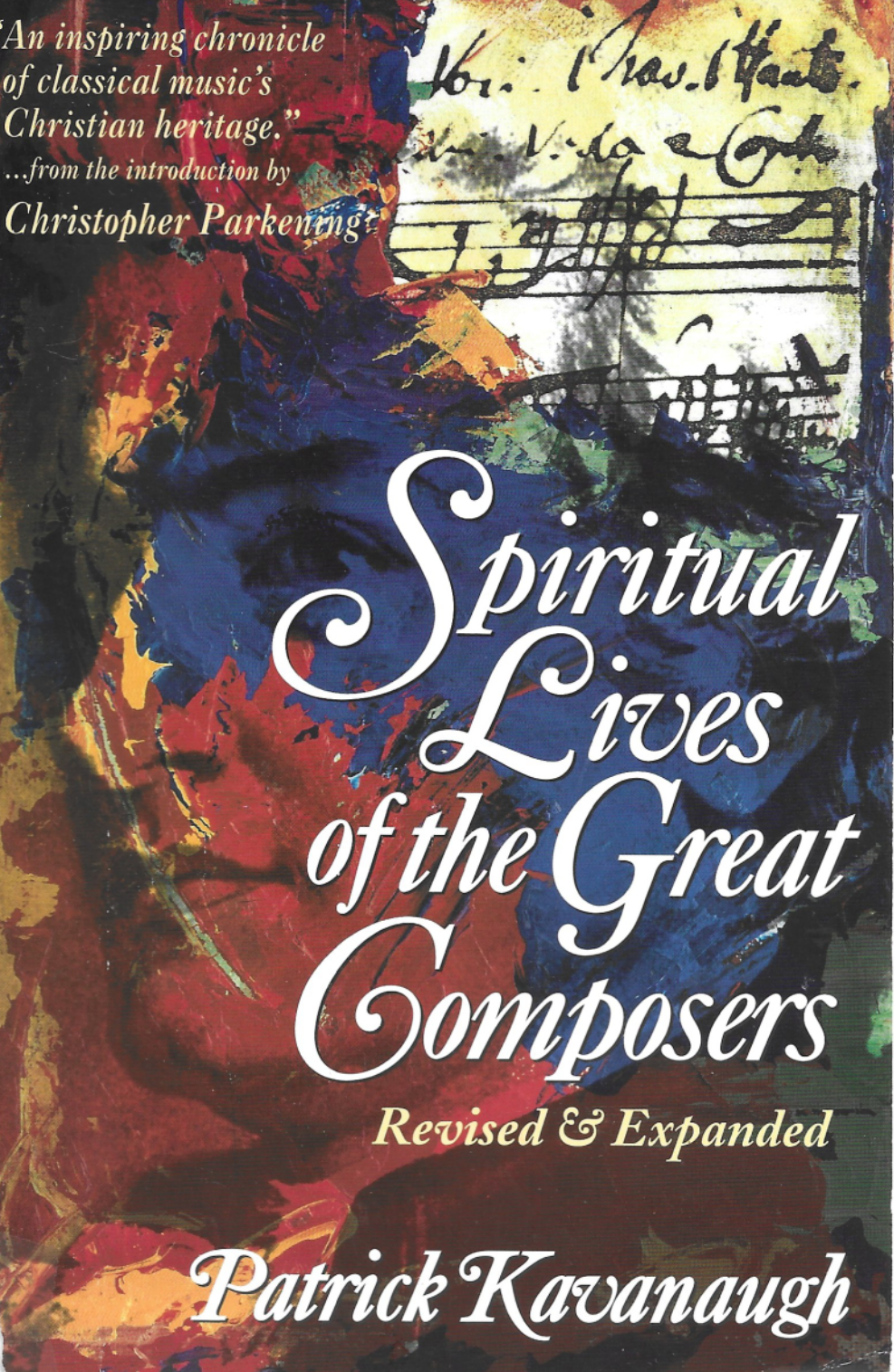


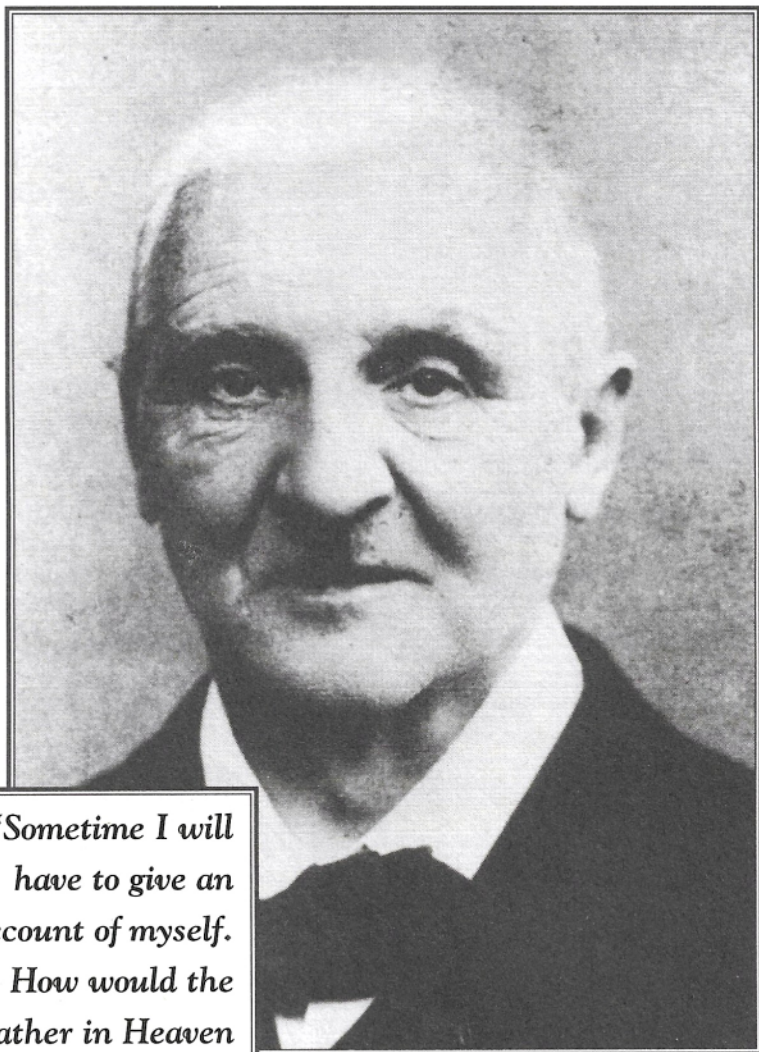


*An inspiring chronicle
of classical music's
Christian heritage."
...from the introduction by
Christopher Parkening*

Spiritual Lives of the Great Composers

Revised & Expanded

Patrick Kavanaugh



*"Sometime I will
have to give an
account of myself.*

*How would the
Father in Heaven
judge me if I
followed others
and not Him?"*

Anton BRUCKNER



1824–1896

As soon as the orchestra began to play, everyone in the Viennese audience could sense something was wrong. This concert, a symphony conducted by its composer, was not going over very well. At first the audience began murmuring, but soon loud jeers were heard. A contingent of faculty from the Vienna Music Conservatory burst into laughter. Finally, people were sneaking from their seats. The trickle grew and grew until the audience was leaving in droves. By the time the music was over, the large concert hall held but twenty-five listeners.

The composer of this innovative symphony had been so absorbed in his music that he was oblivious to the audience's protests. Wringing with sweat from his labors, he set down the baton and turned to receive his applause. In stunned horror, he saw the hundreds of empty seats where his audience had been.

Tears came to his eyes. He seemed in a stupor, unable to budge. After an awkward time, the embarrassed orchestra members stole from the stage. Of the twenty-five who had remained in the audience, one was the young composer, Gustav Mahler, who came to the podium to express his esteem for the music. But the conductor still could not move. Finally, he stammered, "Let me go. The people do not want to know anything of me." It would still be many years before the Viennese musical society would appreciate the genius of Anton Bruckner.

