

Two more Bruckner Marathons!

For the second consecutive year I had the privilege of attending two USA Bruckner marathons in early September: the 14th annual “Brucknerthon” organized by Dave Griegel and Ramon Khalona and hosted at Ramon and Pam Khalona’s home in Carlsbad, California on Saturday, September 1st, and the 4th annual “Brucknerathon” put on by John Berky at the Connecticut home of Ken and Ruth Jacobsen the following weekend. As was the case in 2011, I was familiar with very few of the recordings chosen, making the two sessions most interesting, enjoyable, and informative for me. In each case about 15-20 folks were in attendance, and good food, good drink, and stimulating conversations were the order of the day. As before I’ll present brief reviews, some with (quite personal) comparisons to recordings I know. So, to the performances, for which more detailed information may of course be obtained from John’s website, www.abruckner.com:

West: **Symphony in F minor, Bosch, Aachen Sym Orch, 26 & 28/5/12**

East: **Symphony in F minor, Skrowaczewski, Saarland Radio Sym Orch, 6-10/3/01**

Returning to the F minor after a hiatus of a couple of years, the Westerners chose a strong entry by Marcus Bosch to open their proceedings. I’ve found some of the recordings in the now-complete Bosch set to be too fast and lacking in requisite weight. But that approach works for the F minor, and the orchestra gives a lively performance with the necessary solidity when needed. Excellent SACD sound (heard in two-channel) complements this release. The unfortunate caveat is that this disk, also containing “die Nullte” (that must be a first: two complete Bruckner symphonies on a single CD!) is not available singly--only as a bonus upon purchase of the full set. A continent away, we heard Skrowaczewski’s effort, which like Bosch’s times in at around 36 minutes. However, his Saarland band puts forth with a much bigger sound and more consistent Brucknerian weight without the dragging tempos that I have to be a problem in other recordings of the work. The Skrow is my new favorite. It’s readily available on Oehms with the orchestra there identified as the Saarbrücken RSO.

West: **Symphony No. 1 in C minor (1866 ed Carragan), Schaller, Philharmonia Festiva, 7/11**

East: **Symphony No. 1 in C minor (1877 “Linz” ed Nowak), Haselböck, Wiener Acad, 6/5/04**

Gerd Schaller’s impressive traversal of the symphonies continues with a set containing 1 through 3 in rarely-heard versions. Schaller’s 1st is the first recording of the pure, unrevised 1866 version of the symphony, which differs from the more familiar 1877 revision in numerous details literally from beginning to end. Both Tintner and Venzago (see below) have recorded versions that are mostly 1866, but both add an extra measure from 1877 to the beginning, and Venzago adds the 1877 trumpet to the very end. At first Schaller’s seems a bit on the slow side, no doubt a concession to the highly reverberant recording venue, Ebrach Abbey in northern Bavaria. Momentum never flags, however, and the terrific Munich-based orchestra delivers a performance with high spirits, great energy, and real impact. Close miking allows the sound to come through with good clarity while preserving the wonderful cathedral ambience. Martin Haselböck’s 1877 1st (in this case, mislabeled in one Amazon link as the 1866) is a smaller-scale performance but one not lacking in body. The textures are lighter than we usually hear but not to the extent found in Venzago’s. Haselböck’s tempos are mainstream and his lyrical approach is complemented by divided violins and clear SACD sound.

West: **Symphony in D minor (“Die Nullte”), Davies, Bruckner Orch Linz, 23/11/08**

East: **Symphony in D minor (“Die Nullte”), Venzago, Tapiola Sinfonietta, 11/10**

Dennis Russell Davies’ “Nullte” provides quite a contrast with the super-charged 1st that he took on US tour a few years ago. This D minor is moderate in tempo but energetic and very solid with a rousing close. Mario Venzago’s is another beast entirely: It is quite simply the most interventionist performance of this (or, perhaps, any) Bruckner symphony I have ever heard. Wild fluctuations in tempo are coupled with big variations in dynamics, texture, and degree of vibrato in the strings, but all in remarkably good taste and in service to the music—although your mileage may vary on that. Just by way of example: The low strings in the slow movement sound more like a harmonium than a string section. And at the end of the scherzo Venzago slows the tempo to lead into a trio that can’t be going at more than 1/3 the scherzo’s pace. Again, a rousing finale. You’ll either love it or hate it, but you will not be bored. Exceptional playing by the small but outstanding orchestra (especially its remarkable strings with divided violins) and crystal-clear CPO sound make this a unique experience. It is coupled with a 1st (mentioned above) that is similar in concept, perhaps a bit saner overall, but equally remarkable in opening new windows on such a familiar work.

