

A Short History of Performances of Bruckner's Music by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s

By Alonso del Arte, author of [*The 20 Crucial Compositions of Anton Bruckner*](#), and composer of the world's first Horn Concerto commissioned through eBay.

In the American Midwest, the orchestra with the strongest Bruckner tradition is the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, though the Cleveland Orchestra is making a powerful claim under the leadership of Franz Welser-Möst. But it would be a mistake to count out the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, which had a good run of Bruckner performances in the 1960s and 1970s.

One can only hope that the deleterious effects of the 2010 strike, which was so poorly handled by management, are minimal, and also hope that they don't include an unwillingness to program anything the slightest bit off the beaten track. (World premieres are safe, as they are a requirement for a major orchestra's prestige, but American or Michigan premieres could suffer).

When Sir Roger Norrington was guest conductor the last week of May 2010 in Detroit, just a few months prior to the strike, it was not the first time Bruckner's Seventh was heard at Orchestra Hall, though it may have been the first time it was heard without vibrato or portamento in the strings.

Although the vast majority of Bruckner performances in the 1960s and 1970s were of the Fourth and Seventh Symphonies, the Third, Fifth, Eighth and Ninth, and even the scarcely played Sixth, all had performances. The program note writers during the period examined here were first J. Dorsey Callaghan and then Robert Holmes. Their notes shoot down some common tropes about Bruckner while reinforcing others, for example, making much of the 'problem' of multiple versions of the Symphonies.

In regards to the Fourth Symphony, Callaghan assures concertgoers that Sir John Barbirolli has carefully studied the issue of the different versions of Bruckner's Symphonies and, and that he chose the Haas edition of 1936 over the Gutman of 1889. Before that 1958 concert, the previous performance of Fourth was in 1927, the program note says. In the 1970s, the Fourth was played quite a few times, and likewise the Seventh. The Detroit Symphony had, prior to 1979, never played the Eighth, a surprising fact given that the Sixth was played in 1972—was that also a DSO premiere? The note doesn't say.

While Holmes takes care to debunk certain misconceptions about Bruckner, at the same time he insists on emphasizing that scholars are divided and strongly polarized in their opinions of Bruckner, for instance pitting a quote from Harold Schoenberg against one from Richard Capell, or a contemporary review from Gustav Dömpke with another contemporary, Paul Marsop, the former recoiling in horror, the latter amazed Bruckner was unknown to him for so long prior to the premiere of the Seventh Symphony.

As for the Ninth Symphony, Holmes strongly refutes Lawrence Gilman's idea that "it seems complete in its incompleteness," but then goes on to say that it may be performed in its incomplete state. Prior to 2012, nothing of the Ninth's Finale had been played in concert in America, and so far that has only taken place in New York.

Going back to 1960, Callaghan starts off his note on the Bruckner Seventh marking Bruckner as being alone amongst 19th Century symphonists and mentioning that "the distinguished music critic, Winthrop Sargent, refers to him as the greatest symphonist since Beethoven." Although Callaghan does mention Bruckner is a "controversial figure"

and speaks of his “peasant naivete,” the overall impression of Callaghan’s note is one of admiration.

What Callaghan finds controversial about Bruckner’s Seventh is not the cymbal clash in the Adagio or lack thereof, but “Bruckner’s claim to have composed the Adagio as a memorial to Wagner, because some evidence existed that it was written prior to the Bayreuth master’s death.” Very helpfully to me, Callaghan’s note ends with the tidbit that the last DSO performance of Bruckner’s Seventh was on December 20, 1923, conducted by Ossip Gabrilowitsch.

Newspaper critics in Detroit in the 1970s were just as polarized as their Viennese counterparts in the 1880s. Prof. John Guinn, who teaches harmony and ear training at Wayne State University and was music critic for the *Detroit Free Press* up to the time of the 1996 newspaper strike, remembered the performance of Bruckner’s Fourth at the Meadowbrook Festival in 1975, which he thought was unusual as the summer festival tended to concentrate on more popular fare.

Two days after the concert, Guinn wrote in the *Free Press* that Bruckner “stops and starts more times than cars on the Lodge [Freeway, M-10] during rush hour.” Jay Carr, writing for the *Detroit News* the day after the concert, found the Bruckner Fourth “opulent” and “resplendent,” and, in disagreement with Robert Simpson, writes that “its four movements are, for Bruckner, unusually cohesive.”

