

Bruckner Symphony No. 8 in C minor (recorded in 1944)

Anton Bruckner was born on 4th September 1824 in the Upper Austrian village of Ansfelden, near Linz, as the first child of the village schoolmaster and organist. From his father he received his first education, general as well as musical and after his father's death in 1837 he became a pupil and chorister at the nearby monastery of St. Florian. Like his father, he originally intended to become a schoolmaster, and after a course of studies in Linz he taught school in the small villages of Windhaag, Kronstorf and eventually St. Florian. But music was in his blood, and during these years he continually strove for perfection in his organ playing and studied the theory of music with a number of teachers. During his last years in St. Florian he was organist as well as school teacher, and in 1856 he took the final step to becoming a full-time musician by accepting the appointment as organist to the Cathedral and the *Pfarrkirche* in Linz. Here he set out on another long course of studies, this time with the Viennese professor Sechter, for although he had already composed a number of shorter works as well as a Requiem and a Mass, he still considered himself unqualified as a composer.

It is as a result of these circumstances and this attitude that the 'great' Bruckner as we know him today only emerged from his fortieth year onwards with the compositions of the three great Masses (1864, 1866 and 1868) and his first symphony (1866). These years mark the turning point from Bruckner the organist to Bruckner the symphonist, and they coincide fairly closely with his move from Linz to Vienna, in 1868, where he had been appointed Professor at the Conservatorium in succession to Sechter. From then onwards until his death in Vienna on 11th October 1896 the story of his life is virtually synonymous with the creation of his other eight gigantic symphonies, the last of which was to remain a three-movement torso at his death.

His path towards recognition was an arduous one. Not only did his symphonies by their sheer length transcend anything that had been written or heard before, but Bruckner lived in a spiritual world of his own, and consequently both what he had to say and the musical language in which he expressed it were entirely novel to the audiences of his day. The first two symphonies still had some small measure of success, but the first performance of the 3rd Symphony, on 16th December, 1877, was nothing short of a debacle. In addition to the facts outlined above, Bruckner had unwittingly become involved in the strife between the Brahms and Wagner factions of Vienna: Bruckner had been proclaimed (wrongly and against his will) as the "Wagnerian Symphonist", and as the all-powerful Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick sided with Brahms, Bruckner had to bear the brunt of his most acid-press comments. Despite these unfavourable circumstances and the depressions which they caused him, Bruckner wrote symphony after symphony, and at long last the road to success seemed to open up when Nikisch in Leipzig and Levi in Munich achieved a resounding victory for Bruckner's music with performances of his 7th Symphony, on 30th December 1884 and 10th March 1885 respectively.

Imbued with new energy through this success, Bruckner continued work on his 8th Symphony and completed it on 16th August 1885. A few weeks later he sent a clean copy of the score to Hermann Levi with an accompanying letter in which he writes: "Hallelujah! At long last the Eighth is finished, and my artistic father must be the first to know about it", ending with the words, "May it find grace!" But although Levi had been enthusiastic about the 7th Symphony and had moved heaven and earth to perform it, he failed to grasp the enormous compass of this new work and, through the agency of their mutual friend Joseph Schalk, made his opinion known to Bruckner. Bruckner was completely shattered by this rejection from the man whom he always called his 'artistic father', and during the resultant period of depression, at the advice of well-meaning friends, he embarked on a protracted process of revision of this and other works. Thus the 8th Symphony, in its second version, was not completed until 1890 and received its first performance under Richter in Vienna on 18th December 1892.

It is always a difficult task to analyse Bruckner's symphonies. Despite assertions to the contrary, as a result of his meticulous studies with Sechter, Kitzler and others, Bruckner always had a very precise conception of form, but whereas in his earlier works he still adhered with some measure of strictness to the principles of symphonic and sonata form, in his later symphonies he largely adapted these forms to his own particular needs and used harmonic rather than thematic development to build up the structure and inner tensions of his huge movements. (The attention of those who may wish to delve more deeply into this problem is directed to Robert Simpson's excellent book "The Essence of Bruckner", Gollancz, London 1967). Within the scope of the present context, suffice it to give the following brief indications with regard to the 8th Symphony: — the first movement, *Allegro moderato*, commences with the *pianissimo* tremolo which is so often the beginning of a Bruckner symphony and which seems to be coming out of the nowhere. What may be described as the first and main subject of the movement is then stated in the lower

