12 Between formlessness and formality: aspects of Bruckner's approach to symphonic form

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In memoriam Eugene K. Wolf (1939–2002)

There is something sphinx-like about Bruckner's musical forms. They can seem neat and traditional at one moment, but at the next appear free and unconventional. This duality is evident in the rather disparate interpretations, ranging from the accusation of 'formlessness' to the claim that Bruckner's symphonies represent a pinnacle in the evolution of musical form, that have been offered, discussed, and elaborated from the nineteenth century onward.

A prevalent early judgement found Bruckner's music 'formless'. This concern was first raised after the composer conducted the Second Symphony on 26 October 1873. A. W. Ambros, staking out what was to become a familiar position, wrote that instead of exhibiting, as expected, a 'firmly joined musical structure [*festgefügte musikalische Tektonik*]' the symphony drove the listener to 'breathlessness' by presenting a series of 'tonal shapes [*Tongebilde*] wilfully strung one after another'.[1] Throughout the 1880s the notion that Bruckner's symphonies were chaotic in form percolated through antagonistic reviews, most importantly in those by Hanslick, Kalbeck, and Gustav Dömpke. Dömpke, for example, opened his review of the Viennese première of the Seventh Symphony with the assertion 'Bruckner lacks the feel for the primary elements of musical formal shape, for the coherence of a series of melodic and harmonic component parts.'[2] Even observers sympathetic to Bruckner's music were occasionally puzzled by his forms; Hugo Wolf referred to a certain 'formlessness' that haunted the symphonies despite their 'originality, grandeur, power, imagination and invention'.[3] The durability of this notion is reflected by the publication in 1902 of a brief essay entitled 'Is Bruckner Formless?'[4] As late as 1925 Hans Alfred Grunsky published a lengthy analytical defence of Bruckner's 'immortal masterworks' against the 'accusation of musical formlessness'.[5] What exactly the term 'formless' meant was never made entirely clear. It undoubtedly referred in part to matters – including novelties of harmony, syntax, and motivic work – that are not aspects of 'form' in the modern sense, as well as to Bruckner's divergence from conventional *Formenlehre* paradigms. It is noteworthy that each of the Bruckner symphonies best known in the nineteenth century (the last revised versions of the Third and

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Fourth, and the Seventh) has a Finale that is strikingly unconventional in form.[6]

Other observers felt that Bruckner's symphonies were all too formal in their reliance on traditional symphonic models, both in their four-movement schemes and in the sonata form of individual movements. This claim particularly worried the young Wagnerians who advocated Bruckner's cause. Wagnerian formal doctrine placed great value on the ideal of organic form, and held that the symphony and especially the conventional forms associated with the genre were no longer vital. As Christian von Ehrenfels put it, Wagner's achievement was not to destroy musical form, as his critics claimed, but to demolish the continued validity of musical 'templates'.[7] Thus Rudolf Louis' observation in 1893 that Bruckner was 'all but slavish' in his use of conventional symphonic forms was meant to censure Bruckner both aesthetically and historically.[8] The difficulty of reconciling this view with an essential approval of Bruckner's works is apparent in August Göllerich's assertion (offered in an address about Bruckner on the occasion of the seventy-first anniversary of Wagner's birth!) that it was only because Bruckner was 'so intrinsically deep and richly talented, so German and therefore so specifically a musician ... that he is satisfied with the outward form of the symphony'.[9] Early twentieth-century critics echoed this view, but with subtly changed emphasis. In 1921 Franz Schalk wrote that 'nothing is more primitive than Brucknerian form ... Bruckner fabricated a very simple schema for his movements, and never speculated about it and held to it regularly in all of his symphonies'.[10] This sweeping overstatement, which certainly feels like criticism, rings strangely coming from an active proponent of Bruckner's symphonies. While it may have been intended simply to counter the idea that Bruckner was 'formless', it also probably reflected the changing politics of musical form in the early twentieth century, when Bruckner, no longer avant-garde and provocative, was increasingly positioned against the perceived scourge of the New Music and its 'formless' atonal tendencies.

August Halm and Ernst Kurth, two great Bruckner champions of the early twentieth century, developed a rather different view of his form and its historical significance. Halm claimed Bruckner's symphonic art as a synthesis of the two preceding musical 'cultures', the 'culture of the theme' epitomized by the fugal art of Bach and the 'culture of form' consummated in Beethoven's sonatas. 'A third culture of music ... is to be expected', he wrote, and 'it will be a complete culture of music for the first time ... I see it germinating ... in Anton Bruckner's symphonies.'[11] Kurth, whose work is related to Halm's in important ways, famously explained Bruckner's form not as a matter of static architecture but as the outward manifestation of metaphysical energy unfolding in series of dynamic waves. He argued that

Bruckner was a '*Dynamiker* of form' who 'snatched back the concept of form from one-sided rigidity and revived it' and was able to 'renew not form but forming [*das Formen*]'.[12] As historical prophecy such views do not hold up well – Bruckner had relatively little direct influence on succeeding generations of composers – yet they do focus worthwhile attention on the undeniable fluidity of Bruckner's music.

That the form of Bruckner's symphonies has generated such a range of contradictory interpretations is not explainable merely as the reflection of differences of opinion or even of different systems of evaluation; it stems ultimately from the originality and complexity of Bruckner's approach to the integration of symphonic form and content. Each of these lines of interpretation is partial, yet each fixes on something significant. Indeed much of the inner tension of Bruckner's symphonic project emerges from delicate balances: between a commitment to the structural grandeur of symphonic sonata form and an expressive agenda rooted in a vocabulary of advanced chromatic harmony, between tradition and innovation, between form as scheme and as dynamic process, between general and particular. Any successful criticism of these works needs to encompass the interrelationships of these elements and address the critical issues that bear on them and their interpretation. The goal of this essay is to consider and elucidate Bruckner's approach to form, specifically symphonic sonata form, by focusing on several of its crucial patterns and procedures, including the structure of the exposition, methods of recapitulation, and the interaction of form and content.