The little country of Austria has produced many of the world's greatest musicians, often from the most humble beginnings. Although their lives only overlapped a few years, the composers Schubert and Bruckner have a number of similarities. Both came from a family of schoolteachers and were trained to follow that trade. Neither married, and both lived most of their lives in musical obscurity.

But unlike the short-lived Schubert, Anton Bruckner would be given a long life. He would live to see his music acclaimed by the world, and his genius appreciated and honored. Yet these honors would not come until his later years. For decades before then, he would face more continuous rejection than almost any other composer in history.

Born in a small village of Upper Austria, young Bruckner's musical talent was soon obvious. Encouraged by his music-loving parents, he played the violin at the age of four and by ten was playing organ for local church services. When his father died in 1837, the boy entered the music school at the ancient monastery of Saint Florian. After graduation, Bruckner had a brief stint as a village teacher (his official duties included ringing the town bell at 4:00 A.M. and helping harvest crops in nearby fields!), and was paid the minuscule salary of one dollar per month. But in 1845 he joined the music faculty of Saint Florian's and was able to devote his time exclusively to music.

This baroque monastery and its worshipful atmosphere played a major part in shaping Bruckner's life. When, later in life, the hectic pace of living in a big city would stifle his imagination, he would retreat to the peacefulness of Saint Florian. His pious nature, evident from birth, was nurtured in its ancient walls. At a young age, he was called out from among the village boys for a special blessing by a dying priest. Musically, such surroundings helped him to become a virtuoso on the church's great organ and a lifetime composer of sacred music.

