

The symphonies of Anton Bruckner have in recent years received more appreciation than ever before; there was a time, not so very long ago, when the English-speaking world rejected them with scarcely a proper hearing — now they are heard almost as much as those of his great rival, Brahms. We have got beyond the fierce combats that blinded and deafened the opposing Wagner and Brahms factions to the virtues of each other's idols, and there is now no difficulty in finding a true perspective. The apparently simple Bruckner was seized by the Wagnerites as a Heaven-sent answer to the Brahmsians — a symphonist who admired Wagner, and who was personally timid enough to allow some of them to alter his works to make them sound more Wagnerian. So confusion reigned for many years: about the nature and significance of Bruckner's music, about the authenticity of the published scores, about the curious uniqueness of Bruckner in the history of music. It is now becoming clearer that he was in many ways a lone figure, fundamentally unconcerned with the fashionable quarrels of his time, naïvely religious, pursuing instinctively new and vast forms that he himself would have been unable to rationalize. It took him many years of skull-cracking work to achieve his aim; in his Third Symphony it is fascinating to discover how his instincts and his *a priori* academic notions are often at war with each other. In the Fourth (1878) nearly all his problems are magnificently solved, at least in the first three movements — and the finale, groping towards something new, is often astonishingly original and impressive.

This symphony is the only one of Bruckner's with a title. He was not by nature a romantic composer; all his life he sought objectivity, and his patient spirit has nothing in common with the self-dramatizing ideal of the nineteenth-century romantic. If he thought about romanticism at all, it was probably in terms of the purely illustrative side of the movement — hence the often amusingly inadequate 'programmes' he used to tack on to his symphonies, perhaps sincerely imagining that these would interest those who took seriously arch-programmatic works like Liszt's tone-poems. So the title of his No. 4 is not very significant; the work is no more 'romantic' than any of the others. In this case Bruckner's tale about the music concerned a medieval scene, dawn, knights, a hunting scene, pageantry, etc.; but the sheer grandeur and scope of the music itself eclipses all this nonsense.

The opening, with its mysterious horn theme over deep string *tremolandi*, is surely one of the most beautiful and gripping in symphonic music, and from it the music grows with remarkable spaciousness and certainty into one of Bruckner's most majestic movements. The first full orchestral passage brings with it a sense of action, but the basic momentum remains grandly deliberate. There is always time for quietness,

even stillness, and for the kind of gentle rustic music that begins the second group of themes, with its unmistakable bird-call. The development culminates in a mighty modulating chorale of extraordinary breadth and power; after this, meditative harmonies lead to the recapitulation, in which the horn theme is deepened in octaves. The coda is one of Bruckner's finest.

The two middle movements are directly opposed in character, the *Andante* fundamentally static and the *Scherzo* highly active. The static quality of the slow movement is positive — everything contributes to it; the treatment of tonality (which is very subtle), the way the themes are made to lie alongside each other, and the pervasive atmosphere of a veiled funeral march, seen at such a distance that movement is barely perceptible. When the climax comes, it seems like a mountain rather than an event. The form of the piece is strange, a remote derivative of sonata, but with the recapitulation behaving as the exposition was expected to, but did not. By contrast the *Scherzo* is all brilliant activity, often scored with great delicacy (by this time it will be obvious that Bruckner is a master of the orchestra); here we can see his idea of a hunt, with the simple little trio forming a resting place. The whole movement is consummately composed, the trio, too, with its delightful twists of key.

The huge time-scale of Bruckner made it necessary that he should search for a new kind of finale which, instead of being a dynamic culmination, is the uncovering of a deeper layer, an objective state, behind or beneath the rest. This does not preclude massive power — indeed it often demands it — but it means that the athletic energy of the classical finale is replaced by calm deliberation. If the first movement allows moments of intense stillness, the finale has even more space for them. Bruckner's problem was to achieve this sense and yet to find a vast slow momentum that would flow steadily through all types of activity or apparent non-activity. In the Eighth Symphony his success is monumental; here it is partial, but nevertheless full of nobility, and at best utterly inimitable. Perhaps the two finest passages are the majestic opening and the superb coda, one of the most awesome he ever wrote.