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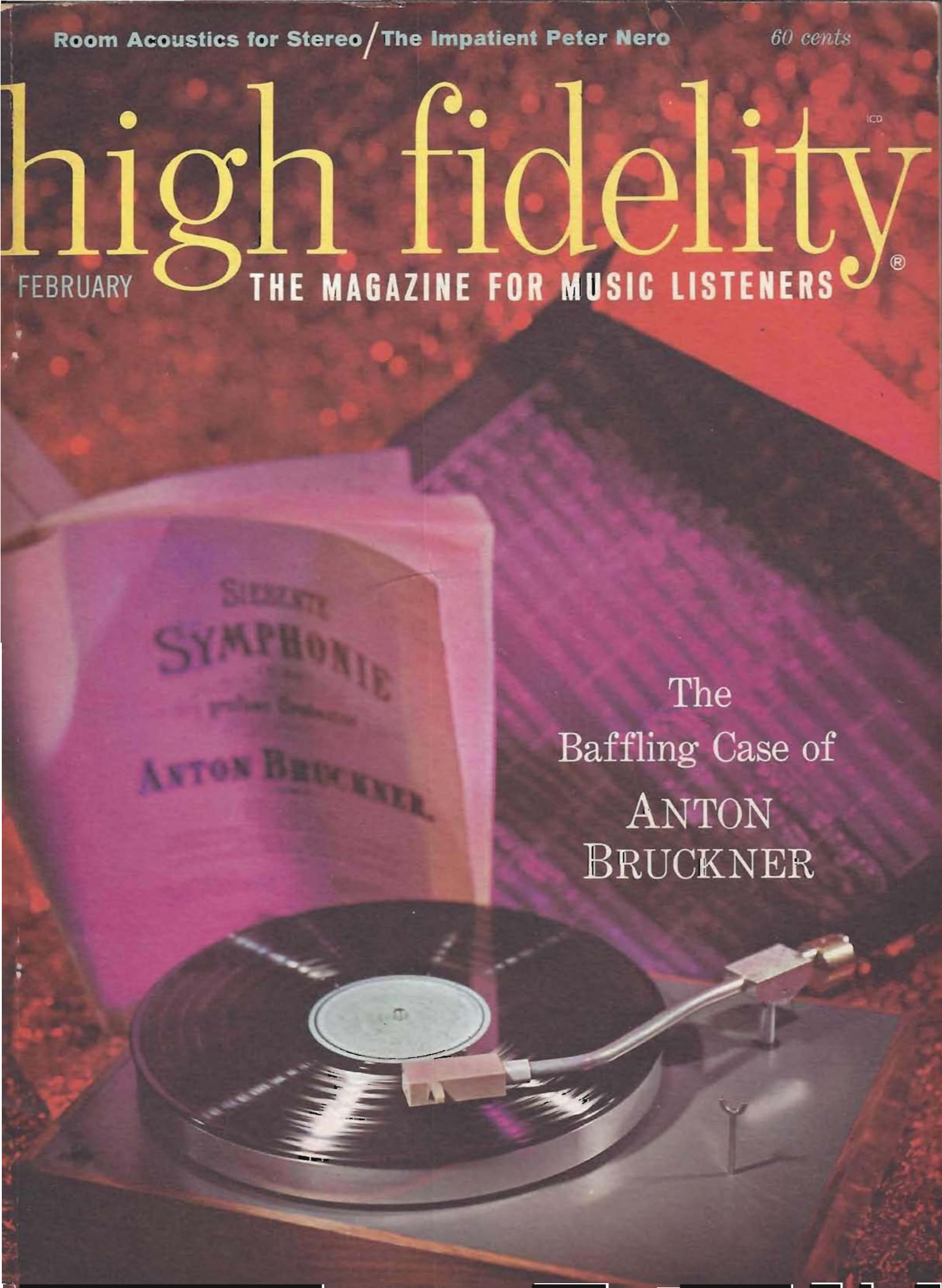
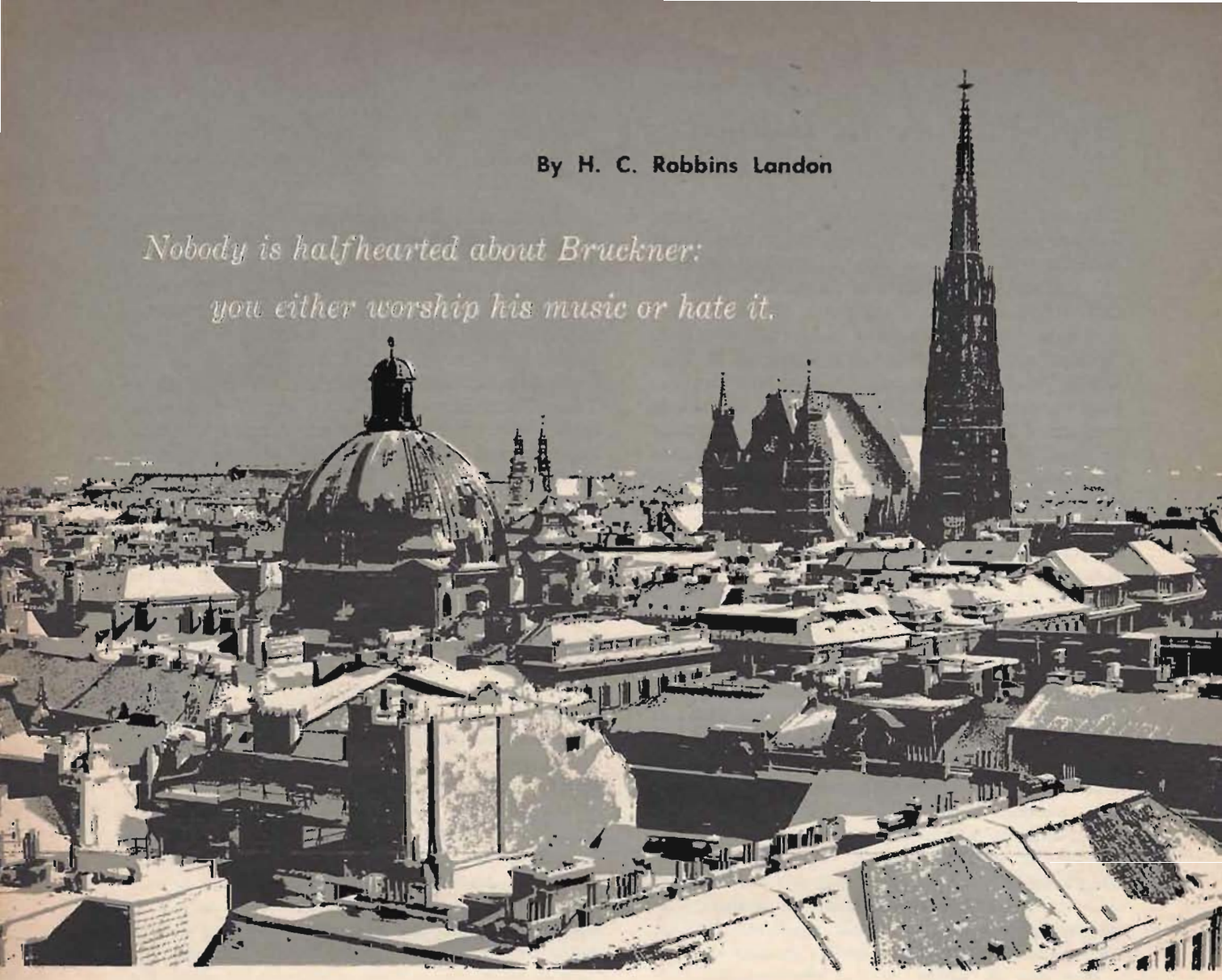


