



Otto Böhm

Anton Bruckner

Bruckner's Third and Fourth Symphonies had marked the acme of his creative inspiration. Even the few of his contemporaries who had grasped the significance and greatness of Bruckner's life work, must have felt that the maturity, the power, inspiration and expressive force of these works could almost not be surpassed even by Bruckner himself. Yet these two great works by no means signified the ultimate stage in the tremendous evolution of this great symphonic composer: his Fifth Symphony by far surpassed even its predecessors. It carried Bruckner to a summit of his art, to a height of creative power which was thereafter consistently maintained in all of Bruckner's works that followed. Clarity and logics despite boldest conception in form and structure; strongly personal and characteristic expression; and a marvellous perfection of vivid contrapuntics (Bruckner himself termed the Fifth his "contrapuntal masterpiece") — all that and more makes this symphony so admirable and powerful a composition.

The Adagio was the first movement which Bruckner wrote of this symphony. He began work upon it on February 14th, 1875. The Scherzo followed on April 16th of that year, and the Finale on May 10th. The first movement was the last one, chronologically speaking; Bruckner commenced it on March 3rd, 1876. The entire symphony was not completed until August 9th, 1877, and was further revised and altered in 1878.

No doubt Bruckner's conditions of life during that period have decisively influenced his Fifth symphony. Bitter disappointments were tormenting the master, painful sorrows, even want of the means for his modest commodities.

A weaker character than his might have been oppressed by such adverse conditions, his creative powers would have been crippled by such troubles. Not so with Bruckner. Like Beethoven, such hostile surroundings inspired his fancy to lofty flights. It is the Prometheus-like struggle of a gigantic spirit, its rise to sublime regions, that reflect themselves in the movements of this symphony, so big in proportions and climaxes. Small wonder that Bruckner's contemporaries found it incomprehensible, indeed repulsive: Bruckner's enemies, never at a loss to substantiate their verdict, decried it as abstruse, lacking in form, unplayable owing to its technical difficulties. Thus it happened that one of the most important works of the symphonic literature of all ages was everywhere refused and waited for seventeen years for a performance. Only after Bruckner had gained full recognition with his Symphony No. 7 and with his Te Deum, an artist mustered the courage to redeem the wonderful Fifth symphony from undeserved oblivion: it was Franz Schalk, then conductor of the Municipal Theatre of Graz, who produced this symphony in that city, for the first time anywhere, on April 8th, 1894 — with a success that was well-nigh sensational. Dr. Theodor Helm reports that the enthusiasm of the audience grew with each successive movement; again and again the orchestral players had to rise from their seats to acknowledge the tumultuous applause. Bruckner himself was not among those present: his already failing health prevented him from attending the memorable performance. Indeed the Fifth symphony is the only one of Bruckner's symphonies (aside from the Ninth) which the composer has never heard in its entirety. Even this triumphant performance of the Fifth symphony remained the only one for a period of years. Only after

Ferdinand Löwe had performed the work at Vienna, with the Kaim Orchestra from Munich (early in March, 1898 — a year and a half after Bruckner's death), and again with a truly sensational success, this symphony began to take its deserved place on the programmes of the world's symphonic orchestras.

“Per aspera ad astra”: it is a motto which may justly be ascribed to every great and significant work of art — regardless of time and period.

Vienna, 1927.      J. V. Wöss.