by the composer, but the listener must have a grasp of the structure and proportions, lest everything seem an uncoordinated succession of events. Here, too, certain Bruckner fingerprints serve a definite purpose. When those much-criticized four- and eight-bar phrases are taken out of context, they may indeed seem repetitive. Within the design, however, they help generate the sense of solidity, power and momentum in the music. Moreover, outside of the scherzos, they appear only in key places and are not representative of Bruckner's phrasing as a whole. In the same way, the juxtaposition of contrasting blocks of sound, the changes of texture, the great pauses and silences (which should reverberate or tremble, not feel empty) are all architectural features which fall into place when

performers and audience have an overview of the shape of the work.

This has been a generalized description of a Bruckner first movement; not all of them have exactly the same form. More important, when they all become familiar, one finds a unique atmosphere in each. Consider the broad, open-aired majesty of the opening movement of the Fourth; or the stained-glass, cathedral-like echoes of the Fifth; the singing brightness of the E major Seventh; the chilling coldness of the Eighth; or the confrontation with dark forces in the mighty Ninth. Even the codas have a wonderful variety. That of the Sixth modulates through every key before reaching home; the first movement of the Seventh ends with a dazzling flood of sunlight, entirely on the tonic harmony; a stark force overwhelms that of the Eighth; and the close of the opening movement of the Ninth, perhaps Bruckner's most effective coda, is an ascent of the bleakest grandeur and sheer menacing power.

Bruckner constructs his great climaxes in a characteristic way, whether in the codas, or at the heart of the adagios. They move with a great sense of deliberation, rising and modulating through a series of waves. Each one reaches a plateau and then momentarily subsides, as though renewing strength before going on. The tension thus generated can be acute, until the final wave bursts over the actual summit, overwhelming in its release. Someone once said "Bruckner makes all other composers sound asthmatic." At such moments it is hard not to agree.

Bruckner's symphonic style differs from that of his predecessors. (Remember that he had written five symphonies before the premiere of Brahms' first.) His expanded structure, and the type of measured themes that fit into it, create an overall feeling of slowness, making the first movement seem like a vast introduction to the symphony as a whole. This, however, is intentional, and it produces a major shift in the symphony's centre of gravity. Up to that time (the later 1800s), the most important drama was usually expended in the first movement. The following andante and scherzo provided calm and jocular interludes; and then the work concluded with a last burst in a vigorous finale. In Bruckner's scheme, the opening movement does not use up the major part of the energy. Rather, each succeeding movement creates a cumulative weight and tension, constantly looking forward, making the finale the crowning element of the entire work. No wonder that Bruckner had to struggle to perfect this subtle but radical new approach, and no wonder it was his finales that gave him the most trouble.

The typical Bruckner scherzo derives from Austrian peasant dance, but in his hands it becomes more than that. Its muscular vitality, its open-air quality in features such as the hunting-like use of the horns, make it something of a paean to nature. In the workings of the symphony as a whole, the scherzo's driving rhythm offsets the broad pace of the outer movements and the tranquility of the adagio. In many of them, notably the Fifth, Eighth and Ninth, there is an element of the fantastic — which incidentally, must have influenced Mahler. That of the Ninth Symphony is almost surrealistic, and has been called the most original scherzo of the nineteenth century.

The Viennese affectionately called Bruckner a "composer of adagios". There can be little doubt that in the 75 years between Beethoven's Ninth and Mahler's Third, the finest, most profound slow movements were contained in the symphonies of Bruckner. They are the emotional and spiritual heart of each work.

A good example is the adagio of the Seventh Symphony, his most famous single movement. The long opening theme-group has a funereal cast, lightened by a consoling second subject of radiant quality. In the development, combining moods of melancholy and hope, the music passes through a series of climaxes. For another composer these might have served as the high point of the movement; here they merely foreshadow the

greatest climax yet to come. The latter occurs in the recapitulation, a long, inexorable buildup through successive terraces. As usual, the apex is reached through a thrilling modulation, in this case into a resplendent C major. Its energy released, the music sinks down into a coda in which the themes of the first group, if not lifted entirely out of their tragic cast, are invested with serenity and resignation.

All of the adagios abound in sublime melodies, all attain an uplifting, inner peace. Each has its own individual character. There is an austerity in the Fifth, a delicate hush in the Fourth, and an elegaic quality to the Sixth, whose second theme may be the most beautiful Bruckner ever wrote. Perhaps the adagio of the Eighth is the most profound, subtler in its progress than the Seventh. It contains the first signs of a personal disquiet in Bruckner himself (which was to culminate in the tortured anxieties expressed in the Ninth) and the route to the climax, more transfiguring even than its predecessor, is an involved one. The effect of the final coda can scarcely be described in words. I know of no other composer who has so touched a fundamental nerve in the human psyche as has Bruckner in these closing pages of the adagio of the Eighth Symphony.

When Bruckner submitted the score of the Eighth to conductor Herman Levi, one of his most ardent supporters, Levi could not understand it. His rejection of the new work threw the composer into a period of nervous collapse, filled with anxious and misguided revision. He reworked not only the Eighth, but earlier symphonies as well. Progress on the Ninth was delayed for three years. As a result, there are only inadequate sketches for its finale, and the work ends with the swan-song adagio.

Fortunately, Bruckner had fully realized his symphonic vision with the finale of the Eighth. Previous finales had come close. That of the Fourth has an unexcelled opening and a magnificent coda, but a trivial theme in the body of the movement plays a ruinous role. Those of the Third, Sixth and Seventh are effective, but seem ultimately unable to bear the full weight of what has gone before. The Fifth, with its fugal development section and the chorale ending which brings in additional brass instruments, comes closest to success.

But the finale of the Eighth Symphony is totally satisfying in its impact. It moves with a broad momentum, conveying a strong sense of victory and summation. The final coda is a stroke of genius. It rises from the depths in a dark C minor, the original key of the symphony. By the time it reaches its apparent climax it has turned through several modulations into F major. But a C minor symphony that ends in F major would hardly be appropriate, and in any event Bruckner has been waiting for this moment. So for one breathless second, the lowest bass elements of the music seem to lift their feet, and in a single phrase the whole structure rotates, like the world wheeling majestically in a half turn, and sets down again in a blazing C major. The sense of having arrived at the true tonic home is like a revelation. In the final bars, the main themes of all four movements are superimposed, and the unison figure at the end is like a cosmic exclamation point.

Bruckner is indeed a cosmic composer. The vastness of his vision has generally defied analysis. But among the many observations made by Bruckner commentators, two are particularly telling. Erwin Doernberg, in his book, *The Life and Symphonies of Anton Bruckner*, points out that the difficulty in Bruckner is his never-remitting intensity; the mood of the music may vary, but the intensity is always present. In Robert Simpson's book, *The Essence of Bruckner*, the author declares that this essence is patience, both in its expression and fulfillment in the music and in the required attitude of the audience. These comments are representative of the one element upon which all are agreed, namely, that Bruckner's music makes an exceptional demand upon the listener. If, however, this demand can be met, all are equally agreed that the rewards are great. □