The Baffling Case of ANTON BRUCKNER

By H. C. Robbins Landon

Nobody is halfhearted about Bruckner: you either worship his music or hate it.



THE BAFFLING CASE OF Anton Bruckner

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, Vienna's famous concert organization, the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, sent out to its subscribers a questionnaire asking them what kind of music they wanted to hear, which composers, which works. Of the 4,000 persons queried, only 1,086 replied; on the whole, however, their preferences may be taken as representative of those of the average conservative concertgoer in Vienna. The answers were tabulated in two ways: first, by composer; then by specific works. As anyone familiar with postwar Vienna might surmise, Anton Bruckner came out on top, by a comfortable margin: Bruckner, 337; Mozart, 277; Franz Schmidt, 270; Beethoven, 257; Haydn, 244; Richard Strauss, 244—and so on down to Schoenberg (77), Webern (71), and Prokofiev (66). As for particular works, Bruckner's Eighth Symphony won at 377 (Mozart's *Jupiter* got only 100 votes).

For those unfamiliar with the phenomenon of Bruckner in Austria, it should be explained that his popularity there has been rising steadily ever since the First World War, and most sharply since the sensational revelations of the early Thirties, when it was shown that the published scores of Bruckner's famous symphonies had been "improved" by well-meaning disciples. It is not always clear why Bruckner allowed his original versions to be altered by conductors; but in at least one case, the unfinished and towering Ninth Symphony, the retouchings by Franz Schalk and Ferdinand Löwe were flagrant falsifications of the master's intentions; and there was no question that the *Originalfassung*—first

played in 1932—of the Ninth was more powerful in addition to being more authentic. As score after score appeared in the "original version," not only was the musicological sensation among scholars heightened but audiences in Austria and Germany had a chance to reconsider Bruckner. Both the professional critics and the general public came to wholehearted agreement that the original versions, though longer, were more convincing than the "edited" scores. Bruno Walter, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Hans Weisbach, Sigmund von Hausegger switched from the "old" to the "new" and authentic versions. (Of celebrated present-day conductors, only Knappertsbusch stubbornly refuses to use the corrected scores.)

Gradually, to many Austrian and German music lovers, Bruckner came to mean all things. As World War II progressed, it was to Bruckner that they turned in times of bombing, darkness, and death. When Hitler's death was announced over Hamburg Radio in those final cataclysmic days of April 1945, it was the Adagio of the Seventh Symphony that followed, illustrating (one presumes) the utter depth and despair into which the German nation had been plunged. Even more than Wagner, Bruckner came to mean the essence of German spiritual life: all that was *Dichter* and *Denker*, all that was mystic and philosophic, seemed to be summed up in the solemn grandeur of Bruckner's adagios. It was, people felt, the ultimate expression of the Faustian nature in music. The shattering emotional experience of the Eighth under Furtwängler, played by the Vienna Philharmonic in the scarcely heated Musikvereinsaal during the somber winter of 1944, seemed to make all the suffering worthwhile. An officer on leave in late 1944 wrote in his diary, "The [Bruckner] Ninth with Hans Weisbach: now I know what we are fighting for; to return to the Front will be easier."

The reverence for Bruckner in Vienna has, indeed, something extramusical and feverish about it. The newest trend is to hiss applause after performances of the Eighth and Ninth Symphonies, on the principle that "profound silence" is the only appropriate tribute to these two huge and emotionally racking works. The Viennese also considered it entirely appropriate that St. Stephen's Cathedral should, a couple of Vienna Festivals ago, have allowed the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra to give a concert there consisting of the Bruckner Ninth Symphony and his Te Deum. "Thank God," said one Viennese to me, "they *couldn't* applaud in the Stefansdom. Besides, it's almost a Mass, that symphony, isn't it?"

In the fifteen years during which I have lived in Vienna, I have often—as a matter of statistical curiosity—asked people at a Philharmonic Orchestra concert if they thought that Bruckner was a greater composer than Beethoven. Most of them have replied: "Perhaps not, but he says more to me." Those who have not attended a Bruckner concert in Vienna can hardly imagine the concentration, the dedication, with which audiences listen to the Masses and symphonies. I have never felt a more charged atmosphere in any concert hall than I did in the Musikverein after Furtwängler's performance with the Philharmonic, shortly before his death, of the Bruckner Eighth. And not only the audience is so emotionally involved; the players themselves seem to take on a kind of rapt, otherworldly inwardness when playing Bruckner. Everything combines to produce an atmosphere closely akin to mass hysteria by the time the work is finished. The very loudness of the last pages of the Eighth, in which it is tradition to have a whole set of extra brass come in (making sixteen horns, six trumpets, six trombones, and two bass tubas), is in itself shocking. And thus the return to reality after the final unison notes crash down is so difficult that applause really does seem out of place (as, indeed, it often does after the performance of any great piece of music).