West: **Symphony No. 2 in D minor (1877 ed Haas), Suitner, NHK Sym Orch, 21/11/80**

East: **Symphony No. 2 in D minor (1877 ed Haas), Zender, Southwest German RSO, 1990**

Hans Zender’s 2nd is a natural, unforced, lyrical performance but not lacking in the big moments. It is lively, even bouncy at times, and never bogs down. The sound is a little recessed except when Zender chooses to open things up; but at higher volumes some digital glassiness appears. Still, this is one of the stronger Haas 2nds out there. Otmar Suitner’s 2nd is even better: He shows an easy lyricism and even more fluid phrasing, coupled with careful attention to orchestral balances to bring out normally buried instrumental lines, and finally a real flair for the dramatic. For those of you who have sought in vain for an antidote to the timid tympani thumps that usher in the coda to this symphony’s scherzo in almost every other recording, your search is ended. In this live performance one hears seven titanic thunderbolts that will warm the heart of even the most unrepentant percussion fanatic. Suitner’s 2nd is a keeper. I ordered mine online before I even left the room. By the way, it is mislabeled as Nowak. It is coupled with an NHK 4th from 1971 that is wonderfully interpreted but sabotaged by a blaring trumpeter.

West: **Symphony No. 3 in D minor (1873 ed Nowak), Blomstedt, Leipzig Gewand Orch, 23-24/9/10**

East: **Symphony No. 3 in D minor (1874 ed Carragan), Schaller, Philharmonia Festiva, 7/11**

Over the past 20 years Herbert Blomstedt has made somewhat of a personal speciality of the 1873 3rd. This recording possesses a beautiful blend, showcases superb playing at amazingly swift tempos (those Leipzigers can flat out *play*), and is powerful and balanced in conception. Blomstedt knows how this piece goes, and brings it across marvelously. Meanwhile, Gerd Schaller presents the premier recording of a version of the symphony that Bruckner created in 1874, prepared for performance by William Carragan. Bruckner augmented many instrumental lines in this score (some of which appear in later versions of the symphony) but hadn’t yet made cuts, so it is a fascinating window into his revision procedures as well as a wonderful piece to hear. Having Will Carragan in the room to (literally) provide us a roadmap to the score was a very special treat. Schaller and his orchestra do a spectacular job: Instrumental detail is very clear, and the sound is gorgeous. This is one powerful and effective performance. I bought a Schaller 1-2-3 set from John; he still has a couple more. Don’t wait too long.

West: **Symphony No. 4 in E-flat major (1878/80/86 ed Nowak), Sanderling, Bavarian RSO, 1994**
East: **Symphony No. 4 in E-flat major (1878/80/86 ed Nowak), Böhm, VPO, 19/11/73**

The Western marathon honored Kurt Sanderling, who passed away just a year ago, with the playing of this 4th. It is a good, solid 4th, with broad tempos, lyrical lines and very good sound. Orchestral playing is a bit untidy in spots, but it preserves a fine live performance. The Böhm is a classic and still holds up, especially in terms of sound and orchestral execution, with the VPO at the top of its game. One could say that the interpretation is a bit square at times, and no one could be faulted for preferring, say, the Klemperer from 10 years earlier, or any of a number of very fine 4ths that have come our way since.

Both: **Symphony No. 5 in B-flat major (1878 ed Nowak), Abbado, Lucerne Fest O, 19-20/8/11**

Abbado's 5th (DVD and Blu-ray—the latter in full, rich surround sound) documents a well-balanced and well-played performance with good flow, nice dynamic terracing, a pleasant lilt to the string playing and a great deal of sensitive phrasing. What appear to be wooden flutes provide a nice blend to the woodwind section's sound, and neither strings nor brass dominate. The scherzo could bounce a bit more, but the finale builds nicely. Curiosities: Abbado inserts an unwritten (and I think unnecessary) *subito piano e crescendo* effect just before the end of the first movement; it is (fortunately) not repeated elsewhere. On the positive side, in the finale's coda Abbado brings out a delightful passage in the winds that is normally completely buried in the brass-drenched maelstrom. Abbado, now 79, has aged a lot in appearance, but it was great to see him looking healthy and energetic on the podium as he allows this music to unfold.

West: **Symphony No. 6 in A major (1881 ed Nowak), Barenboim, Chicago Sym Orch, 13/12/77**
East: **Symphony No. 6 in A major (1881 ed Haas), Celibidache, Munich Phil Orch, 27-29/11/91**

Barenboim leads a potent, brassy 6th in Chicago. Unsubtle is an adjective that comes to mind. The adagio is handled well but elsewhere phrasing at times is rather square and obvious. Nonetheless, it is a worthy effort given the difficulty this symphony seems to give many conductors. Celibidache's Munich 6th is a DVD that comes from the same series of four or five performances that gave rise to the EMI CD among others. This performance is more animated and energetic than the one on the CD, which always seemed to me to be rather dead, especially in the adagio. This could be the best option for a Celi 6th.

West: **Symphony No. 7 in E major (1885 ed Nowak), Gielen, SWR Sym Orch, 12/86**
East: **Symphony No. 7 in E major (1885 ed Nowak), Barenboim, Berlin Staatskapelle, 6/10**

Michael Gielen is such a quirky conductor. I saw him do a deadly dull Bruckner 2nd ages ago in New York, but found his SWR 5th a nice, lively change of pace when it came out in the 1990s. Here, from the beginning of his tenure in Stuttgart he produces a surprisingly lyrical and flexible 7th, fleet in tempo but suitably punchy: An unexpectedly enjoyable performance if not desert island stuff. Percussion but no cymbal clash in the adagio. Is Barenboim's new 7th the beginning of a third recorded cycle? I'm afraid it really did not leave much of an impression, although the Staatskapelle plays quite well for him. Most of us feel his best Bruckner was from his Chicago days.

