Anton Bruckner and his Music

Anton Bruckner and Gustav Mahler have proved music's most controversial figures right up to our day. Volumes have been written *pro* and *con* these *causes célèbres* over a period of more than 60 years. Like all controversial figures, they have their detractors, but they also rate their staunch supporters, who number among their ranks such outstanding men as Bruno Walter, Dimitri Mitropoulos, and Otto Klemperer.

Where Mahler's music is personal and introspective, morbidly so, with either a touch of forced gayety or ironic comment, Bruckner's compositions are often suffused with a warm, spiritual glow, a radiant yet forthright exaltation, that has caused some commentators to compare his masses and symphonies to the upward thrust of great gothic cathedrals.

Bruckner, born in Ansfelden, Austria, on September 4, 1824, of humble parents, was a man of naive and simple faith, retaining the endearing qualities of humility and candor throughout his anything but easy life. Locally famed as an organist, Bruckner resolved to be a composer. His steadfast faith in the new life he was embracing, gave birth to the early masses and symphonies.

Though humble, and often impressed with the work of others, Bruckner did not lack courage, as his many days of inner struggle proved. Most of his years of composition formed a long and continuous uphill struggle for recognition.

What might be termed the turning point came about by an episode that caught the fancy and imagination of the general public. During the composition of his Seventh Symphony, Bruckner felt a premonition that Richard Wagner, for whom he felt an intense admiration, was about to die. When the symphony, which carried this message in its rather sombre *adagio,* was performed by Arthur Nikisch (Bruckner's youthful disciple) at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig on December 30, 1884, Bruckner's fame suddenly received an impetus throughout Germany, and, from that most musical of countries, spread to other lands.

The world now began to recognize the great variety of the composer's melodies, his spontaneity, his rhythmic sense, and his ability to build massive and imposing climaxes. Along with this growing recognition persisted the refusal by certain experts and critics to give Bruckner's music complete approval, on the basis that his musical form was far from perfect, and that his idiom was not free from decided and suspected influences. This division of opinion still exists today. However, the emergence of long-playing records, which has stimulated the recording of Bruckner's music more than ever before, may serve to ultimately swing opinion overwhelmingly in his favor, through familiarity with his rarely performed compositions.

After years of struggle, Bruckner received a coveted degree from the University of Vienna in 1891. He was pensioned the same year. This allowed him to dedicate the last five years of his life entirely to composition. He died in Vienna on October 11, 1896, leaving behind him many grieving and distinguished pupils, among then Nikisch, Gustav Mahler, and Karl Muck.

The Symphony No. 3 in D Minor

Richard Wagner expressed the opinion that Bruckner was the only real symphonist since Beethoven. This statement, plus the sincere admiration of Bruckner for the Master of Bayreuth, makes it a matter of small surprise when we find that the Third Symphony is dedicated to that towering musical figure.

The Symphony No. 3 in D Minor was finished in 1873, when the composer, though 49 years old, was still at the inception of his symphonic career. A man of relatively little fame, Bruckner humbly asked Wagner if he would consent to have the new symphony dedicated to him. Augustly granting this permission, Wagner let it be known that he considered the composition a work of genius. Wagner's trademarks are frequently apparent in the score. The symphony was first heard in Vienna in 1875. It was a *fiasco,* owing to the inept conducting of the composer. The work netted Bruckner only 200 marks. Today it is among the most generally acclaimed of his compositions.

The first movement — *Mässig Bewegt* — states its principal theme early through the trumpets over a mysterious murmuring of strings and woodwinds. This is soon echoed in brass and woodwinds, followed by a powerful descending figure in a burst of climactic power. A second climax leads to a delightfully lyric passage of complex development. The rest of the movement is made up of passages that sound like a chorale set forth by brass, and a general recapitulation. About two-thirds of the way through the movement, the first theme reappears effectively, and again at the end, when it is worked up into a powerful climax.

The second movement — *Adagio (Etwas bewegt) quasi andante* — might be called a musical affirmation of Bruckner's faith. The real man emerges through these devotional pages. The movement, a relatively brief one, is composed of three sections exploiting three contrasting themes — *adagio, quasi allegretto,* and *misterioso* — and their free development. The over-all impression is one of serenity.

The third movement is a delightful *scherzo (ziemlich schnell),* pinning violin figurations against a melodious counter-theme. The *trio* suggests rustic dancing, perhaps by Austrian peasants. Its waltz character makes a happy effect.

This light-hearted feeling is carried into the final movement *(Finale),* an *allegro,* free in form, and filled with repetitions of an engaging second theme. A mysterious passage leads chromatically to a triumphant outburst. This is interrupted by some dance-like measures, naive and sweet in character. The *coda* now commences, building up to a powerful and reiterated affirmation of the principal theme of the first movement.

— Notes by MAX DE SCHAUENSEE,
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