strings and, after a passage which already contains the nucleus of the second thematic group, it rises to a climax. The second group is entrusted to the strings and, despite its sheer beauty, basically consists of a series of ascending scale passages which are answered by the woodwinds. After a rousing climax, based this time on descending scale passages, the power of the music abates, and Bruckner then fuses development and recapitulation into one mighty span, using the thematic material stated in the initial section and reaching a great climax shortly before the end. The movement then dies away on a repeated descending motive from the very first subject, and it might be noted that this is the only case in Bruckner's entire symphonic output that a first movement of a symphony ends *pianississimo*. This, incidentally, is one of the alterations which Bruckner made in the 1890 revision, for in the first version of the symphony (of 1885) it ended in the customary splendour of an orchestral *tutti*. As in the case of Beethoven's 9th Symphony, the Scherzo, *Allegro moderato*, is the second movement. Although on a much larger canvas than usual, it has the customary form, the Scherzo itself being monothematic. It is followed by a slow Trio marked *Langsam* in which the harp plays an important part (the 8th being the only symphony in which Bruckner made use of the harp), and the Scherzo is played *da capo*. The ensuing third movement, marked *Feierlich langsam, doch nicht schleppend*, must be numbered amongst the greatest Adagios ever written. With its two separate thematic groups it bears a strong formal affinity to the Adagio of Beethoven's 9th Symphony. The first group contains two motives which are of paramount importance for the movement: the rise and fall of a semi-tone, and a great sweep of ascending broken chords. It is this latter motive which eventually seems to soar to the very heavens in what has been described as the greatest ever climax achieved in symphonic music. The second group is based on a more flowing theme, first stated by the 'cellos. After both groups, in varied forms, have been presented twice, Bruckner sets out on one of those gigantic build-ups which are so typical for him. It can only be described as a series of symphonic waves: Again and again the music surges up only to ebb away, until the great climax mentioned above is finally reached on a cymbal clash. This leads immediately into the *Coda*, and the movement fades away into nothingness. The Finale, marked *Feierlich, nicht schnell*, is far too complex a movement to analyse even in broad outline within this confined space. Suffice it to say, then, that it is one of the most striking finales Bruckner ever achieved, based in principle on three groups of themes, the first of which is given out in all its breadth by the brilliance of the brass. The second group, as so often in Bruckner's music, has an almost chorale-like character and the third or coda group is of a more sombre nature and strong rhythmic pregnancy. The movement and indeed the entire symphony is summed up at the very end, when themes from all four movements are superimposed in a blaze of orchestral splendour, and it is noteworthy that although at this point Bruckner performs a miracle of contrapuntal writing, the effect is absolutely natural and never contrived, laboured or academic. Various attempts have been made, in the conventional tradition of 'romanticism', to attribute an underlying 'programme' to this symphony, and in fact Bruckner himself did so in his letter to Felix Weingartner of 27th January 1891. But his music is always pure, absolute, symphonic music, and efforts to 'explain' it by other than purely musical means will lead at best to nought, at the worst to the ludicrous.

In common with most of Bruckner's works, the 8th Symphony is beset with the vexing problem of the 'versions'. As has been stated earlier, Bruckner himself revised the symphony, so that there are two versions from his own hand, namely Version 1 of 1885 and Version 2 of 1890. However, in preparing Version 2 Bruckner was doubtlessly influenced against his own judgement by well-meaning friends and pupils, and they made further alterations in preparing the work for print, so that the first publication of the score in 1892 cannot truly be considered Bruckner's own final will. A new era began in 1927 with the formation of the International Bruckner Society and the subsequent issue of his complete works in their original form. Prof. Robert Haas, who presided over this edition as first Editor-in-Chief, issued the score of the 8th Symphony in 1935, basing his text on Bruckner's own Version 2 of 1890 but restoring to it certain material from Version 1 which Bruckner, it can be assumed, had excised under pressure from his friends, as these cuts disturbed the formal balance of the work very noticeably. After the war the editorship of the complete edition passed into the hands of Prof. Leopold