BUT THIS IS only one side of the picture. The composer is nowhere near so universally admired as the existence of the Bruckner cult in Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and Holland would suggest. In other countries and other cultures, Bruckner is often regarded with a loathing fully as strong, and perhaps as unreasonable, as the adoration in which he is held in Austria. I have seldom met someone to whom Bruckner was simply "*égal*," and the violence of reaction which his music calls forth constitutes what must be called the Bruckner Problem.

Bruckner's music produces, and I think will continue to produce, intense emotions, because it was born in a man whose simple, peasantlike exterior concealed a swirling flood of passionate feelings. When the Third Symphony was first performed in Vienna, the audience was so shocked that it first laughed and then angrily walked out of the hall, leaving the composer alone with the orchestra and a few faithful followers. In the United States, people do not generally walk out in the middle of concerts; but I remember distinctly the fury of some Bostonians who were treated to their first taste of Bruckner's Eighth with Koussevitzky shortly after the last war. I was invited to lunch at a house on Beacon Street the next day, and as the discussion about the Eighth grew more and more heated, one man, literally shaking with rage, put down his fork and left the table, choking out as he stormed from the dining room: "It's the most frightful, wicked music I ever heard."

I was exposed to a similarly violent reaction when I paid my first visit to Denmark. We were sitting around the piano—one of Copenhagen's leading conductors, a well-known Danish musicologist, several other musicians, and myself—when the conversation fell on Bruckner. It was then I realized that much of the Bruckner Problem in non-German-speaking countries is political rather than musical. "Karajan came up during the war and conducted Bruckner, I think it was the Seventh Symphony," said the Danish conductor. "I'm sure he did it well, but for us it represented everything about Germany we hate, the marching boots, the concentration

camps. . . ." "Surely that's an exaggeration," I said. "You can't mix music and politics that way." And on the argument went, till I sat down at the piano and began to play the beginning of the Ninth Symphony. The company listened attentively, but after a few minutes my host came over. "Please don't play it," he said, pushing a glass of cognac into my hand; "it really makes me ill."

Several years later I was in Prague, talking to members of the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra. We were discussing the group's repertoire, and I asked if they did any Bruckner. "During the war and before, the German Philharmonic Orchestra here [now the Bamberg Symphony] played a lot of Bruckner; but it was for the German population. We Czechs can't stand Bruckner; it reminds us of the Occupation." And the subject was very abruptly changed.

Actually, this confusion of art and politics in connection with Bruckner is partly the result of the Austro-German attitude which, as I have tried to convey, borders on worship. If Bruckner's music represents (as I think it must, at least subconsciously) the essence of German spiritual life to the Austro-Germans, such peoples as the Danes and Czechs probably react against it more for what it represents than for what it is. Dragging politics into the Bruckner Problem has only served to make it worse.

It does not help matters to include Bruckner with the parochial, highly nationalistic composers who sprouted forth at the end of the nineteenth century, such as Delius, Sibelius, Smetana, Elgar, and Nielsen —composers whose present popularity exists almost exclusively (and even Sibelius is hardly an exception any more) in the cultural milieu to which they belonged. In other words, the English do not dislike Bruckner for the same reason that the Austrians dislike or, more truthfully, are bored by Elgar. The problem of Bruckner is surely one that is, or should be regarded as, purely musical. Austrians sometimes try to persuade doubting foreigners that in order to savor Bruckner you must have seen St. Florian, the great Benedictine Abbey in Upper Austria where Bruckner was organist; you must have soaked up the atmosphere of Upper Austria, the lilting countryside, and so forth. This is surely rubbish, just as it is foolish to say that to like Delius you must lie on the grass by the Thames on a summer evening. Of course it is obvious that the *Ländler*, from Mozart and Haydn down to Mahler, has had a strong effect on Austrian music; but you can like a *Ländler* or a waltz without ever having set foot on Austrian soil. And to confuse the Bruckner Problem with local "*Kolorit*" is certainly as bad as to bring politics or *Weltanschauung* into the affair.