In 1856, Bruckner accepted a position of organist at the Linz Cathedral, where he remained for twelve years. He continued to

compose, mostly for chorus and orchestra, his favorite idiom. An important influence on his composing was his introduction to the music of Richard Wagner. He loved the ultrachromatic language of Wagner, and such modernization soon found its way into Bruckner's church compositions. The two composers met, and Bruckner was delighted at the encouragement he was given by the famous Wagner.

Toward the end of his stay in Linz, a combination of overwork and loneliness contributed to a nervous collapse. Perhaps this was also aggravated by his lack of success at wooing a mate. Like Beethoven a few decades earlier, the kindly but rather absent-minded Bruckner was rejected by several young women. He was eventually admitted to a sanitarium for a few months, and its restfulness restored his soul. He wrote a friend, "God be praised! He has saved me in time."¹

The famed Vienna Conservatorium offered him a post in 1868, and when he moved there he unexpectedly found himself in the middle of a musical war. Many in the town—including powerful music critics such as Eduard Hanslick—supported the composer Brahms as the successor of Beethoven's mantle. Others were in the Wagner camp, and the two sides seemed irreconcilable.

Since Bruckner was such an admirer of Wagner, he was considered a musical enemy by Hanslick, his newspaper, and his many allies. It became nearly impossible to have his works performed. The Vienna Philharmonic performed his *Symphony no. 1*, but it received such a cold response that they refused to play Bruckner's other works. He was told that his *Mass in F Minor* was "unsingable"; again, no performance. Whenever a piece was actually played, Hanslick was waiting to attack with his malevolent reviews. Another critic called Bruckner a "fool and a half."

This lasted for more than a decade, yet Bruckner continued to compose, believing that his talent was a trust given by God. He once explained with deep emotion, "They want me to write in a different way. I could, but I must not. Out of thousands I was given this talent by God, only I. Sometime I will have to give an

account of myself. How would the Father in Heaven judge me if I followed others and not Him?"²

Eventually, musicians of note began to recognize this persistent composer. When Hans Richter conducted Bruckner's *Symphony no. 4* in 1881, both audience and critics extolled the work. When his *Symphony no. 7* was premiered a few years later, it seemed that all of Europe exploded with approval. Though he was happy that his perseverance had been rewarded, he must have wondered when he read a favorable critic's words: "We asked ourselves in amazement, 'How is it possible that he could have remained so long unknown to us?'"

From then until his death in 1896, Bruckner was more and more respected and honored. He was awarded an imperial insignia by Emperor Franz Joseph, who was ready to bestow upon Bruckner whatever he asked, even a royal pension. The composer's answer to this royal boon? Bruckner asked the Emperor to stop Hanslick from continuing his wretched reviews!

The steadfast faith of Anton Bruckner was the one constant in his life of ups and downs. Biographer Hans Ferdinand Redlich has testified that "Bruckner is perhaps the only great composer of his century whose entire musical output is determined by his religious faith."³ Another wrote "Religiosity was the center of his heart. He was seeking God in his music. God Himself was his goal."⁴ Still another notes, "There was neither a spectacular conversion nor, at any time of his life, a religious crisis. His whole being shows a personality quietly in contact with God. His faith was an entirely unsentimental, firm and masculine belief."⁵

Bruckner considered his compositions to be divinely inspired. He listened to the "voice from within"⁶ and looked to God, "whose praises he sang in every note of his music."⁷ Bruckner had a strong "conviction that *only he who believes and trusts* finds true peace and the glory of the Lord."⁸ Working on his last symphony, he told his doctor that he intended to dedicate it, "to the King of kings, our Lord—and I hope that he will grant me enough time to complete it!"⁹ Finally he shortened the dedication to simply "to the good Lord," adding with meekness, "if He will accept it."¹⁰

Since Bruckner's nine symphonies are so frequently performed today, many orchestral devotees do not realize the greater extent of his sacred music, especially his beautiful masses. Yet even his symphonies, with their many chorales and hymn-like sonorities, have a spiritual quality that is recognized by listeners of many faiths. A devout Catholic, he had many friends of various denominations. As biographer Dika Newlin has pointed out, "a narrowly Catholic religious interpretation would have been quite foreign to his spirit."¹¹

Bruckner was known to be a man of prayer and fasting,¹² even keeping an account of his prayers in his diary.¹³ If he were to perform on the organ, he would not mount the bench until he had knelt and prayed.¹⁴ Concerning Bruckner's prayers, biographer Hans Ferdinand Redlich has noted, "by all accounts this was no mere word-saying but a complete immersion in a meditative process which took him beyond the confines of the physical world."¹⁵

