

Symphony No 3 in D minor

Anton Bruckner (1824-1896)

2024 version by John Longstaff; first performance

1. Gemäßigt, misterioso
2. ADAGIO Feierlich
3. SCHERZO Ziemlich schnell
4. FINALE Allegro

It is difficult to think of a symphony which has been subjected to more revision than Bruckner's 3rd. For the purposes of these notes we will assume four versions; those of 1873-4, 1877-8 and 1889 all authentic, and the new version we are hearing this evening. In 1873 the composer showed the score to Wagner, who accepted the dedication of this symphony despite the work not yet being finished. Whether or not Wagner was aware that this symphony originally contained several quotations from his operas is difficult to say. The work was completed on 31 December 1873, and was given some preliminary rehearsals in summer 1874 by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra who then rejected it. Bruckner then revised the work: a performance was scheduled for 16 December 1877 when it was to have been conducted by Johann von Herbeck, an influential Viennese musician who had given the first ever performance of Schubert's 'Unfinished' Symphony in 1865. Sadly Herbeck died the month before the Bruckner concert, leaving the composer with no alternative but to conduct his 3rd Symphony himself. It's one of the tragedies of musical history that he failed spectacularly; the audience, finding Bruckner's music difficult to understand, left in droves during the performance. The Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra were openly contemptuous of both the music and the composer-conductor, and left the concert platform the moment the work was over. Poor Bruckner remained alone on stage to receive the opprobrium of such few members of the audience who had remained to the end to express it.

Despite this humiliation, Bruckner continued to revise the work, emboldened by the offer of Theodor Rättig to publish not only the full score, but also a version for piano duet made by the young Gustav Mahler (then aged 17) with his friend Rudolf Krzyzanowski. And there the story might have ended, except that in 1887 the conductor Hermann Levi (who had conducted the world première of Wagner's *Parsifal* at Bayreuth) rejected the original version of Bruckner's 8th Symphony, causing Bruckner not only to revise it, but also to have another look at his 3rd and 4th symphonies to see if they could further be improved. By this time Bruckner's pupils Josef and Franz Schalk had established successful careers of their own, and were determined to assist their master in promoting his

music. But their influence didn't stop at promotion, it also included assisting their teacher with suggestions for cuts and alterations to his music, and in places radically re-orchestrating it. There are moments in the 1889 version of Bruckner 3 where their influence is easily discernible, and although the changes don't alter the character of the music that much (and their approach to editing the score suggests at times a level of pragmatism that was never really within Bruckner's grasp), nonetheless it's difficult to view this final version as definitive, particularly as it is clear that it's a revision of the 1877-8 version with no reference at all to the piece as Bruckner originally conceived it. This 1889 version was published a year or two later with further emendations by the Schalk brothers, and there the situation rested for a further sixty-odd years.

In 1950 the International Bruckner Society published the 1877 version in a cleaned-up score, believing this to be the original version of the work, and followed this in 1959 with a new edition of the 1889 version as Bruckner left it, thus in the post-war Bruckner revival there were two authentic versions available for conductors to choose from. All this changed in 1977 when the 1873 version was published for the first time; what had previously been thought of as little more than a trial run for the 1877 version suddenly became a score of the highest importance, and possibly superior to the versions we thought we knew and loved. One of the consequences of this discovery is that the composer and writer Robert Simpson, who had published his book *The Essence of Bruckner* in 1967, produced a revised edition in 1991 with the chapter on the 3rd Symphony wholly rewritten, stating that 'in 1873/4 Bruckner had largely achieved the work...the later scores were a progressive ruination of it, brought about by loss of confidence and pressure from self-appointed assistants'. Further research has unearthed a 4th version of the Adagio from 1876, and there are minor discrepancies in the various editions of the three main versions, but these need not concern us here.