Bruckner's formal schema

In the latter half of the twentieth century several German scholars returned to the question of the schematicism of Bruckner's form. In the first edition of *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* Friedrich Blume, explicitly echoing Franz Schalk, asserted that Bruckner's symphonies represent a series of 'increasingly emphatic and gripping solutions' to one basic problem and are fundamentally alike in their forms and patterns, that his themes bear great 'family resemblance', and that he relied upon a single basic schema in creating his symphonies.[13] Blume broached two related yet distinct points. The first is the suggestion that Bruckner's symphonies are essentially similar and exhibit little development over the course of his career, a notion that may not be entirely baseless, but is easily overemphasized and has been by various authorities (unfortunately including some of the most widely used American music history textbooks).[14] Seen from afar, the likenesses among Bruckner's symphonies can impress, but as one begins to grasp

them as a series of individual works Bruckner's approach to form begins to reveal some striking lines of development. This evolution is most evident between Bruckner's two major periods of symphonic composition. The first of these (1872–6) produced the Second to Fifth Symphonies in their earliest versions. The second, which followed several years devoted to revising these works and extended until the late 1880s, produced a second group, comprising the Sixth to Eighth Symphonies, as well as the String Quintet. A second wave of revisions followed in the years around 1890, associated with the publication of several of the symphonies, notably the First, Third, Fourth, and Eighth.[15] The Ninth Symphony, begun in the late 1880s but left with the Finale unfinished at the composer's death, stands somewhat alone in time and, to some extent, in style. As will become clear, several aspects of Bruckner's approach to form underwent a significant change between the symphonies written in the 1870s and those from the 1880s.

Blume's second point, which has received some worthwhile attention in the analytical literature, is that 'a single basic schema' underlies Bruckner's forms.[16] While it is entirely possible to overstate the regularity and formality of Bruckner's forms, there is a whiff of schematicism about them. His symphonies are all based on the standard four-movement scheme; his Scherzos use the standard three-part form with trio and da capo; the structure of his outer movements is derived from the Classical pattern of exposition–development–recapitulation; his expositions present the structural oppositions basic to sonata form, namely the polarity of tonic and dominant keys and the presentation of distinct contrasting thematic ideas; his development sections elaborate material presented in the exposition and pursue a modulatory harmonic course; and his recapitulations restate the movement's themes and resolve into the tonic key. All of this is clearly laid out, perhaps too clearly at times, so that there is a hint of stiffness or formality to Bruckner's sonata form. Yet Bruckner's forms are not, in the end, very conventional: the key schemes in both the expositions and the recapitulations are often out of the ordinary (see Table 12.1) and the balance of the various sections of sonata form is very different from that of the Viennese classics; in particular, Bruckner gives both the second theme group and the closing material much greater space and attention than was traditional. And in several movements, Bruckner deviated substantially from classical forms, as in the unconventional layout of some Finales (notably in the Sixth and Seventh Symphonies and the Quintet) or in the intercutting of development and reprise in the first movement of the Ninth.

Moreover, as Wolfram Steinbeck emphasized, despite his 'broad brush-strokes', 'in no way did Bruckner fill out a learned, abstract, "ready-made" form-schema'.[17] Bruckner often worked out, especially in his later works,

Table 12.1 *Key schemes in Bruckner's sonata-form movements*

| | 1st. mvt. | | | | | | 4th. mvt. | | | | | |
| | expo. | | | recap. | | | expo. | | | recap. | | |
theme groups	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C
Sym. 1	c	Eb	Eb	c	C	c	c	c	Eb	c	a	C
'Nullte'	d	A	F	d	D	D	d	C	F	c	d	d(D)*
Sym. 2	c	Eb	Eb→G	c	C	c	c	A→Eb	Eb	c	C	c
Sym. 3a	d	F	F	d	D	d	d	F♯→F	Db(F)†	d	Ab→A	B(D)*
Sym. 4b	Eb	Db	Bb	Eb	B	Eb	bb→Eb	c→C	bb	eb	f♯→D	eb(Eb)*
Quintet	F	C	C(F♯)C	F	Db	F(B)F	Gb	f	E	—	Db	F
Sym. 5c	bb	F	Db (F)†	bb	g	Eb (Bb)*	Bb	Db	Bb	Bb	F	Bb
Sym. 6	A	e	C(E)†	Eb→A	f♯	D→E(A)*	A	C	C→E	A	A	C(A)*
Sym. 7	E	B	b	E	e	G(E)*	E	Ab	a	bd	C	E
Sym. 8e	c	G	Eb	→(c)	Bb	c	→c	Ab/f	eb	→c	Ab/f	c(C)*
Sym. 9	d	A	d(F)†	d	D	b→d	G→d	G	E	d	G	D

* This key is achieved only in the coda.
† This key is achieved only in the codetta.
a 1873 version
b 1880 version
c Slow introductions not included
d The recapitulation is reversed, beginning with the C theme and ending with the A theme.
e 1890 version

a subtle balance between formal convention and creative idiosyncrasy. A striking example is the arrival of the second theme group of the first movement of the Fourth Symphony (bars 75ff.), which is preceded by a rather formal arrival on the dominant of Bb, the expected dominant key (Tovey described it as 'stiff' and 'archaic');[18] yet following a momentary pause, the theme group begins resolutely in the remote key of Db. In the recapitulation, where things presumably ought to be 'set right' tonally, the second theme group appears, again following a similar cadence on the tonic triad of Eb, in the key of B major (= Cb) (bars 437ff.).

