

“Anton Bruckner was a combination of genius and simpleton,” Fritz recalled. “He had two coordinates—music and religion. Beyond that he knew almost nothing. I doubt whether he could multiply or subtract correctly.

“Religion was very real with him. If the near-by bells tolled, he would either fall on his knees in the midst of a class lesson and pray or, more often, would leave us and rush over to the church for his devotions.

“He was a man without guile and of a childlike naïveté. We youngsters, I must confess, took advantage of these traits of his. I recall two instances. One day some sort of official imperial commission, headed, if my memory serves me right, by Professor Hermann von Helmholtz, dropped in on our class to see how Bruckner’s pupils were doing. I may say parenthetically that Bruckner was not a good teacher, though he was a magnificent, exemplary human being.

“To my amazement the revered *Meister* asked me, as the youngest one in the class, to go to the blackboard and write something in fugue style. ‘Fritz,’ he said, ‘compose a fugue quickly.’ I was then only eight years old. I was flabbergasted. My mind was a blank. No theme would occur to me on the spur of the moment. But our teacher had given us a little textbook with about ninety themes for fugues composed by himself. I knew them by heart. I boldly wrote one of them out on the blackboard. Bruckner, completely forgetting that he had composed and given them to us, looked at my product approvingly and observed, ‘Not bad at all.’

“My bluff had worked with Bruckner. Not, however, with my classmates, the youngest of whom were three years older than I. When class was dismissed, the boys waited for me outside and gave me a sound thrashing. They were so comradely, however, as not to give me away to the *Meister*.”

During this period, a bitter fight was on between the followers of Richard Wagner and Johannes Brahms. The “Wagnerites” of Vienna included, among others, Anton Bruckner.

“Bruckner had a chubby, fat pug dog named Mops,” Kreisler recalled. “He would leave us with Mops munching our sandwiches while he himself hastened off to luncheon. We decided we’d play a

joke on our teacher which would flatter him. So while the *Meister* was away, we'd play a motif by Wagner, and as we did so, would slap Mops and chase him. Next we'd start Bruckner's *Te Deum*, and while this music was in progress, would give Mops something to eat. He soon showed a convincing preference for the *Te Deum*! When we thought we had trained him sufficiently so that he would automatically run away when Wagner was played and joyfully approach us at the sound of a Bruckner strain, we deemed the moment appropriate for our prank.

"'Meister Bruckner,' we said one day as he returned from lunch, 'we know that you are devoted to Wagner, but to our way of thinking he cannot compare with you. Why, even a dog would know that you are a greater composer than Wagner.'

"Our guileless teacher blushed. He thought we were serious. He reproved us, paid tribute to Wagner as the unquestionably greatest contemporary, but was nevertheless filled with enough curiosity to ask what we meant by claiming even a dog could tell the difference.

"This was the moment we had waited for. We played a Wagner motif. A howling, scared Mops stole out of the room. We started in on Bruckner's *Te Deum*. A happy canine returned, wagging his tail and pawing expectantly at our sleeves. Bruckner was touched."