In studying this symphony in its various guises, I found myself agreeing with Robert Simpson that while the original version wasn't perfect, the versions made later (in particular the one made in 1889) rarely improved things. Contemplating a performance to celebrate the bicentenary of Bruckner's birth this year, I researched the available performing material; had I been able to purchase a set of the 1873 version I might well have chosen to perform it, possibly (probably?) with a few cuts, but you can only hire it, and marking up hired material is seldom satisfactory, so this option wasn't really viable. I was also aware of two other recent versions of this symphony by Peter Jan Marthé and Joseph Kanz but their ideas appeared to be rather different from mine, so there was little help there. Rather more encouraging was the remark in the Eulenburg miniature score of the 1889

version by Professor Hans Redlich: *It is not impossible that only a...final version, which will unite the achievements and characteristics of each its predecessors may become the universally accepted performing version of the future.* Another idea which wouldn't go away was that if I chose to perform one of the three available versions (1873, 1877, and 1889) I was by implication choosing to reject the other two, and I didn't feel sufficiently strongly that I wanted to play one of them at the expense of the others.

Thus I eventually decided to make my own version of this problematic piece. My starting point was that the original was the best version until I felt that it wasn't; if the 1877 version seemed better I had no hesitation in using it in preference. I've tried to eliminate passages which seemed equally ineffective in all three scores, while not disturbing the overall shape of each movement. The overriding intention has been to produce an effective and logical symphony which is reasonably easy to follow.

The first movement opens with an ostinato on the strings over a tonic pedal, so typically Brucknerian that there can be little doubt whose music we are listening to. The trumpet sounds out the main theme which will recur at important points throughout the symphony. The music reaches a loud climax at which point the orchestra declaims a second theme in unison octaves. This is explored a little and then the opening ostinato repeats over a dominant pedal, ending in another loud climax with the second theme. A linking passage leads us to the second subject group, characterised by lyrical tunes often played simultaneously, so that although immensely attractive we're not quite certain which tune is the most important; for that matter neither is Bruckner. This continues for some time, after which a crescendo leads us to the third subject group where jagged octaves alternates between loud and soft. The exposition ends with a quiet coda after which the development starts, largely concerned with reworking the opening trumpet tune played in inversion (i.e. bottom to top) contrapuntally by the winds while the strings have various ostinato figures. Eventually we arrive at a massive climax where the trumpet theme is hammered out by the entire orchestra, but this is not the start of the recapitulation, which when we get there a few moments later turns out to be pretty much a rerun of the exposition with a few small tucks and transpositions. At the end of the recapitulation we hear some woodwind fragments recalling earlier musical themes before we embark on the Coda, which like that of Beethoven's 9th Symphony is based on a chromatic figure hanging around the tonic of D minor.

After the drama of the 1st movement, the Adagio opens quietly with a serene tune in the surprising key of Eflat major; it's rare for the opening chord of a second movement to be a semitone higher than the end of the first movement. The movement has the rather surprising structure of

ABCBA; this is due to Bruckner choosing to delete a midway repetition of the first theme in 1877, regrettable in terms of the shape of the movement, but rather more practical given the length of what remains.

The lyrical B theme is in $\frac{3}{4}$ time and is heard first on the violas, then on the cellos and basses over which the violins play a syncopated accompaniment, one of Bruckner's favourite effects. Then comes a slow mysterious hymn-like tune, again on the strings. Fragments of it are taken over by the flute and clarinet before it returns to the strings. It moves around the orchestra before a loud bridge passage (the first loud music in the movement for quite a while) takes us back to the viola tune, this time with a running semiquaver countermelody in the violins. There's a further repetition of this tune, this time in the bassoons and double-basses; it's taken over by the horns before the music seems to lose its way; a brief reminiscence of the C theme leads us back to a repeat of the opening of the movement; this time with the tunes in the winds against a pizzicato triplet accompaniment in the strings. This builds up to a number of fortissimo interjections; however the movement ends quietly after a quotation from Wagner's *Die Walküre*, the only Wagner quotation which survived in this symphony through all the composer's revisions.

The Scherzo returns to the style of the opening of the symphony; a tentative beginning leading to a loud outburst from the full orchestra: the ensuing trio is much more lyrical, perhaps in the style of an Austrian folk-song, after which the scherzo is repeated in its entirety.