An even more important point is that Bruckner's forms are not schematic in the usual sense of the term. Carl Dahlhaus defined a schematic form as one 'sustained exclusively by the quality of the initial idea, the individual character of which compensated for the conventionality of the overall outline'.[19] In Bruckner, form emphatically does not serve merely to provide a frame for melodic content; rather the overall architecture is supported by the careful construction of key schemes and the strategic deployment of cadential progressions. This is evident in the care with which Bruckner arrays the keys in which material is restated in the second half of movements: e.g. the cadential passage that ends the slow introduction of the first movement of the Fifth Symphony on the dominant of the mediant returns on the home dominant to introduce the recapitulation (bars 347–62). He also made considerable use of well-articulated cadential progressions to define formally decisive junctures. In the earlier symphonies these signal themselves very clearly with a strong IV–V motion in the bass and/or a prominent

4–3 suspension on the dominant. In the 'Nullte' Symphony and the Second the coda of the Finale is announced by a compact decisive cadence of this sort, as is the final section of the coda in the Finale of the Third Symphony. In the first movements of the Second, Third, and Fourth the recapitulation is prefaced by an elongated version of the same basic progression. In the later symphonies cadential progression of this type are used to assert tonal goals somewhat more fluidly, often in the context of a chromatic, locally unstable harmonic medium, a practice reminiscent of that used in Wagner's mature works. For example, in the opening thematic statement in the first movement of the Eighth, an unresolved IV–V progression in C minor (bars 20–1) is important in establishing the tonal centre of a passage that starts far from the tonic. Similar progressions cadencing in secondary keys stabilize the second group (bars 71–3) and prepare the closing group (bars 89–97). In the first movement of the Ninth Symphony, this tendency is reduced to its essence in the coda, where a massively primal unison assertion of the pitches G and A prepares the final tonic D minor (bars 549–51).

The three-part exposition

The form of Bruckner's expositions is highly characteristic. Described simply, his expositions consist of three distinct sections: a primary thematic area that essays the tonic key, a lyrical second group, or, in Bruckner's terminology, the *Gesangsperiode*, and a closing group. Each of these sections is well marked and usually rather self-contained; often they comprise multipartite paragraphs in and of themselves. Bruckner provides little formal transitional music to bridge the sectional divides. In addition to the essential differences in thematic content and tonality, each section is, as a rule, quite distinct in mood, tone, rhythm, tempo (including in a number of movements, beginning with the Finale of the Third, a broadening of the basic tempo for the second theme group), texture, and orchestration.

Bruckner was quite consistent in his expositions, and it is possible to describe the characteristic traits of each of the three sections. The first group presents the primary thematic material, which may be based on a short motivic idea (as in the opening movements of the Second, Fourth, Sixth, and Eighth) or on a more complete, closed melodic theme (the first movement of the Seventh is the greatest example). In first movements, the primary theme group begins *piano* before presenting a contrastingly louder section, whether a *fortissimo* counterstatement as in the Fifth to Eighth, or with the introduction of complementary material at the crest of an intensifying *Steigerung* (build-up) as in the Third, Fourth, or Ninth. Generally Finales begin similarly, but several do begin forcefully straightaway (notably the First, Third, and Eighth).

Bruckner's *Gesangsperioden* are, as the term suggests, songful, flowing in motion, less insistent though often richly contrapuntal in texture, with orchestration that favours strings and woodwinds. Often the thematic material is a double-theme of some type, either a two-part contrapuntal complex (as in the opening movements of the first four symphonies) or the simultaneous presentation of two fairly distinct musical ideas, as in the well-known combination of polka and chorale in the Finale of the Third. A Brucknerian *Gesangsperiode* is considerably larger in size than a typical second theme group; indeed several are developed ternary forms in their own right. This tendency is strongest in his later works; in the first movements of the Sixth and the Seventh the second theme group is a complex rounded structure of some fifty bars covering considerable harmonic ground.

The concluding third theme group rounds off the exposition by returning to a mood closer to that of the opening group: the orchestration is full, the weight of the brass more evident, and in movements with a slower *Gesangsperiode*, the tempo returns to that of the opening material. Sometimes the thematic material feels akin to the primary theme, sometimes not. Often the closing group is based on some sort of grand *unisono* scoring; striking examples include the searing syncopated string unisons in the Finale of the Third and the enriched unison writing in the opening movements of the Sixth and the Eighth. The exposition closes with a quiet lyrical codetta, whose mood carries across the double bar into the beginning of the development section, blurring the division between the exposition and the development section and often giving rise to some of the most soulful music in the movement. See, for example, how Bruckner handles this juncture in the first movements of the Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth, and also in the Finale of the Fifth. With the exception of two apprentice works, the F minor Symphony of 1863 and the 1862 String Quartet, none of Bruckner's expositions is marked with a repeat sign.

Halm provided descriptions of the musical nature of each of the three theme groups that, although rather old-fashioned in tone, are trenchantly metaphorical. The first theme group is the 'dramatic group'; it exhibits 'the will to consequence' and 'the spirit of the future'. The *Gesangsperiode* in contrast is 'idyllic or lyric': 'its melodic self-sufficiency gives a feeling of the present... Here we no longer feel the passage of time, yet we sense within an urge forward.' The third group returns the music to directed action, but is more 'relaxed' than the first group. It is not 'fed by the conflict of opposites', rather the musical impulse is now unitary as 'gathered energy frees itself' and 'recovers' to yield basic triadic and stepwise progressions.[20]

Once he struck upon this tripartite plan in the First Symphony, Bruckner held to it consistently, both across his career and in the revision of individual symphonies; even in the most extensively revised movements – notably the

outer movements of the Third, Fourth, and Eighth Symphonies – the form of the exposition remained relatively unchanged. It is not a mere coincidence that Bruckner's first maturity, from his arrival in Vienna up to the completion of the Fifth Symphony, coincided with the crystallization of the three-part exposition. His method of exposition is conditioned by his overall approach to sonata form; conversely, the larger patterns of his movements, especially those of the recapitulation, depend on possibilities that arise from the nature of his expositions. In addition, the structure of Bruckner's expositions underwrites many of the most striking characteristics of his music including its richness of thematic material, the great contrasts that arise from the juxtaposition and working-out of several well-marked thematic ideas, and a pronounced expansion of the formal and temporal dimensions.