Nowak who reissued the score of version 2 in 1955 omitting the material restored by Haas from version 1 in the 1935 edition. Version 1 will also be issued under the editorship of Leopold Nowak and is at present in preparation. The first performance of the 8th Symphony in Vienna under Richter in 1892, which was mentioned earlier, consisted of the second version in the altered form in which the score was printed in the same year, whereas the first performance in the original version (ed. Haas) was conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler in Hamburg on 5th July 1939. It is this version (i.e. Version II, ed. Haas) which Furtwängler also conducts on this recording, except that he makes

a cut of ten bars (bars 209-218) in the Adagio. This cut coincides with one of the passages which Haas restored from the score of Version 1

Furtwängler, one of the greatest conductors especially of the romantic repertoire that the world has ever seen, was always particularly attracted to Bruckner. It was prophetic rather than accidental that at the age of twenty in Munich the programme of the first symphony concert which he conducted should include Bruckner's 9th Symphony, and from then onwards the symphonies of Bruckner appeared regularly in the programmes of his concerts all over the world. Of course in those days the existence of the real, the true Bruckner was hardly known: His symphonies were only available in the scores and parts printed after 'adjustments' and 'improvements' had been made, and like all conductors of his generation Furtwängler conducted these adulterated versions. But unlike most of his contemporaries he was one of the first to realise what the emergence of the real Bruckner meant when the scores of the original versions became available, and it is of great interest to note what he himself has to say on the subject. "For our knowledge of Bruckner's musical language, Bruckner's stylistic will and depth of feeling, these original versions are exceedingly important and relevant. The main differences are to be found in orchestration and in tempo relations; in both cases the original versions are characterised by greater simplicity, uniformity and directness, and they appear to correspond more closely to Bruckner's spacious concept of music. In general the many cuts which have been restored in the original versions also increase the feeling of a greater organic cohesion, not only as a detail from bar to bar, but especially with regard to the particular work as a whole. In those cases where the cuts have been made with the greatest ruthlessness—the Finale of the 5th Symphony was reduced by 122 bars as opposed to the original version—there can be no question of the greater power, clarity and effectiveness of the original. One might almost be tempted to say that this most monumental Finale of the entire musical literature of the world has been given to us anew." From the moment that they became available Furtwängler adhered to the original versions of the symphonies as issued under the auspices of the International Bruckner Society, making only minor deviations such as the cut in the Adagio of the 8th Symphony mentioned above. In matters of tempo and dynamics Furtwängler always allowed himself a certain amount of artistic license and it cannot be denied that some of these slight modifications, in the case of the Bruckner symphonies, coincide with indications contained in the earlier, unauthentic scores. A case in point occurs in the first movement of the present recording of the Symphony No. 8 in bars 72 and 330, where he adheres to the instructions contained in the unauthentic score and reduces his tempo by virtually half. In addition, Furtwängler is apt to make minor alterations of his own, such as the addition of a timpani roll in bars 239/40 of the same movement which does not form part of any of the existing printed scores of the work. But under his hands these minor deviations become so entirely convincing that any criticism on those grounds would be completely misplaced. It would be utterly superfluous to eulogise about Furtwängler's interpretation of Bruckner: The present recording bears full witness of his deep insight into the musical as well as spiritual world of Bruckner, of the essential tightness of his reading, and of his unsurpassable gift of welding so large and great a symphony into one entity, one indestructible arch.

The present recording was made in 1944, and it seems beyond comprehension that such a performance could have been given at a time when the terror and evil of the Second World War was at its peak. The tape itself had rather an adventurous history, and only this one copy of it is in existence from which the present recording was produced. Needless to say, allowances must be made for the fact that twenty-five years ago recording techniques had not yet reached the high level of our day, and in places there is some tape hiss which could not be remedied. However, as the performance is so outstanding and the recording virtually a historic document, it is felt that it will be valued by everyone as such, and that these inevitable flaws are far outweighed by its artistic merit.

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