## BRUCKNER: SYMPHONY NO. 4 IN E FLAT MAJOR

Some composers, like some wines, do not travel well. It is much better to admit this in a case like that of Bruckner than to take refuge in the misleading half-truth that music "knows no national frontiers". Nor is it by any means necessarily evidence of a composer's lack of greatness that he is not readily accepted abroad. Paris took Lehár to its heart long after it continued to find Brahms something of a bore, and this is no more evidence of Lehár's superiority than is the strange fascination that Galsworthy holds for Germans testimony to his superiority to Virginia Woolf. In Vienna, Munich and Zürich, Bruckner is accepted so confidently as the equal of Brahms, and holds so prominent a place in concert programmes, that his greatness is hardly a matter of discussion. In England an isolated performance of a symphony attracts sporadic discussion that only in the last two or three years has shown signs of building into real interest and respect.

Many Austrians maintain that the flavour of Bruckner's music is too intimately bound to the landscape and folk tunes of his birth place, Upper Austria, to make a wide appeal. But the same could be said of Smetana and Janáček. The reasons for the general (and often thoughtless) rejection of Bruckner lie deeper than this and are more complex. Perhaps first in importance is the absurd notion that his music amounts to no more than the Wagnerian idiom poured into symphonic mould. Partially the blame for this misconception lies with Hanslick, who, aware that Bruckner was an ardent admirer of Wagner, never seems to have discovered that he was none the less a highly individual genius. But fundamentally the blame lies with the good intentions of the composer's friends and pupils.

Bruckner was a man of the utmost simplicity and humility. Born in 1824, he spent the first forty years of his life in the quiet seclusion of Austrian provincial life as an organist, first at the great monastery of St. Florian and subsequently at Linz Cathedral; and it was not until 1868 that he came to Vienna as professor of harmony and counterpoint. But he

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remained until his death something of a curiosity in the sophisticated life of the Austrian capital. A naive and pious country bumpkin, subservient to anyone he considered his superior, completely lacking in social graces or intellectual interests, the great city never ceased to appear baffling and hostile to him. In point of fact this simple piety, coupled with a complete isolation from the intellectual currents of his day, is one source of the great strength of Bruckner's music, for it preserved him from literary preoccupations that undermined more than one romantic composer.

But it did not appear like this to his friends. They acknowledged his contrapuntal mastery and the power of his symphonic thought, but his scoring they took to be crude. It was, they considered, hardly to be expected that a simple country organist could master the complicated technique of contemporary orchestration. Accordingly, among other "improvements", they rescored the symphonies in accordance with the best Wagnerian practice of blending instruments from various divisions of the orchestra so as to produce a rich, thick tonal carpet. In doing so they destroyed the unique characteristic of Bruckner's scoring: his tendency to use strings, woodwind and brass as individual blocks of sound, thus retaining the simple brilliance of primary colours that so perfectly matches his musical personality. In this manner his friends contrived to strengthen the impression, so successfully created by critics like Hanslick, that Bruckner was to be considered as no more than a pale shadow of Bayreuth.

This was not all his friends did for him. They decided that the symphonies were too long and accordingly set about shortening them by the simple means of cutting. Bruckner was far too lacking in any self-confidence to protest effectively. And incredible though it may seem, his plea that at any rate the complete version should be published was not always respected. It is indeed surprising that what survived this drastic treatment was still able to arouse interest. But a turning point came in 1927 with the formation of the International Bruckner Society. Under its auspices the Ninth Symphony, which after the composer's death had suffered a particularly severe mauling in Loewe's over-confident hands, was performed under Siegmund von Hausegger in Munich, both in its original form and in Loewe's version, as recently as 1932. The immense superiority of the original version, that allowed the work's individual flavour to emerge fully for the first time, was immediately apparent. In the succeeding years there was a steady stream of first performances of the newly published original versions of other symphonies (including that of the Sixth under the conductor of this recording, Paul van Kempen, at Dresden in 1935) that led to a re-birth of interest in Bruckner, the ripples of which are only now beginning to lap at the shores of Britain.

It is in this form, with the Wagnerian veneer removed, that Bruckner's symphonies are generally heard today, and this recording of the Fourth Symphony is accordingly of the *Originalfassung*. What above else emerges from this belated process of rescuing Bruckner from his friends is that fundementally he stands, not under the shadow of Bayreuth, but in direct line of succession to the Viennese classical symphonists, and first and foremost to Schubert. It would be idle to pretend that his symphonies have the compact formal qualities of his great predecessors like Mozart and Haydn, but this admission is far removed indeed from the general assumption that they are lacking in any sort of formal cohesion. The great problem confronting all composers of symphonies after the death of Beethoven was to combine coherent development with the extended and lyrical material that as romantics they often took as their themes. This conflict is already apparent in Schubert; no doubt the ravishing melody which opens the Unfinished Symphony is intrinsically far more beautiful than the rhythmic figure that is rapped out at the beginning of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, but there can be no question which is symphonically the more fruitful.