Bruckner's threefold exposition is indebted to the music of previous generations. Beethoven and Schubert fairly often made use of a closing group with a clear thematic profile, and, as John Williamson pointed out, 'that the closing section of a sonata-form exposition may make reference to the first subject is a procedure as old as Mozart. The so-called third subject in Bruckner is merely an expansion of this tendency.'[21] Schubert's fondness for lyrically expansive and self-contained second theme areas made a deep impression on Bruckner. Bruckner's expositions also clearly participate in a nineteenth-century tendency to expand the tonal scheme of sonata-form expositions to include a third key; these so-called 'three-key expositions' are found often in the works of Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Brahms, and other Romantic composers, and the roots of this procedure have been traced back to Haydn, Mozart, and other late eighteenth-century composers.[22] Bruckner's employment of these structures pursued many of the advantages adduced by James Webster in his important essay on three-key expositions of Schubert and Brahms, notably the possibility of integrating 'lyrical themes, quasi-closed forms, remote keys, and the double second group' into 'a coherent large sonata-form exposition'.[23] Despite a certain similarity of aim, Bruckner's recasting of the classical exposition is in several ways more radical. In contrast to Brahms' ideal of meticulously crafted transitions, Bruckner's desire to emphasize contrast led him to minimize transitional sections. In Bruckner's expositions theme groups usually follow each other quite directly, without much mediating material, and when transitional sections do appear, they are limited to a few bars of dominant preparation and often even this is suppressed (precedents may be found in the opening movements of Beethoven's Fifth and Schubert's 'Unfinished', which limit themselves to a brusque transition between the first and second theme groups). The most significant morphological difference in Bruckner's expositions is the expansion and elevation

of the third group into a fully fledged unit on a par with the first and second groups. This process anchored both ends of the exposition, freeing the *Gesangsperiode* to evolve into a characteristically extensive and musically replete section. Also, since a main function of the third group was to secure and define the key of the dominant or, in some minor-key movements, the relative major, the *Gesangsperiode* was relieved of one of the traditional function of a second theme group, the establishment of the exposition's second structural key. Bruckner was happy to take full advantage of this latitude, especially from the Third Symphony on; the key schemes of his expositions, or more precisely of his second theme groups, are often very rich and wide-ranging.

The expansion of the exposition, and therefore the recapitulation as well, obviously contributes to the splendid expansiveness of Bruckner's symphonies. Simply enlarging the theme groups, especially the second and third, serves to extend the duration of a movement. Of even more importance perhaps, are the grand contrasts created by the markedly different patterns of musical motion of the primary and closing groups, on one hand, and the *Gesangsperioden* on the other. These contribute greatly to Bruckner's impressively extensive feeling of time; as Tovey wrote about Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, 'the enlargement of time-scale is not a matter of total length; it is a matter of contrasts in movement'.[24] Bruckner symphonies expound and glorify such contrasts.

Also, and this should be emphasized, Bruckner's symphonies do contain musical elements that cut across formal divisions, counteracting any latent tendency to stasis inherent to his architectonic schemas. The most important of these are Bruckner's famous *Steigerungen*, intensifying passages that build climactically by means of *crescendo*, rhythmic compression, and (often) rising linear motion and harmonic tension.[25] Sometimes such passages remain neatly within the bounds of a formal section, as for example near the end of the primary theme area in the 1880 Finale of the Fourth Symphony (bars 50–92) or in the first movement opening theme group in the Third and the Ninth. When coordinated with the end of a formal section, a *Steigerung* can emphasize its integrity; the best example might be the forceful and prolonged dominant preparation that ushers in the closing group in the first movement of the Seventh (bars 103–22). More often, however, Bruckner's *Steigerungen* refuse to accede neatly to formal schemes. An early instance is found in the first movement of the First Symphony when a sudden, sharp intensification leads to an abrupt, unexpected thematic outburst near the end of the exposition (from bar 78 in the Linz version). Another striking destabilizing *Steigerung* occurs near the end of the first movement of the Eighth; it builds to a seething peak of intensity and rapidly collapses into the tautly quiet coda. And in several of his later symphonies Bruckner

artfully deployed gestures of this sort in conjunction with the process of recapitulation.

A number of other gestures are characteristic of Bruckner's symphonic forms. These include the grandly sweeping tuttis that surge forward in several first movement development sections (see the Fourth Symphony at bar 253 or the Fifth at bar 283), sudden momentary lyrical outbursts (as in the *Gesangsperiode* in the first movement of the Ninth at bar 123), and the peremptory return of the tonic in the development section of the first movements of the Third, Fourth, and Ninth Symphonies. The most important of these gestures may be sudden local tonal shifts based on half-step progressions, examples of which can be found across Bruckner's symphonic career: these shifts are similar to what Adorno described as Mahler's 'macrological' progressions that, in their brusqueness, create broad patterns of 'light and shadow ... foreground and depth'.[26] In Bruckner, such progressions do occur between abutting formal sections, a usage that seems more conventionally Romantic, if unusual in symphonic music. A good example is the appearance of the *Gesangsperiode* in the Finale of the Second Symphony in the key of A major following a firm arrival on the dominant of Db major (at bar 76). More characteristically, though, these macrological shifts occur within theme groups and in development sections, as in the finale of the First at bar 134, the middle of the *Gesangsperiode* of the first movement of the Third (bar 147 of the 1873 version), the finale of the Sixth at bar 151, and in the opening theme group of the Ninth, where the shift from D minor to Eb is integral to the thematic concept.

