

SYMPHONY No. 5 in B flat major

ALTHOUGH the slow oncoming of widespread public acceptance of the music of Anton Bruckner has been happening for many years, he remains for many something of an enigmatic figure; what manner of man was he, and to what aesthetic programme were those massive symphonies constructed?

He was born in 1824, the son of a village schoolmaster, and was trained to follow in his father's footsteps. At the age of 11 he was sent to a cousin of his father and under his tuition he began to compose simple organ preludes. After his father's death in 1837 the youth spent four years as a chorister at the Augustinian Foundation of St. Florian near the town of Enns where he was taught piano, organ, violin and a certain amount of musical theory as part of his training as a school teacher. Three years drudgery in village schools followed and in 1845 Bruckner returned to St. Florian as an assistant teacher. Teaching became less and less congenial and a successful performance of the *Mass in B flat major* encouraged him to take the plunge and adopt music as a career. He was appointed organist at Linz Cathedral in 1856. At Linz Bruckner saw productions of *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser* and they proved to be vital and lasting influences in his development as a composer. In June 1865 he journeyed to Munich for the first performance of *Tristan and Isolde* and there he met both Wagner and Hans von Bülow for the first time. It was not until 1862 that the ventured to write for the orchestra (the *March in D minor*). The nine symphonies by which, together with the three great Masses and a few other major choral works, he is best known were written between 1865 and his death in 1896. For thirty years

the symphonies were his major preoccupation. He was constantly revising and rewriting them and was actually engaged on the uncompleted finale of the *Symphony No. 9 in D minor*, which was started in 1887, on the morning of his death, on October 11, 1896.

Among the nineteenth-century symphonists Bruckner holds a unique position. While we are able to trace the stylistic and technical links which connect him with Beethoven and Schubert, the spirit of his symphonies was something entirely unknown before him and still remains the subject of lively comment. To define this spirit in exact terms is not easy. We might say that it sprang from an experience of life compounded of a singularly profound religiosity and nature mysticism — the two mainsprings of Bruckner's art, the two poles of the axis round which his whole creation revolved. Bruckner was a simple-minded man, non-intellectual and unspeculative — Mahler once called him "half simpleton, half genius"— and his religious visions were naive and child-like. But it was precisely this unquestioning, innocent belief in a Creator which represented Bruckner's great strength and which made him regard his music as being *omnia ad maiorem Dei gloriam* — all to the greater glory of God. Closely linked with this most deep-seated devout attitude was his nature mysticism. Nature was for Bruckner a manifestation of God's power and to feel at one with it was tantamount to a mystic union. He happened to live the most impressionable years of his life in close vicinity of pure nature — the Austrian Alps — and this explains why the imposing grandeur and majesty of those mountains, their primordial stillness and their vast expanse are so faithfully mirrored in his sympho-

nies — in their huge, piled-up blocks of sound, their mysterious "silences" and their enormous architectural span. In a sense the Bruckner symphonies are cosmic music and to listen to them, is to glimpse eternity wherein lies the chief aspect of their uniqueness. *The Symphony No. 5 in B flat major* was the only one of his works in this form (with the exception of the unfinished *Ninth* of which Bruckner did not hear a performance before he died. The composer began work on this symphony early in 1875, soon after having completed the first draft of the *Fourth*, and it was ready by May the following year. Space does not allow a detailed analysis of the massive *Fifth Symphony* here. Let us content ourselves with drawing attention to the opening *Adagio*; this opening is the "germ" of the work, for it spreads its influence over the entire symphony, both thematically and tonally. The ensuing *Allegro* is monumental and complex; it is effectively contrasted by the broad and essentially simple outline of the ensuing slow movement, *Adagio*. The *Scherzo* is one of Bruckner's most energetic, a vast creature of fantastic proportions, but an amiable *Ländler* provides a measure of relief, as does the delicately-written trio section. The finale, a colossal and intricate elaboration begins, somewhat in the manner of the last movement of Beethoven's *Choral*, with reminiscences of the previous movements. The finale's own two themes are then subjected to a working-out of breathtaking magnificence and grandeur, and it then ends with a reference to the main theme of the opening movement made in a way in which, as it has well been described "Bruckner seems to link heaven and earth in one immutable visionary span."

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