The Detroit Symphony brass section, although consisting of world class players, doesn’t have the same high reputation as that of the Chicago Symphony. Carr noted that Bruckner’s Fourth “asks a lot of the horns ... and the [Detroit] Symphony’s horn players measured up admirably.”

There was no overture at that concert, but Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 15 in B-flat major, K. 450, was in the first half. Guinn noted that many latecomers, “almost all in high heels,” marred the satisfying second movement. Mozart is not beyond reproach in Guinn’s estimation: the third movement rondo is “long on technique, short on musical thought,” and drew the “required standing ovation.”

Carr drew attention to the passing of a pianist and teacher who played with the Detroit Symphony many times: “The Mozart Concerto seemed to serve as an unintended memorial for Gizi Szanto,” Carr wrote at the end of his review of the concert.

Both Guinn and Carr were uniform in their praise for guest conductor Stanisław Skrowaczewski and guest pianist Rudolf Firkušný. Guinn remarked that Skrowaczewski “looks like an elongated version of the orchestra’s first chair cellist Italo Babini,” and said that he “conducted this work with immense fervor. ... If there is a Bruckner revival in the offing ... this man should be at the forefront.”

Although not as dramatically as at the disastrous premiere of Bruckner’s Third, at Meadow Brook performance of Bruckner’s Fourth “some of the audience departed after the first movement. Some were leaving in the midst of the third movement,” Guinn wrote. “Those who remained until the bitter end responded with all the fervor of converts.”

Performances of Bruckner in Detroit became very rare in the 1980s and 1990s. There was a slight increase in the first decade of the new millennium, but there doesn’t yet seem to be much steam for an increasing trend.

In the following table, notice how often Bruckner is placed first or second, but not last, on the programme succession, as the DSO has done with 20th Century symphonists like Vagn Holmboe and Sten Broman, and even for Mahler.

Table 1

December 11 & 12, 1958

Sir John Barbirolli

Sir Malcolm Arnold: *Tam O'Shanter* Overture

Sir Edward Elgar: Enigma Variations

Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 4 in E-flat major

March 17 & 18, 1960

Paul Paray, Nathan Gordon

Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 7 in E major

Hector Berlioz: *Harold in Italy*

Richard Wagner: Dance of the Apprentices from *Die Meistersinger*

November 11 & 13, 1965

Sixten Ehrling, David Oistrakh

Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 5 in B-flat major

Jean Sibelius: Violin Concerto in D minor, Opus 47

December 1 & 3, 1966

Eugen Jochum

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Eine kleine Nachtmusik, K. 525

Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 7 in E major

December 19, 1968

Werner Torkanowsky

Franz Schubert: Symphony No. 8 in B minor

Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 9 in D minor

November 27 & 28, 1970

Henry Lewis, Young Uck Kim

Samuel Barber: Overture to *The School for Scandal*

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Violin Concerto in D major, Opus 35

Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 7 in E major

January 6 & 8, 1972

Sixten Ehrling, Itzhak Perlman

Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 4 in E-flat major

Igor Stravinsky: Violin Concerto in D major

October 5 & 7, 1972

Pierre Héту, Charles Treger

Camille Saint-Saëns: Violin Concerto No. 3 in B minor, Opus 61
Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 6 in A major

January 31 & February 1974

Aldo Ceccato, Rudolf Serkin
Felix Mendelssohn: Piano Concerto No. 1 in G minor, Opus 25
Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 3 in D minor

November 7 & 9, 1974

Jerzy "George" Semkow, Leonard Rose
Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Variations on a Rococo Theme
Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 7 in E major

July 31, 1975 (at Meadowbrook)

Stanisław Skrowaczewski, Rudolf Firkušný
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Piano Concerto No. 15 in B-flat major, K. 450
Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 4 in E-flat major

December 2 & 4, 1976

Klaus Tennstedt, Juliana Markova
Sergei Prokofiev: Piano Concerto No. 1 in D-flat major, Opus 10
Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 4 in E-flat major

July 7, 1978

Aldo Ceccato, Eugene Fodor
Alexander Glazunov: Violin Concerto
Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 7 in E major

July 9, 1978

Aldo Ceccato, Grace Bumbry
Richard Wagner: Wesendonck Lieder
Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 7 in E major

October 5 & 7, 1978

Michael Gielen, Shlomo Mintz
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Violin Concerto No. 5 in A major, K. 219
Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 9 in D minor

January 18 & 20, 1979

Klaus Tennstedt
Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 8 in C minor (DSO premiere)

January 10 & 12, 1980

Herbert Blomstedt, Ilan Ragoff
Schubert/Liszt: Wanderer Fantasy
Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 4 in E-flat major