Gestures of quotation and recall

One of Bruckner's most characteristic formal procedures is the use of various gestures of thematic quotation or recall, and these too are coordinated in various ways with formal architecture. Several types of quotation, differing in placement, material, and method, can be discerned. In the Second Symphony and in the early version of the Third Bruckner introduces quotations from outside the work. These gestures appear between formal units and thus outside the main structural argument of the movement (making it easy for Bruckner to remove them in later versions). In the Second material directly derived from Bruckner's F minor Mass is quoted in the slow movement (bars 138–40 and 180–3 of the Nowak edition) and in the Finale (bars 200–9 and 547–56), and a motive reminiscent of *Rienzi* is presented near the end of the third theme group of the first movement (bars 163–76 and 460–79). The first movement of the 1873 version of the Third Symphony, as is well known, includes several clear evocations of Wagner: the 'Liebestod' motive

from *Tristan* appears in bars 463–8 and the 'Magic Sleep Music' from *Die Walküre* is paraphrased in bars 479–88 (the opening theme of the Second appears between these Wagner allusions). Leaving aside the thorny questions about the possible semantic and/or programmatic meanings of these quotations, the form of these gestures, which marks the quoted material as something extrinsic, is itself significant.[27]

Most of Bruckner's gestures of quotation are cyclical; they recall material presented earlier in the symphony. The Second, Third, Fourth, and, even more dramatically, Fifth Symphonies include in their final movements clear reminiscences of themes from preceding movements. In the earliest versions of the Second and the Third principal motives from earlier movements are presented in a quiet interstice before the final phase of the coda. In the Fourth (1880 and 1888 versions), these allusions are less formal: the first movement's main motive is dramatically recalled at the culmination of the opening theme group (at bar 79) and the Scherzo is invoked both in the opening group (bars 29–42) and near the end of the development (bars 360–70). The Finale of the Fifth Symphony opens with a passage surely modelled on Beethoven's Ninth that reviews the main themes of the slow introduction, the first movement, and the Adagio. In his later works, as his feeling for form became more fluid, Bruckner largely abandoned this sort of formalized quotation, and he removed most of them from the revised versions of the Second and Third Symphonies. From the Sixth Symphony onwards another type of thematic recall is pre-eminent, an apotheosizing statement of the main theme of the first movement (usually in a stabilized form) late in the Finale. This is held back until the conclusive period of the coda in the Sixth and the Seventh, on the model of the Finale of the Third. In the Eighth, as in the Fifth, Bruckner brings the opening theme back somewhat earlier (bars 619–23 of the 1890 version, just before the coda) and then crowns the work with its famous triple thematic overlay in the final pages, just as the Fifth culminates in a chorale with the head motive of the first movement deployed contrapuntally as a countersubject.

Recapitulation

It is in the recapitulation, which is both the crucial and the most problematic element of sonata form, that Bruckner breaks most decisively with formal convention. The 'metaphysics of return', to borrow James Buhler's apposite formulation, is essential to the traditional aesthetic of sonata form; return, as formalized by the process of recapitulation, 'carries the heavy burden not only of creating musical time but also of engendering and thus making possible the totality of the work', and it 'thus possesses a metaphysical

import that brings into existence the appearance of the properly musical'.[28] It is appropriate, then, that the recapitulation of the exposition's thematic material, beginning with the 'simultaneous return' of both primary theme and tonic key at the end of the development section, has been described as 'the central structural event, distinguishing sonata form from all others that begin with an exposition ... Neither a simple restatement of the main theme alone, nor a simple return to the tonic alone, has the intense impact of this simultaneous return.'[29] A complementary notion of recapitulation places special emphasis on the so-called 'sonata principle': the exposition, with its tonicization of the dominant (or relative key) and presentation of a second theme group in the new key, establishes a 'large-scale dissonance' that the recapitulation then resolves by reprising the 'material played outside of the tonic (i.e., the second group)' in the tonic key.[30] Bruckner's recapitulations pay court to both of these principles, the 'double return' and the resolving restatement of the second (and third) groups in the body of the recapitulation; yet they tend to avoid simple fulfilment of them, especially in the later symphonies. The gestures and pattern of recapitulations grow increasingly complex and Bruckner was at pains, especially in his finales, to postpone full resolution and tonal completion until late in the movement. The ways in which Bruckner accomplished this repay careful attention, both because of their musical interest and because they involve an aesthetically fraught structural juncture.

In his earlier symphonies, up to the Fourth, Bruckner's handling of the initial portion of his recapitulations is quite regular, with the reprise beginning with a 'simultaneous return' prepared by a dominant preparation. In first movements the development section comes to rest on the dominant, whereupon the recapitulation begins quietly in the tonic, as did the exposition. In the First and Second Symphonies, the recapitulation of the Finale begins forcefully with the main theme arriving at the peak of a prolonged, gathering dominant preparation. However, the ways in which Bruckner recapitulates the second and third theme groups in these works is somewhat more unusual. The task of recapitulating this material is made more complicated by the structure of the exposition, with the presence of a definite third theme group and often a third key area; since these comprise the 'material played outside of the tonic' in the exposition their restatement is crucial to fulfilment of the sonata principle. In the first movements of these symphonies Bruckner restates this material quite conventionally, with some important exceptions in the First Symphony (where the great trombone theme from the exposition (bars 94ff. in the Linz version) is simply absent) and the Fourth Symphony (a work in E♭ major in which the *Gesangsperiode* first appears in D♭ major and is restated in B major). The key schemes of the recapitulation of the Finales of the Third and Fourth display great

latitude. The Finale of the Third in D minor has a second theme group that in the exposition begins firmly in F♯ major before making its way to the expected F major. In the recapitulation (1873 and 1877), this section begins in A♭ before arriving in A major, a key much closer to the tonic, yet not *the* tonic, as formal convention would seem to require. (In the 1889 version A major is all but eliminated at this point.) This is followed by a blazing restatement of the closing theme group on B♭, which circles closer to the tonic, but hardly fulfils the conventions of the sonata principle. The tonic of D minor arrives only in the coda. In both the 1874 and the 1878 versions of the Finale of the Fourth Symphony, which is in E♭, the second theme group first appears in C and is recapitulated in D, and this pattern persists with modification in the two later versions of the movement (1880 and 1888) as well.

