

MAX GRAF, who studied with Bruckner, has given us an unforgettable picture of him in a book named *Legend of a Musical City*. Bruckner, writes Graf, was a little man who generally wore "a wide jacket of heavy material which he had had sent from upper Austria, where his home was. His trousers fell in countless wrinkles to his small feet and their bagginess gave his legs an elephantine appearance. His face was that of an old peasant, weathered by air, sun and rain, but it was a peasant face with Roman features and the profile of the Roman Emperor Claudius. The singular appearance of the man became more marked when he lifted the broad-brimmed artist's hat from his bald, round head and, with a deep bow, bent almost to the ground."

Later in the book, Graf's reminiscences cover Bruckner's teaching methods at the Vienna Conservatory, where he gave lectures on harmony and composition. To Vienna, according to Graf, Bruckner's personality was often a matter of mirth. He spoke the peasant dialect of his birthplace. He was almost a "natural," in the Elizabethan sense: a child of nature. His manners aroused amused comment. He would interrupt his classes, when the church bells tolled, to kneel and pray. (He dedicated his Ninth Symphony to God.) Telling his class, with great emotion, that a critic had called him a second Beethoven, Bruckner added "How can anybody dare to say such a thing?" and quickly made the sign of the cross on his forehead as if to avert the sin.

All this is necessary to understand Bruckner — a simple, devout, naive, unsophisticated man. "An innocent," once wrote Paul Rosenfeld, "seeing only his own idea . . . a religious mystic . . . elemental and taurian strength: The lung capacity of the man, the vast span and breadth of his themes and thematic groups, make the majority of composers seem asthmatic . . . The great, gradual climaxes of the adagios of the symphonies, the long powerfully sustained ecstasies with their wildly and solemnly chanting trumpets, have something almost terrible in their vehemence and amount. The great battering-rams are slowly gotten into action. But, once heaved forward, they crash walls down."

The eight symphonies, and the uncompleted Ninth, are Bruckner's testament. In many respects, he was no innovator. He was content to take the four-movement

symphonic plan as Beethoven had left it, and was essentially a conservative. Beethoven he idolized. The other great influence on his life was Wagner, to whom he dedicated his Third Symphony. Naturally, this alliance earned for him the hostility of Hanslick, who took every opportunity of sneering at Bruckner; and when so important a critic as Hanslick sneered, most of Vienna sneered with him. It is easy to over-estimate Wagner's importance in the Bruckner symphonies, however. The real, ever-present figure is the Beethoven of the Ninth Symphony. But Bruckner never had Beethoven's iron control or self-discipline. He was a marvelous theoretician, but preferred to let his fantasy overpower his sense of form. To the admirers of Bruckner, this does not matter. The greatness of his music is in the visions it portrays, the celestial goal at which it aims.

Bruckner himself called his Fourth Symphony the *Romantic*. It is the only one of the nine to have a definite name, although it was not subtitled until two years after its completion. The work was finished on Nov. 22, 1874, and Bruckner described the first movement in these terms: "A medieval city — Sunrise — Reveille is sounded from the towers — The gates open — The knights sally forth into the countryside on their spirited horses, surrounded by the magic of nature — Forest murmurs — Bird songs — And so the romantic picture develops further." The other movements also had a vague program attached to them, including a festival dance in the finale. Later on, Bruckner is said to have described the first movement as a scene out of the days of chivalry, the second as a rustic love scene, the third as a hunt interrupted by a festival dance, and the fourth — "I'm sorry, but I have forgotten just what it was about."

Obviously Bruckner did not take the program seriously, nor should anybody else. He probably thought it up after he had written the music, much as Schumann named many of his descriptive piano pieces after completing them. About all one can say about the *Romantic* Symphony, programatically, is that it does breathe a certain free air, that it does carry a hint of pastoral quality. Otherwise it is all things to all listeners. One thing can be said: of all the Bruckner symphonies, the *Romantic* is perhaps the closest-knit, the most joyous and close-to-

the-soil and (many think) the most melodic, as well as the most concentrated. Scholars have demonstrated that all four movements spring from the main theme of the first movement, and in his biography of Bruckner, Gabriel Engel states that "so logical and masterly is the development of this theme in the course of the work that the climax is not reached until the closing portion of the finale."

It was Gabriel Engel, too, who claimed to have traced a spiritual pattern in all the Bruckner symphonies. According to Engel, the first movement always represents the drama of inner conflict, with the soul as hero. Then come, respectively, a song of faith, a dance of life (the joys of life in nature) and a finale in which the soul's struggle and triumph are represented. And, knowing Bruckner's devout Catholicism, one is tempted to agree wholeheartedly with Engel. Whether or not Bruckner consciously had such a plan in mind, his subconscious mind undoubtedly would throw him in that direction.

The *Romantic* Symphony was not played until seven years after it was composed. Nobody wanted to take the chance of conducting it, in view of Hanslick's out-spoken anti-Brucknerism. In the meantime, the composer twice revised his work — once in 1878, then in 1879-80. Finally, in 1881, Hans Richter put it on a Vienna Philharmonic program and conducted the premier on Feb. 20. You may be sure that a proud and nervous Bruckner was in the auditorium during all the rehearsals. Richter, one of the finest conductors of his generation, has described what happened at one of those rehearsals. He was playing a passage and became worried about a note that did not seem to fit the general harmonic pattern. He turned to Bruckner and pointed it out. "What note is this?" he asked. The awed and flustered Bruckner answered "Any note you choose. Quite as you like." At the end of the rehearsal Bruckner approached Richter, "radiant with enthusiasm and happiness." He pressed something into the conductor's hand. "Take it and drink a mug of beer to my health." The flabbergasted Richter looked down at his palm and saw that Bruckner had tipped him a "taler" (three marks, about sixty cents). Richter says that he broke down and wept. He kept the coin as a memento, of course, piercing it and attaching it to his watch chain.

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