THE FIRST THING that labels a Bruckner Symphony as out of the ordinary is its huge length compared to that of previous symphonic works. The Eighth Symphony, for example, is almost three times as long as Beethoven's Fifth. This, in itself superficial, observation means that the listener must concentrate for some eighty minutes; it puts the playing of a Bruckner symphony on a special level, otherwise occupied (as far as length goes) only by Mahler. The large size of the orchestra—not to speak of the technical difficulties demanded of the brass section—also places the music out of the range of all but major symphonic organizations. Thus, on the simplest level, the execution of a Bruckner work involves problems unrelated to those of the standard repertoire. It takes but one thought for an orchestral management to schedule a Bach suite, a Schubert symphony, a Mozart concerto: it takes at least two, even in Austria, to include Bruckner's Seventh, Eighth, or Ninth on a program.

The moment one stops thinking about the Bruckner Problem and starts listening to the music with an objective ear, however, it is not difficult to see at once why the Austrians identify themselves, or rather their cultural heritage, with this music: for Bruckner is a vast summing up, a final passionate outpouring of a long and hallowed tradition, the end beyond which it is not—and, as history has shown us, has not been—possible to proceed. Mahler was by no means such a repository of tradition as was Bruckner; Mahler leads forward, even to Shostakovich. Bruckner leads nowhere (unless you are prepared to call Franz Schmidt somewhere, which most non-Austrians are not): he is the end of the long road.

In the Bruckner orchestral works, there are powerful echoes of the great symphonic tradition: of Austrian baroque, with gigantic fugues, proud trumpets, and rattling kettledrums; of Haydn's late Masses, which were miraculous fusions of the late Viennese classical style and the older contrapuntal forms; of the doom-ridden tremolos in the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth—an atmosphere to which Bruckner, trancelike, returns again and again. There are also traces of Schubert's lyricism, and many of Bruckner's second subjects bear the stamp of music's greatest song writer. In the scherzos, we have a continuation of the famous Austrian dance tradition, one that flourished in the *Deutsche Tänze* and Minuets which Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven wrote (and were not ashamed of writing) for court balls and also for less formal occasions; this tradition turned into the early waltz (Josef Lanner) and, of course, the Strauss dynasty. In the orchestration of Bruckner's symphonies, there is always a strong undercurrent of a mighty organ; and this is no accident, for Bruckner began his career as an organist, and toured Europe—as far as London —in that capacity. Finally, his orchestration and his harmonic language owe a strong debt to Wagner, the composer who might be said to have colored Bruckner's music more than anyone else. In short, when a musically well-educated Austrian listens to Bruckner he hears, at least in his subconscious, the mighty procession of his musical culture.

After what I have written above, it sounds, on paper, as if Bruckner were music's greatest eclectic; but if you knew *Continued on page 120*

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no Beethoven and were to read a scholarly German thesis on Beethoven's musical inheritance, you might imagine that composer to have been a combination of Haydn and Mozart but with more *ff's*. Bruckner's language, though we can easily trace its sources, is highly original; once you know it, you could turn on the radio and spot Bruckner at once even if the piece were one you had never heard. For like all great synthesizers—Mozart is perhaps the most celebrated example—Bruckner knew instinctively which elements of his heritage to accept and which to reject.

The enormous forms in which his music is cast are necessary because the material he presents is highly complex; it is also complicated, which is not the same thing. Thus, in the Finale of the Eighth Symphony, the coda unfolds itself like the reading of the Archangel at Doomsday; and at the very end, preceded by jagged timpani fanfares, every principal theme in the symphony comes in at once in a final and apocalyptic flash of grandeur. But to arrive at this point, to make this last affirmation of *e pluribus unum*, Bruckner had to construct a long and involved movement, to build up, stone by stone, the mighty edifice capable of receiving, at the end, such an overwhelming superstructure. One of the things that bewilders many people about Bruckner is this very size; we must always remember that he worked in the largest possible forms. (There is, significantly, no important short piece at all by Bruckner.) His mind worked precisely opposite from that of a Persian miniaturist, in whose art our eye is caressed by delightful details; in Bruckner, everything—even the smallest detail—is constructed with an eye to the whole and is thus relatively unimportant in itself.