Bruckner's methods of recapitulation evolved substantially in the late 1870s. The turning point seems to have occurred with the Fifth Symphony (composed in 1875–6 and reworked through 1878) and the recomposition of the Finale of the Fourth Symphony (1879–80). In these works new strategies emerge, especially around the juncture at the beginning of the recapitulation. In the first movement of the Fifth, the recapitulation arrives with a *fortissimo* announcement of the head motive of the main theme on the tonic, B♭ major. This 'simultaneous return' differs from the commencement of the exposition in several ways: it does away with the *piano* statement of the theme that opens the Allegro and the recapitulation is set up by sixteen strong bars of dominant preparation, while in the exposition the main theme emerges from the slow introduction that ends with a powerful sounding of the dominant of D minor. Both of these modifications serve to increase the impact of the thematic reprise; yet in the recapitulation, the main theme group, which is harmonically unstable, is truncated to a mere eighteen bars and quickly slides to the dominant of G minor, in which key the *Gesangsperiode* is restated.

The 1880 Finale of the Fourth (the version commonly performed today) handles the start of the recapitulation so freely that the boundary marking its beginning is blurred: the development section dissolves into a mysterious passage, based on the inversion of the movement's main theme, of great harmonic subtlety (with prominent use of an augmented triad) that hovers around the dominant of D minor before settling to dwell quietly on the home dominant (bars 351–82). Following a long bar of near silence, a prominent motive from the primary theme group is announced *fortissimo* in a massive tutti that begins on the tonic E♭ (in bar 383) but immediately begins to move harmonically and soon subsides on the dominant of F♯ minor. The restatement of the complete two-part *Gesangsperiode* begins in F♯ minor and moves to D major. In the 1888 version of this movement, the *fortissimo*

passage from bar 383 is removed and the reprise of the first part of the *Gesangsperiode* begins in D minor, not F♯ minor, preceding the second part of the *Gesangsperiode* in D major. (Interestingly, the 1888 changes bring the key scheme of this portion of reprise closer to the form it had in the 1874 and 1878 versions of the movement.) The third theme group, elements of which were handled at length in the development section, is merely hinted at before the coda begins with a transformed variant of the material that had opened the movement, now transposed from B♭ minor to the tonic minor.

In both of these movements Bruckner splits the various components of the process of recapitulation – dominant preparation, thematic and tonal return, restatement of the second and third theme groups in the tonic key or not – and doles them out in ways that do not follow the usual patterns or structural conventions. These manipulations serve to postpone the achievement of full structural closure until late in the movement, often not until the final phase of the coda.

Bruckner carries this process further in his final group of symphonies. The first movements of the Sixth and the Eighth both do several things worthy of special note. Both symphonies, like the Fifth, begin with an initial *piano* statement of the main theme that is balanced by an immediate *forte* counterstatement; in both recapitulations, however, Bruckner (again as in the Fifth) begins the recapitulation with a shattering *fortissimo* thematic statement that dramatizes the moment of arrival. Each of these arrivals is emphatically prepared by a propulsive dominant preparation, neither of which, remarkably, is rooted on the home dominant; moreover, neither recapitulation begins firmly in the tonic key, thus contesting the central norm of symphonic recapitulation. In the Sixth (in the key of A) the reprise of the main theme is prefaced by a dissonant sonority on the dominant of E♭ minor, which ushers in a reprise of the innately mobile primary theme beginning on E♭ and quickly moving through A (the tonic) to C♯. The *Gesangsperiode*, which appeared in E minor in the exposition, in recapitulated in F♯ minor.[31]

In the Eighth (in C minor), Bruckner also actively destabilizes the tonality at the start of the recapitulation. As the home dominant begins to gather itself in preparation, the harmony slips to the dominant of B♭ minor (bars 217–24) and the music drives forward to a massive announcement based on the primary theme at its original pitch level. The main theme, which is chromatically inflected, tends to veer away from the tonic key, and here Bruckner maximizes this tendency by driving the music through a series of sequential statements. Some bars later, a second statement of the main theme appears in something like the tonic, but with a richly dissonant Neapolitan overlay (bars 283ff.). With the return of the second theme group held to the relative major, it is not until the reprise of the third theme group that the tonic key is finally secured.[32]

Bruckner's handling of the recapitulation in the first movement of the Seventh Symphony in E major is equally sophisticated, but is necessarily treated differently because the primary theme is based on an inherently stable arpeggiation of the tonic triad. The process of reprise begins, after some sixty-five bars of development, as the music comes to hover on a quiet G major triad (bars 229–32). Suddenly a grandiose statement by the full orchestra of the head motive of the main theme in inversion rings out in C minor. Because of its force, this gesture feels like the start of a recapitulation, yet it is so palpably remote from the tonic key that it clearly cannot be the real thing. After sixteen bars of this, the first clause of the main theme, still in C minor, is restated in its original form with its first few bars surrounded by canonic entries of its head motive in both prime and inverted forms. This entire twelve-bar unit is then repeated, transposed up a step to D minor. If this pattern were to be repeated, we would land on E minor, the tonic minor, but Bruckner tinkers with its continuation to deflect the music to the dominant seventh of Ab. Here the clustering canonic entries of the head motive return, only to give way abruptly after four bars to a radiant and still E major and the restatement of the complete primary theme, which is sounded, as on the opening pages, by the cellos with doubling first by a single horn and then the clarinets. Unlike the exposition, though, the theme is here mirrored by the simultaneous sounding of its ornamented inversion in the first violin and flutes. Following an extraordinarily elliptical transition (bars 303–18), the *Gesangsperiode* is restated beginning in the tonic. This harmonically mobile theme group inevitably unfolds through a range of flat-side harmonies and leads to a restatement of the third theme group that wholly avoids E. It is not until the coda, then, that E is finally established by the sort of firm, if not yet decisive, cadential motion that was so pointedly absent at the return of either the first or second theme group. In this movement, then, Bruckner effectively deconstructs the process of recapitulation and individually distributes its various thematic, tonal, and gestural elements.

