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NOTES BY FRANK PLASH

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Symphony No. 3 in D minor

Anton Bruckner (1824-1896)

Bruckner's Third Symphony is sometimes called the WAGNER SYMPHONY because it was dedicated to the creator of the German music-drama Richard Wagner. Bruckner's interest in Wagner began when he studied the score of his opera TANNHAEUSER and became so intrigued by the new approaches to harmony, orchestration and instrumentation that he himself decided to write symphonies.

A personal meeting between Bruckner and Wagner at the opening performance of TRISTAN in Munich initiated a cordial friendship between these two contrasting personalities. The humble and obsequious Austrian, Anton Bruckner, saw in Wagner his musical idol and considered him the 'master of masters.' The self-centered Wagner responded with a genuine interest in Bruckner's work and he thought of Bruckner as the successor to Beethoven.

"Symphony in D minor, dedicated with deepest respect to the high and noble Mr. Richard Wagner, the unrivalled, world-renowned and exalted master of the poetic and musical art." These were the words with which Bruckner dedicated his Third Symphony to his hero Richard Wagner. The circumstances of the dedication also had humorous aspects. During a visit in Wagner's home in Bayreuth, Bruckner showed Wagner both his Second and Third Symphony. Wagner was impressed by the latter and accepted the dedication of the Third. A session of beer-drinking followed and the next morning Bruckner could not remember which symphony Wagner had chosen. He sent a note to Wagner saying only "Symphony in D minor, where the trumpets begin the theme." Signed A.Bruckner. Wagner replied on the same note "Yes! Yes! Hearty greeting!" Signed Richard Wagner. So it was that the Third Symphony received a rare "double autograph."

The openly proclaimed relationship between the two composers was in many respects detrimental to Bruckner's career. The Viennese musical society at the time was divided into two camps: The partisans for Brahms, whom they considered the representative of classicism, feuded with those who championed Wagner's innovative 'new music.' When Bruckner showed his pro-Wagner attitude by joining the 'Academic Richard-Wagner Society' in Vienna, he lost support of Hanslick, a powerful and bitter opponent of Wagner. Hanslick, who was later satirized by Wagner as Beckmesser in the MEISTER-SINGER, became increasingly negative in his comments on Bruckner.

Vienna had only one orchestra, the PHILHARMONIKER (today the WIENER PHILHARMONIKER) and they were Bruckner's only chance to have his symphonies performed. When the Symphony No. 3 was programmed for the 16th of December 1877, the designated conductor Herbeck suddenly died. No other prominent conductor was prepared to take over and Bruckner was forced to conduct himself. He was not an impressive leader, imprecise in his beat and a poor communicator with the orchestra. During rehearsals dissensions occurred and misfortune struck when the audience walked out before the end of the performance. Only a small group of young supporters applauded in the empty hall, among them the 17 year-old Gustav Mahler whom Bruckner had befriended. Their cheers did not brighten Bruckner who pleaded: "Leave me alone, nobody wants me !"

A ray of sunlight appeared on the horizon of this catastrophe. The publisher Theodor Raettig, who was in the audience, astonished Bruckner with an offer to publish the symphony at his expense. He kept his word. The 'Wagner Symphony' and a reduction for piano prepared by Gustav Mahler and one of his friends became the first published composition by Anton Bruckner.

It was thirteen years before Symphony No. 3 was again performed in Vienna. Bruckner wrote to conductor Felix Weingartner about it: "The D minor Symphony had its second performance. Conductor: Hans Richter - ideal. Performers: the Philharmonic Orchestra - perfection. And with this, the most sensitive audience, an enthusiasm and applause could not have been greater. Couldn't you get this into the papers ? It would be an excellent thing!" Bruckner and his Third Symphony had finally overcome.

Bruckner was inclined to revise his original scores whenever he felt that a change would facilitate the programming of his work. The original version of the Third Symphony (1872-1874) contained Wagner quotations from TRISTAN AND WALKUERE. These references to Wagner were removed in the second version (1876-1877) and it was this version that was first performed by the Vienna Philharmonic in 1877 under Bruckner's own baton. The third version (1888-1889) was the variant that was first performed with such success in 1890 in Vienna under Hans Richter. The Los Angeles Philharmonic has chosen to perform the 1876-7 version.

A trumpet theme, the one that induced Wagner to accept the dedication, opens the first movement. The Adagio was composed in memory of the birthday of Bruckner's mother; away from conflicts and confrontations, it reflects a prayerful remembrance in a peaceful mood. The Scherzo had its origin in the rustic folkmusic of Bruckner's Upper-Austrian homeland; the Trio lets you imagine a swinging Laendler on the dance-floor. A most unusual double-theme appears in the Finale when Bruckner combined a polka with a chorale. The composer's biographer Goellerich quotes Bruckner's explanation: " From a mansion comes the sound of dance-music and merrymaking; nearby lies a man on his deathbed. Such is life. That's the thought behind my theme."

In a period when program music was a primary art of composition, when the 'modernists', including Wagner, predicted the end of undefined music, Bruckner remained the conservative advocate of pure and absolute music. The listener to a Bruckner symphony, lacking a programmatic explanation, may require more than one hearing to be truly rewarded with appreciation for the greatness of this composer's work.

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