The Finale's main theme recalls the rhythm of the trumpet tune heard at the start of the first movement, but whereas the trumpet sought to emphasise the home key of D minor, here we are in tonally turbulent waters, the main key being hinted at, but never properly announced. Instead the turbulence gives way to a second group of themes where a polka and a chorale are played simultaneously. In an oft-quoted remark Bruckner made to his biographer August Göllerich, the composer said that "The polka represents the humour and cheerfulness in the world - the chorale represents the sad and painful in it". These two themes are happily combined and played around with for quite a while, before a third idea interrupts them: an octave theme played by the winds and strings (the lower strings playing a quaver behind the rest of the orchestra, so if it doesn't sound quite together it's probably correct!), while the brass hammers out more octaves in a different rhythm; mercifully this mayhem soon dies down.

It's at this point that Bruckner tied himself in ever-tighter compositional knots, and I've had to make some difficult choices. All three authentic versions of the symphony attempt to develop the preceding material, but none is particularly successful, and in the later versions the recapitulation is significantly shortened (not by much in 1877, almost

eliminated in 1889). I've stuck with the original version, but I've reduced the development to a reminder of the second theme, (this time in the minor key) before reinstating the recapitulation in just about its entirety. So we get it all again; the chromatic turbulence, the polka-chorale, and the displaced octaves, which as before die down. Bruckner then reminds us of the journey we have undertaken by quoting short fragments of the first three movements (he later shortened this section and eventually abandoned it altogether, but its poignancy is undeniable). Another chromatic outburst leads us to a brass fanfare heralding the return of the opening theme of the symphony, this time triumphantly in D major, and with the entire orchestra hammering out the first four notes of the trumpet theme in octaves the work comes to a glorious conclusion. This last idea is surprisingly not a feature of the original, but musically it is so satisfying that it demands to be included in any posthumous version (as it was in both 1877 and 1889). Whatever the edition played, what matters most is that any version offered this evening is a convincing piece of music; if you've enjoyed it then my efforts on behalf of this flawed but magnificent symphony have not been in vain.

Programme notes © John Longstaff 2024

JOHN LONGSTAFF (conductor) was born in Lancashire, read music at Girton College, Cambridge and studied conducting at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, and also with George Hurst. In 1988 he was awarded 2nd prize in the Leeds Conductors Competition and in 1991 was a finalist in the first ever Donatella Flick Conductors Competition. He has held full time posts as rehearsal pianist and conductor at the Opera House in Kiel, Germany, and with Northern Ballet Theatre, in addition to guest engagements for Opera North, the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company and Opera Lirica. For 18 years he was Musical Director of the Sheffield Symphony Orchestra, where he is now Conductor Emeritus.

He is currently Director of Music at St. Peter's Church, Harrogate, where in addition to his regular duties he directs annual Oratorio performances in Holy Week with orchestra; works performed include *Messiah*, the *Mass in B minor*, and Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, this last in a new translation he has made with his friend and colleague Andrew Greenan. As a composer and arranger he has been responsible for many ballet scores, including the music for several children's ballets; most notably composing the score for *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, which was toured nationwide in 2017 and shown on BBC CBeebies. He has made versions for smaller

orchestras of all the Tchaikovsky ballets and Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*. In the realm of opera he has made acclaimed chamber orchestrations of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, and of Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel*.

KERNOW PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA
(leader Alastair Wood)

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Deborah Reep
Jenny Rapson
Justine Smith
Fathyma Parker
Alex Fraser
Claire Hamlen
Emma Oliver-Trend

2nd Violins

Karen Frost
Hywel Webley
Sarah Routley
Mark Stott
Liz Vosper
Clive Bix
Jess Angove
Sarah Johnston
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Laura Parfitt
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Flutes

Sarah Hanley
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Jess Ward
Demelza Curnow

Clarinets

Patrick Saunders
Jo Crompton

Bassoons

Helen Simmonds
William Kinnear

Horns

Iain Vosper
Gus Lewis
Phil Penglase
Gemma Peasgood

Trumpets

Paul Thomas
Anthony Hindley
Lindsay Marns

Trombones

Matt Harrison
Sinne Brock
Andrew Rice

Timpani

Ross Hamilton