Form and content: incongruence?

Despite the undeniable presence of a number of formal conventions and patterns derived from standard sonata form, Bruckner's symphonies do not feel terribly classical or traditional. A number of critics have described a tension or imbalance between the outward trappings of sonata form and the specific content and style of Bruckner's music. During Bruckner's lifetime, Rudolf Louis referred to the 'incongruence between form and content' in Bruckner.[33] In the 1960s Werner Korte suggested that the influence of

Formenlehre led Bruckner into the 'cardinal sin' of 'regarding "form" and "content" as two separate matters'.[34] Roughly similar sentiments became quite prevalent in British Bruckner criticism. Tovey bluntly asserted that 'the fundamental mistake of Bruckner was in associating his Wagnerian style with sonata form at all'.[35] Robert Simpson, who like Tovey admired Bruckner's music, in discussing the first movement of the Seventh referred to 'the gulf between sonata principles and those obeyed by Bruckner', a sentiment that recurs several other times in his writings.[36]

This line of criticism connects with several aesthetic positions. One is the familiar sense that the classical equilibrium of form and content, of part and whole, was increasingly lost in the course of the nineteenth century. In the Romantic era, as Edward Cone put it, composers treated sonata form 'no longer as a principle, but as a "form"'. Thus composers from 'Chopin to Bruckner and beyond, dutifully try, in individual ways, to force intractable material into an unyielding mould'.[37] In a similar vein, Roger Sessions wrote that Romantic composers increasingly emphasized 'the individual detail' at the expense of 'synthesis, the real essence of musical form', such that in Wagnerian music 'musical coherence is there, to be sure – but in a passive sense'.[38] These judgements assume an ideal of musical form as organic, a belief that musical form should arise, or grow, by inner processes, not external conventions or patterns. Charles Rosen identified as a hallmark of classical form the 'sense that the movement, the development, and the dramatic course of a work all can be found latent in the material [and] that this material can be made to release its charged force so that the music ... is literally impelled from within'.[39] Bruckner's music is hard to accommodate within this organicist aesthetic, notwithstanding Kurth's Herculean – and often truly perceptive – efforts in this direction; it is not seamless music that seems to germinate effortlessly, nor is it free from traces of schematicism. Bruckner, it seems fair to conclude, was less concerned with formal organicism than many of his critics; he was also out of step with Wagner, who placed great emphasis on the significance of organic structures and the escape from artistic conventions. Perhaps Bruckner's non-organic sense of form reaches back to the Latin Mass, highly conventionalized both as a text and as a musical genre, that was such an important presence in his musical world, especially in his formative years.

Many of the musical ends Bruckner pursued – powerful expressions of contrast, lyrical and harmonic intensity, and epic grandeur – could not be achieved easily or naturally within more 'organic' forms. It may be that one of Bruckner's basic insights was to accept that musical form was to some extent, in Dahlhaus' terms, 'a system of formal relations' – in other words, something in dialogue with conventional patterns and schemes – and not to insist that form must appear as the result of 'organic' unfolding of the

possibilities latent in motivic and thematic kernels.[40] Bruckner was thus responding to a tension emerging from the historical condition of the symphony and of musical language itself in the final decades of the nineteenth century. The advanced chromatic and motivic techniques of the time were not easily adaptable to the purposes of traditionally conceived symphonic forms, which had originally developed out of a much more basic harmonic vocabulary. Bruckner's schematic formal approach responded to this condition; the solidity of its larger architecture allowed the accommodation of a complex tonal and motivic vocabulary within a firmly drawn symphonic structure.

Bruckner's use of harmonic and motivic devices that were stylistically progressive, and thus by the standards of the time broadly Wagnerian, is probably the source for the idea bluntly expressed by Hanslick that a basic 'peculiarity' of Bruckner's symphonies was his 'importing Wagner's dramatic style into the symphony'.[41] The particular formation of Viennese musical politics certainly coloured Hanslick's view, yet scholars such as Tovey have shared it and not without musical justification. Guido Adler, who studied under both Hanslick and Bruckner, wrote that Bruckner 'transferred idiosyncratically the motivic workmanship of the musical drama to his themes and thematic treatment'.[42] Adler did not explain how this influence manifested itself, but its effect is clearly to be felt in Bruckner's preference for plastic, well-characterized, fragmentary, and often chromatic and/or harmonically unstable thematic ideas (e.g. the opening themes of the Second, Sixth, and Eighth Symphonies) that are presented very clearly and often immediately developed into paragraphs that tend to avoid the grammatical conventions of classical periodic phrase structure; thus, as Blume wrote, Bruckner worked 'with brisk, energy-laden motifs each of which is developed within itself... out of this motivic work grows an extensive thematic complex that in itself forms a tense and firm symphonic unit'.[43] Consider the opening pages of the Fourth Symphony: a simple motive based on a dotted rhythm and the interval of a fifth is introduced by a solo horn (instrumental timbre is here thematic, as in many Wagnerian leitmotifs) and is repeated, first by the horn and later by upper woodwinds and the horn in dialogue, in a series of increasingly evolved variants before giving way to a new motive (in the 'Bruckner rhythm', bars 43ff.) and at last reaching a structural cadence (bar 51). Harmonically this passage, which sets wind and horn firmly in relief against a continuous tremolando background played by the strings, derives less from the syntax of common-practice chord progression than from harmonic motion around sustained pedal tones (the tonic is sounded by the cellos and/or the violas through bar 32) leavened by sudden enharmonic shifts (for example, in bars 29–35 where a C minor sixth chord moves to a D♭ minor sixth followed by a second inversion triad