IN THIS SENSE, not only the Austrians but the rest of us too are getting a Faustian summing-up in such a work as the Bruckner Eighth or Ninth Symphony. Why, then, has this music—coming from a school whose other members have written works cherished the world over—not gone the way of earlier Austrian composers? Why has not Bruckner become a main staple of our musical fare in the way that have Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, or Johann Strauss?

A number of answers to this difficult question have been suggested, but none appears to be wholly satisfactory. It is, for example, possible to link Bruckner's fate with the fate of romantic music in general: for with the upsurge of romanticism, the course of music began to take that fateful direction towards nationalism which ended in the pre-Schoenbergian chaos of a host of minor composers, all working within their own countries and penetrating the international concert world only with difficulty, or not at all. By conjuring up the temptation of subjectivity, composers had to pay the devil's price: isolation and misunderstanding. And if Schubert's path was difficult—we must remember that he wrote his Ninth Symphony more or less for the desk drawer—how much more tortuous was that of Bruckner, who was, moreover, burdened by a total lack of worldly sophistication, a hard, peasant's accent (his crude, primitive German was a sort of society joke in Vienna), and a generally uncouth appearance. Still, this naïve exterior obviously had nothing to do with the visionary grandeur of his music, and the argument connecting Bruckner and romanticism can be effectively countered by citing other romantic figures such as Mendelssohn or Tchaikovsky, whose music has not experienced any difficulty in crossing the borders of the countries in which it originated.

Still another argument, which one heard more frequently twenty or thirty years ago than one does today, is the old anti-Wagnerian cry. For many years it was the fashion to decry Wagner and, automatically, Bruckner, whose music, as we know, owes much to Wagnerian methods. Yet today Wagner is accepted as one of music's greatest geniuses, certainly not to be classified as a problem any more. This argument, too, does not bring us nearer the core of the matter. "I am tempted to believe," writes a valued colleague, "that there is no explanation for the feast-or-famine attitude towards Bruckner—except that we are perhaps in the presence of a cultural lag that seems to be more laggardly in some milieus than in others."

Granted this is true, someone reading this article a hundred years from now will probably experience the same curious sensations with which we read of mighty and earth-shaking aesthetic battles that took place generations ago: battles with which we can hardly identify ourselves emotionally, so long ago in space and time did they occur. Personally, I do not doubt for a minute that Bruckner is the greatest symphonist since Beethoven. Bruckner, I am convinced, is here to stay, and it is up to us to face his music squarely. Like the tourist in the Uffizi gallery in Florence who was told by the guard, "It is not the pictures that are on trial, it is you," one might paraphrase, "It is not Bruckner's music that is on trial. . . ." Perhaps the answer to the Bruckner Problem is as simple as that.

Bettmann Archive

The Bruckner Symphonies on Records

OF Bruckner's earlier symphonies (which include two before that designated as "No. 1"), there used to be several microgroove recordings, but all have disappeared except for the former Unicorn recording, with veteran Brucknerite F. Charles Adler, of Symphony No. 1, in C minor, now to be had on Siena 1001. On the whole, No. 1 is not a work, nor this a recording, with which to begin a Bruckner library. Nor is No. 3, in D minor, in spite of its real touches of genius, the Bruckner work with which to start a collection. There are two available recordings of the Third, neither of which uses the original version. SPA offers a two-record set (30/31) with F. Charles Adler (Mahler's Tenth Symphony on the fourth side), now very outdated sonically. Knappertsbusch, another veteran Brucknerite (who, as mentioned in the accompanying article, refuses to accept the original versions), plays the work with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra on a single disc, London CM 9107; and this is clearly the preferred recording.

