

ANTON BRUCKNER - A COUNTRY BOY BECOMES A MUSICAL GENIUS.

By FRANK J. PLASH

The history of music probably offers no other example where genius and personality confront each other with such contrast as in the case of Anton Bruckner. His contemporaries described him as naive, primitive and gullible; all attributes that can be traced to his provincial background. The first forty years of his life were spent within miles of his birthplace in the countryside of Austria. It is difficult to bring this personality in accord with the powerful expressions of his musical mind.

Not in touch with the problems of his days - he seldom read newspapers and remained untouched by the currents of his time - he was self-absorbed in a world that was deep-rooted in his religious faith. In his music he praised the Lord; admired the grandeur of nature and sang of joy and sorrow on this, God's earth. He even dedicated his last symphony to his Creator " ... if He wants to accept it ".

Although his musical achievements seem so overwhelming when measured by the simplicity of his character, it cannot be denied that Bruckner's capacity as a composer had been founded on a natural talent and his persistent desire to learn and to perfect himself.

Anton Bruckner was born in 1824 in the small village of Ansfelden in Austria where both his father and grandfather had been schoolmasters and he was to follow them in their footsteps. "Tonerl", as the Austrians nicknamed Anton, showed his musical talent early and as a child he learned to play the church organ. His musical education was widened when at thirteen he was admitted as a choir boy to the monastery of Sankt Florian. In the surrounding of one of the most beautiful edifices of Baroque architecture in Europe and in the environment of monastic life, his religious belief could only be reinforced.

Further studies in the near-by provincial capitol of Linz introduced him to musical theory. While a schoolmaster for the next few years, he continued his musical studies and became an accomplished organist. At thirty-two, he was appointed cathedral-organist in Linz, but even then he persevered in his studies by commuting to Vienna over a number of years for lessons under the then eminent teacher, Simon Sechter. When he took the final examination, the evidence of his musical knowledge persuaded one of the faculty members to remark: " He should have examined us ".

Bruckner had composed sacred works since he was 18, but the stimulant for his beginning as a symphonic composer came as late as 1863 when he was 39 and still an organist in Linz. A conductor at the "Landes-Theater" (State-Theatre), Otto Kitzler, introduced him to modern composition and orchestration through the scores of Richard Wagner. A performance of the opera "Tannhaeuser" was the experience that brought Bruckner to the start of his symphonic career. Soon after, he wrote the decisive work, his Symphony No. 1 in C Minor, which was followed by eight more in the next thirty years.

The concert halls on the North American continent give proof of Bruckner's growing popularity. During the concert season 1971/72 no less than 14 of the top-rated orchestras in the U.S. and Canada have programmed symphonies by Anton Bruckner. Counting repeat-performances by individual orchestras, a total of 46 presentations of his symphonic works will be heard.

75 years after Bruckner's death (he died in 1896 and was laid to rest in the crypt of Sankt Florian), the importance of his achievement as a composer is not disputed. He stands today with the great masters of music wherever appreciation for classical music asserts itself.

The world of music has in Anton Bruckner a strange phenomenon. A simple human being of peasant stock welds his faith in God and his creative instinct with an irresistible passion for knowledge, and emerges as the architect of monumental structures in sound. Anton Bruckner, the rustic genius, has become an immortal.