of A). It is followed by a counterstatement based on variants of the rhythmic motive introduced in bar 43 that differs markedly from the opening paragraph in character, sonority, and rhythmic structure but is similar to it in its smart progression through some remote harmonic regions (from C♭ to A♭ minor via an augmented sixth on F♭, bars 59–65) before defining a firm tonal goal (the dominant of the dominant). Adler suggested that Bruckner's manner of motivic treatment may have 'exercised a loosening influence on his thematic work [and] on the sequence and juxtaposition of groups within movement-sections', and wondered whether 'the manner in which his ideas were handled was an essential component of his design'.[44] These observations are not, of course, mutually exclusive. The inherent richness of many of Bruckner's thematic ideas and their treatment serve direct expressive purposes, yet the solid and often fairly closed paragraphs they engender foreclose the possibility of a smoothly connected overall structure emerging seamlessly from thematic-motivic work; instead, they necessitated forms that had exposed seams and palpable 'edges and corners'. Thus with Bruckner, the larger connections become evident 'only by grasping the complete structure'.[45]

As Dahlhaus pointed out, in the wake of the 'crisis' of symphonic form in the mid-nineteenth century 'the connection between syntactic structure and formal function that existed in classical sonata form was sundered'.[46] The effect of this disruption – or perhaps better, a response to possibilities arising from it – is evident in Bruckner's coordination of function and gesture; many of his theme groups make use of syntactic features – sequence, roving chromatic harmony, motivic evolution, *Steigerungen* – that were traditionally devices of development, not exposition. As a critical category, 'form' (and therefore 'formlessness') indexes more than morphology; it also encompasses the intelligibility of the work (heard against the horizon of tradition) and the interplay of thematic content, formal design, and generic expectation. Bruckner's novel approach to the coordination of the elements contributed to the nineteenth-century perception that his music was formless. This is evident in comments made by Theodor Helm in 1896, who stated that Bruckner's music could 'immediately alienate those unprepared listeners who cannot let go of strict classical formal notions. Specifically, Bruckner was fond of elaborating the second and third themes of his first movements just as extensively as his main theme, and of spinning out these subsidiary ideas at length before returning to the main theme. This hinders the impression of unity on first hearing...'.[47] The infusion of 'developmental' devices into areas devoted to thematic exposition, and in turn recapitulation, is facilitated by the schematic aspects of Bruckner's conception of form, which makes possible the structural balancing of large sections regardless of their content and apparent function and which also

ameliorates the importance of thematic antagonism as a generative force of sonata form. The thematic contrasts in Bruckner are great – often greater than anything to be found in Mozart, Brahms, Schumann, and even Beethoven – but the contrasting themes rarely interact with each other in the ways that they do in the work of other, more 'organic' composers. Perhaps it is that Bruckner's contrasts are so sharply drawn and preserved throughout the course of a work that the individual parts remain too autonomous to submit easily to the impression of seamless formal totality.

Epilogue: form, fragment, and feeling

Some of Bruckner's most moving and affecting pages – for me these include the C minor passage that opens the *Gesangsperiode* of the Finale of the Fourth Symphony, the mosaic-like second theme group in the first movement of the Sixth, the poignantly plain melody sung by the Wagner tubas in the Adagio of the Eighth (bars 67–70, 1890 version) and a moment of passionate arioso in the Finale of that symphony (at letter T) – have an odd self-sufficiency; they seem to exist microcosmically in the larger universe of the symphony. With this, these passages aspire to the condition of the 'Romantic Fragment', a term recently introduced to the criticism of nineteenth-century music by Charles Rosen. In Rosen's formulation, a fragment of this type is 'imperfect and yet complete' and 'is, or should be, a finished form: it is the content that is incomplete – or, rather, that develops further with each reading'.[48] 'The Romantic Fragment', he elaborates, 'is, therefore, a closed structure, but its closure is a formality: it may be separated from the rest of the universe, but it implies the existence of what is outside of itself not by reference but by its instability'.[49] It might seem odd to apply a formal notion derived from *Lieder* and character pieces to monumental symphonies; yet because of the 'formality' of Bruckner's forms certain episodes, especially *Gesangsperioden*, achieve a sheltered isolation somewhat akin to the uneasy autonomy of a song in a song cycle. And because they are self-subsisting units whose meaning, but not form, 'develops further with each reading' Bruckner's theme groups can return essentially unchanged, if often tonally alienated, yet still with new meaning in the recapitulation.

Edward Said responded to Bruckner's distinctive patterns of repetition and change. Before quoting the *Gesangsperiode* of the first movement of the Ninth, he speculated that the value of musical elaboration is not necessarily its achievement of 'finished perfection', but 'that the essence of the elaboration can be transformative and reflective, that it can occur slowly not only because we affirm and reaffirm its repetition, its meandering course, but also because it too seems to be about the same process, the

way, for example, there is something both reflective and circular – without regard for impressive development – in the leisurely, majestic unfolding of Bruckner's Ninth Symphony'.[50] Perhaps these ideas can help us perceive the larger patterns of meaning in Bruckner's form. The pacing, the majesty, the reflection, the circling, the repetition that occur within individual movements and across Bruckner's symphonic oeuvre can, evidently, be objectionable to some; yet it is by them that Bruckner's music wins some of its greatest and most humane expression.