But it is no good blaming composers for failing to be what they are not. It is unprofitable to say that Schubert and Bruckner should have selected themes that would have enabled them to retain the compact force of Beethoven's thinking, for this would have run against their musical natures. Bruckner does, in fact, take themes that are short and truly symphonic in a Beethovenian sense, but they are usually joined – as in the case of the first and last movements of this symphony – by a more lyrical and melodic group. It is from this

themal dichotomy that there springs the impression of so many casual listeners that Bruckner's great movements are a series of episodes, for it is undeniable that his mode of development is often to turn first to one group of themes and then to another, and rarely to bind them into a unity. This impression is reinforced by his disdain of bridge passages: when he has done what he set out to do with one group of themes, he drops it abruptly and turns without more ado to another.

But form is an elusive concept, and one where dogma is misplaced. Sonata-form is not a series of procedures whose application to a couple of themes produces a good first movement in the manner of a cookery recipe. The form an original artist selects inevitably flows not from a formula but from the nature of his artistic personality and of the material he is working in. Hence it is absurd to take Beethoven or Brahms as a model and then accuse Bruckner of formal deficiencies. In the last resort the presence or absence of form can only be determined by the ability of the music to impress its coherence on a listener. And this in its own manner Bruckner's Fourth Symphony most certainly does, if it is listened to without preconceptions but with intelligent sympathy.

Bruckner's Fourth Symphony in E flat major was completed in 1874. It was subjected from 1878 to 1880 to a thorough-going revision, based on the experience the composer had gained from performances of his second and third symphonies, and in the course of which an entirely new scherzo was substituted. The symphony was first performed in 1881 under Hans Richter. Although, after composition Bruckner added an informal programme for the pleasure of his friends, this symphony is not, apart from the scherzo, programme music, even in the limited sense of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony.

The first movement (*Bewegt, nicht zu schnell*) is based on two sharply contrasting groups of themes, the one terse, the other melodic and lyrical. The main theme, dominated by a descending fifth is given out by horns against a background of *tremolo* strings. From it is evolved the second theme of this group, a sharply defined rhythmic figure that appears both in ascending and descending form. The two main themes of the lyrical group in the contrasted key of D flat major appear together, the one light and rhythmically buoyant is heard on violins, while the violas take up as counter-melody a calm flowing figure.

Although smaller in scope and weight than some of the great slow movements that earned Bruckner the title of "master of the adagio," this *Andante quasi allegretto* is highly characteristic and shows how, unlike most composers of his time, Bruckner almost alone could write music that is at once simple yet grave, profound yet unfevered, and that is infinitely refreshing in its unaffected purity and strength. The movement, in C minor, is based on two fresh and romantic tunes connected by a brief chorale-like passage. The first appears almost at once on 'cellos, and, starting with a falling fifth, bears a marked resemblance to the opening theme of the first movement. The second, classically poised and yet heartfelt, is heard from the violas against a background of plucked strings. This is unproblematic yet great music.

Bruckner was almost incapable of writing a poor scherzo and this is among his best. The scherzo itself is a rousing affair with brilliant fanfares (whose rhythm recalls the rhythmic figure noted in the first movement), and portrays a hunt. The trio is a *Ländler*, unmistakably Austrian, that radiates the solid peace of the countryside, a quality that the tormented Mahler, for all his skill, could only approach from the outside.

The finale (*Bewegt, doch nicht zu schnell*) opens with a menacing descending figure on clarinets and horns against a remorselessly treading bass, and is subsequently joined by fanfares recalling the scherzo. This leads to the announcement of a great, uncompromising theme in E minor, cast in the form of stark and primitive simple octaves. Here is no *Gemütlichkeit*, but Bruckner at his most grandiose and imposing. But this grandeur has nothing in common with the agonized soul-searchings that underlie Mahler's great orchestral outbursts. Here there is the unquestioning faith that Mahler strove for but never found, and the source of vast climaxes that punctuate the movement are indeed to be sought in the baroque ceremonial of Austrian catholicism, that forms such an essential part of Bruckner's artistic make-up. This uncompromising theme is followed by a group of lyrical subjects that in key and atmosphere recall the andante. The movement ends in a vast coda in which the opening theme is joined by a chorale-like motive to build a veritable cathedral of sound.