Having begun the habit in childhood, Bruckner always stopped to pray whenever he heard a church bell. Often, while he was teaching, a distant bell would ring, and his students remembered that "in the middle of a lesson they suddenly became aware that his mind and spirit were no longer with them: the church bells had rung, and Bruckner was praying."¹⁶ Bruckner's prayerful attitude during his solitary walks led Paul Rosenfeld to comment, "No brother in blank Carthusian aisles could have paced sunken further in prayerfulness, God-passionateness and Lenten mood, than Bruckner through the city roads. There was the father in heaven."¹⁷

His students remember humorous methods in which Bruckner's biblical training found its way to his music theory classes. He began the first assignment by writing one note on the blackboard, saying: "First God made Adam." Then he added another note a perfect fifth higher and went on: "He soon gave him Eve, and the two did not remain alone."¹⁸ But he made his students study hard, insisting on high standards, both in their work and in their morals. Setting the example, he would "not tolerate anything of a lewd or obscene nature, and whenever the joking or the general conversation tended in that direction, he would either put a stop to it or else take his leave in an ostentatious manner."¹⁹

Bruckner's faith was reflected in his day-to-day life. He was kindhearted and generous, always bringing bags of sweets in his massive pockets for the choirboys whenever he had a rehearsal.²⁰ He was modest to the point of true gentleness and always showed sincere gratitude toward those who helped him.²¹ His quiet demeanor kept his unashamed convictions from ever appearing offensive to others. A story is remembered in which the composer noticed a Jewish student sitting in the hall during one of his lectures. Bruckner went to him, gently placing a hand on his head and opening a conversation with the inquiry: "Do you really believe that the Messiah has not yet come?"²²

As he approached his last years, Bruckner's faith never failed him. In a letter written to his former tutor, he mentioned his failing health, but concluded, "It is all as God wills."²³ As he continued to compose his ninth and final symphony, he jokingly told Gustav Mahler, "I must at least finish, or I'll cut a poor figure when I appear soon before the good Lord and he says, 'Well, my boy, why did I give you so much talent if not to sing to my honor and glory? You have not done nearly enough with it!'"²⁴

On January 12, 1896, he attended his last performance of his music, that of his beautiful *Te Deum*, one of his favorite compositions. He once used this work to illustrate how he believed his talents were to be used for the Lord. "When God calls me to Him and asks me, 'Where is the talent which I have given you?' Then I shall hold out the rolled up manuscript of my *Te Deum* and I know He will be a compassionate judge."²⁵

Anton Bruckner went home to be with his beloved God on October 11, 1896. In accordance with his wishes, he was buried under the powerful organ at the Saint Florian monastery, where he had so often communed through music with the Lord of his life.²⁶

Some Thoughts on Bruckner: Meekness

Jesus told his disciples, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5). Yet the virtue of meekness is hard to find among peoples of any epoch, and is not especially exem-

plified by history's composers. Perhaps composers work with such intensity to "put themselves into the music" that it is difficult to not fight back when their compositions are criticized. But this very quality allowed Anton Bruckner to rise above his critics and outlast them all.

Few composers have ever faced such long-term opposition from a hostile public. A Director of the Vienna Conservatorium told Bruckner to give up on trying to compose and to throw his symphonies into a trash can. When Bruckner dedicated his third symphony to his mentor Wagner, the anti-Wagnerites of Vienna assaulted with wrath, led by Hanslick, who called the symphony "insatiable rhetoric." The work had been accepted by the Vienna Philharmonic but rejected after the first rehearsal. All the musicians except one refused to play the piece.

Yet the composer refused to attack in kind. Instead, he continued to compose work after work, believing that his efforts would eventually be blessed. He even used his own meager resources to give his compositions a hearing. He paid the Vienna Philharmonic eight months of his salary to perform his *Mass in F Minor*, and spent even more for a performance of his *Symphony no. 2*.

His motive for such financial sacrifices was not egotistical, not simply to hear his music performed. Rather, it was his best long-term answer to his many critics. He so firmly believed that God wanted him to compose that he could neither desist nor waste time in meaningless verbal battles with his detractors.

In time, he was rewarded for such meekness. The public came eventually to love his great works and even to scorn those who disagreed. In fact, at the premiere of his *Symphony no. 8*, the audience actually booed his old nemesis Hanslick and sent him scampering out of the concert hall! God had honored Bruckner for his refusing to retaliate against unjust attack. His country came to love this gentle, meek man—and on his seventieth birthday all of Austria celebrated.

Recommended Listening

Orchestral Music: 9 symphonies, notably *Symphony no. 4 in E-flat Major* ("Romantic"); *Symphony no. 7 in E Major*

Choral Music: 3 masses, notably *Mass in F Minor* and *Te Deum*

Chamber Music: *String Quartet in C Minor*; *String Quintet in F Major*

Keyboard Music: *Fantasy in G Major* for piano; *Prelude and Fugue in C Minor* for organ