West: **Symphony No. 8 in C minor (1887/90 Haas-Nowak mix), Herbig, Deutsche RP, 21/6/02**
East: **Symphony No. 8 in C minor (1890 ed Nowak), Graf, Houston Sym Orch, private recording**

Günther Herbig recorded the 7th and 8th symphonies in 2002 with the Saarbrücken (aka Saarland) RSO, which confusingly is identified on this set by the name it took after its merger in 2007 with the SWR. Herbig's 8th, a mostly Haas hybrid, begins on the slowish side, a bit rigid, but loosens up to a swift scherzo, and presents a lovely, flowing adagio. The finale opens with great energy, giving way to a *very* relaxed second subject, picking right back up in tempo afterwards. It's a rather interventionist reading with abrupt tempo changes throughout. Execution is really good—stentorian brass, good articulation—and the sound is excellent. Hans Graf has been a champion of Bruckner's music throughout his tenure in Houston. John Proffitt was able to provide a concert recording in which he participated in its mastering to a five-channel DVD-A format with a "stage-conductor's" perspective. Graf's is a more straightforward reading, steady tempos at first as the orchestra warmed up, then nicely fluid, powerful and exciting by turns. Although the surround set up used was not ideal for the perspective of the recording, the sound was nonetheless impressive, and we were all indebted for John's efforts in giving us this opportunity to hear the work of such a dedicated Brucknerian.

West: **Symphony No. 9 in D minor (1894 ed Orel), Walter, Philadelphia Orch, 28/2/48**

East: **Symphony No. 9 in D minor (1894 ed Nowak), Blomstedt, Leipzig Gewand Orch, 6-8/1/95**

Finally, two very special 9ths completed the cycles. Bruno Walter's second recorded 9th features a remarkable degree of intensity and, for the most part, orchestral execution. At times intonation drifts about, but that could have been the result of flaws in the recording process itself rather than the playing. Aaron Z. Snyder's restoration from, apparently, a broadcast source has given us remarkably vivid sound for the 1948 vintage. Frequency range is quite good and only a little shrillness occasionally intrudes. The Philadelphia strings are, well, the Philadelphia strings. Walter has the tympani pounding away at the end of the first movement (ala Knappertsbusch), a stunning effect. This powerful performance, perhaps Walter's most intense and barely 50 minutes in length, contrasts dramatically (and favorably) with his nearly hour-long recording of the 9th in Los Angeles almost a dozen years later. In celebration of the award of the Bruckner medal to Herbert Blomstedt last year, the Easterners had hoped to have his new Leipzig SACD 9th to audition, but it did not arrive in time. Instead we heard his 1995 Decca recording with the same orchestra and were in for perhaps our biggest surprise of the day. Blomstedt is the consummate gentleman, soft-spoken, calm, gracious, urbane, unfailingly polite and patient with visitors. This performance begins in a curiously unsettled manner, objective, with powerful, almost detached brass exclamations. It proceeds to develop into—there is no other way to put it—one of the scariest performances of the piece I have ever heard. There is nothing spiritual (or gentlemanly) about it. Blomstedt appends huge tympani outbursts to the scherzo; the trio tries half-heartedly for repose but in the end is all menace. The adagio, underpinned by rich, powerful bass, culminates in as wild a final cataclysm as ever there was, not just in volume but in clarity and detail, from those insane swirling upper string figures all the way down. We've all heard 9ths whose third movements close in a soothing, consoling manner, giving the illusion of completion. By the time Blomstedt's adagio died away, the only impression I got was that nothing was resolved; if anything, it seemed that we were right back at the beginning, with the same questions remaining unanswered. Extraordinary. This was my other immediate purchase, as soon as I got online afterwards.

East: **Symphony No. 9 in D minor (1992 finale realization by Samale/Philips/Cohrs/Mazzuca, rev 2012), Rattle, BPO, 7-9/2/12**

Shortly after the conclusion of the Blomstedt we heard the latest and presumably final iteration of the so-called “committee” finale to the 9th. Not unexpectedly the Berliners under Rattle pump out a deep, rich, potent sound. The pacing is a bit measured, but Rattle is thankfully unfussy with tempos, just gently lyrical. My favorite performance of a “committee” finale is Bosch’s energetic reading of a 2005 incarnation (but his first three movements leave much to be desired), while Schaller’s 9th from 2010 using Carragan’s finale is for me the most enjoyable four-movement ninth from beginning to end.

So there you have it: two very rewarding weekends, and 22 Bruckner symphony recordings as well. The ones that made the deepest impressions on me? Suitner’s 2nd, both 3rds, and both 9ths. Abbado’s 5th was something special. And Blomstedt’s complete Leipzig set is due to appear any time now! Once again, thanks to Dave, Ramon, and Pam in California, and John, Ken, and Ruth in Windsor, Connecticut, for making these experiences possible.

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