Beginning with the Fourth Symphony, we are dealing with masterpieces. To me the Eighth and Ninth contain, each in its own way, the essence of Bruckner—all his greatest and most uncompromising thoughts—but the popular pieces are without doubt No. 4, the *Romantic*, and No. 7, in E—which, incidentally, was the first Bruckner symphony to have been recorded (on 78s, with Ormandy). There are four versions of the Fourth to choose from: Hollreiser with the Bamberg Symphony, part of a three-disc Vox set (VBX 117 or SVBX 5117) which includes the Seventh with Rosbaud (a marvelous conductor far too little known in America); a Decca set—also on three discs and also coupled with No. 7 (DX 146), conducted by one of Germany's leading Brucknerites, Eugen Jochum; a very old Klemperer on Vox (11200), which does not show this great conductor at his best; and a gorgeously recorded, smoothly played version with the late Bruno Walter (Columbia M2L 273 or M2S 622, two discs, including the *Tannhäuser* Act I Overture). I would say that Jochum's is the most faithful interpretation, whereas Walter's has the best sound.

Of the difficult and long No. 5, there is only the beautifully played Knappertsbusch (Vienna Philharmonic, on London's two-disc set, CMA 7208 or CSA 2205, with music from *Götterdämmerung*), not, however, the original version. The lyrical Sixth Symphony no longer exists in the American catalogue; there used to be a decent, two-LP on Westminster, conducted by Henry Swoboda.

Continuing with the oft-recorded Seventh, there are no fewer than five editions in the Schwann catalogue (a sixth, the Van Beinum/Concertgebouw on London, was recently deleted—no great loss). Van Otterloo's with the Vienna Symphony on Epic (SC 6006) is a second-rate job and can be ignored. From the above-mentioned Rosbaud set, you can also get the Seventh alone, on one Vox LP, 10750—this is a very good buy and a distinguished performance with the Southwest German Radio Orchestra. Jochum's with the Berlin Philharmonic is a standardly good reading, but all these pale before the magnificent, searching performance with Klemperer and the Philharmonia on Angel (3626B or S 3626B, a two-record set containing also the *Siegfried Idyll*).

Of the Eighth and Ninth Symphonies, perhaps the definitive recordings were never issued—those performances with Furtwängler, which live as a cherished memory in many Europeans' hearts. There is a strong rumor that Deutsche Grammophon may make available a Berlin radio tape of the Eighth with that conductor. If this turns out to be the case, get it by all means. Meanwhile, there is an opulent Karajan version with the Berlin Philharmonic, splendidly recorded on two Angel discs (3576B or S 3576B) and perhaps the best introduction to Bruckner at present available. Van Beinum's Eighth (Epic SC 6011, also two discs) is again second-rate, while Jochum's old performance (Decca DX 109), much loved when it first came out, is now hopelessly outdated sonically (and on three LPs to boot). One of the most rewarding Bruckner performances comes, strangely, from the Leningrad Philharmonic with whom Mravinsky turns out a stunning Eighth on Artia-MK 210B (two discs).

There are now six versions of the Ninth available. Adler's (SPA 24/25, two records) is the only one not to use the original version, and for that reason it is out of the running. The original version of this symphony is the only possible one, for the revised score destroys much of the autograph's brilliant originality and daring. The only two stereo recordings are Keilberth's with the Hamburg Philharmonic on Telefunken (18043, 8043 in mono) and Walter's on Columbia (MS 6171, ML 5571 in mono). Keilberth is not one of my favorite conductors—for me his heavy, coarse joviality has ruined many a Mozart performance at Salzburg—but I must confess that, even with a second-rate orchestra, he gets nearer the jagged monumentality of the Ninth than does Walter, whose Bruckner is a little too smooth for many Brucknerites. I have also had much pleasure from the Vox record with Horenstein (8040), although the Vienna Symphony (that is what Vox means by "Pro Musica" in Vienna) is not the Vienna Philharmonic. Van Beinum's (Epic LC 3401), like all his Bruckner recordings, simply misses the mark. Loving a work does not, I fear, mean understanding it. The Jochum set (Decca DX 139) has the disadvantage of taking two discs, but this, like all Jochum's Bruckner readings, is an intensely dedicated, selfless performance (if you will compare his with Walter's, you will see what I mean about the Walter—in the latter too many corners, if not cut, are at least rounded off). I once heard Furtwängler do the Ninth with the Berlin Philharmonic. None of the readings mentioned above touches it for depth and intensity. I am still waiting for DGG to make the tape recording of his performance (which is known to exist) available on records.