

Classical

From a Problem to a Moment

BY DAVID ALLEN

Bruckner, Bruckner, everywhere.

There was a time, as recently as three or four decades ago, when this composer was a relative rarity, especially outside Central Europe. His reputation pre-éclated him. He was a religious man alien to the modern world, the author of monumental symphonies that many listeners found monumentally dull.

He was a provincial, uncouth, hardly a sophisticate like Brahms or Mahler. There was the forbidding editorial history of his nine (or is that 11? 18?) symphonies, and the lingering unease at his adoption by Nazi propagandists. If Bruckner was never exactly absent from the repertoire, he was long its resident eccentric.

Even if some listeners still struggle with this music, though, there has always been a band of Bruckner devotees among scholars, critics and musicians. "There is no doubt that if people once grow fond of Bruckner, they grow very fond of him," the editor of Gramophone magazine said nearly a century ago. And lately, more and more people seem to have grown very fond of him indeed.

Performances of Bruckner's symphonies seem more common than ever, and not just because this year is the 200th anniversary of his birth. Recordings come out constantly, with offerings that include fresh takes on period instru-

ments and entire cycles from our most esteemed ensembles. It used to be that Bruckner had to be programmed with Mozart to draw a crowd; now he carries enough weight to bring Messiaen or Ligeti along with him. Attitudes have changed; clichés have quietened. Observers once talked of the "Bruckner Problem." Now, we live in the Bruckner Moment.

Conductors have played a major part in this transformation. Many of those working today are not just fond of Bruckner, but truly love his scores. For some, a performance of one comes close to a transcendent experience. Gone are the days when Bruckner was the preserve of the grizzled, graying maestro: Yannick Nézet-Séguin, for example, recorded the Seventh when he was just 31. Studying the music earlier in their careers, conductors have more opportunities to perform it; as technical standards have risen, even unheralded orchestras can give persuasive accounts of works that once posed challenges.

So, what is Bruckner's music like to conduct? Why do his symphonies, the expression of a deep Catholic faith, resonate so loudly in an increasingly secular age? How have these long, complicated works grown so remarkably in stature while our attention spans have become so brief? In interviews, seven conductors offered their thoughts; here are edited excerpts from those conversations.



LISTENERS ONCE FOUND THE COMPOSER ANTON BRUCKNER, BORN 200 YEARS AGO, DULL.



Yannick Nézet-Séguin

Nézet-Séguin recorded the symphonies with the Orchestre Métropolitain de Montréal, and recently received the Killyn-Métroupe Medal of Honor from the Bruckner Society of America.

What makes Bruckner extraordinary to conduct is that it's probably the one composer who can really touch the absolute of playing music in a group, or singing music together, which is that it's not about individual reward or pleasure — it's really about a surrender to the collective. It doesn't give you many solos if you are an orchestral player. You play a lot of tremolos if you're a string player. Brass players tend to be more enthusiastic about it at first, because they get a lot to play. It's been the same journey with every orchestra I've done Bruckner with. It starts with a little bit of, "Oh, it's going to be long, it's going to be tiring," and once you get into a certain zone with this composer, it elevates you, and you feel like you've experienced what is truly the symbolic power of orchestral playing.

My theory, and I know it's not scientific, is when I observe our very fast-paced world, everything is becoming shorter and shorter. Even a pop song is shorter. As part of human nature, we are longing for something that takes more time. That's why people go to retreats, they go to spa retreats, they go to yoga class, they go to meditation moments. And I believe that Bruckner is a meditation. It is all of these things, and yet it also nourishes your soul.



Jakub Hrusa

Hrusa has made two recordings of Bruckner's symphonies with the Bamberg Symphony. One includes all three versions of the Fourth, plus an extra finale and various unpublished drafts.

The originality of Bruckner — and I say this with a little grain of exaggeration, but just a little — is that from the Sympho-

ny No. 0 to the Symphony No. 9, he basically didn't change his concept radically. That's part of the power, of the strength of this, because this originality is not like, "One day I'll try this, another day, that." He stayed faithful to this genre for his whole mature life and made constant progress in the details. There's a combination of extreme complexity and easiness of approach. It really has a quality of communication which stuns me.

Compared to other conducting tasks, I think it makes you vulnerable, because you realize there's so much to be done about the piece, or about this kind of music, which you don't have explicitly in your hands. It has to come organically out of the orchestral culture. The orchestra has to deliver so much, not everything, but so much of what is important for Bruckner, from themselves. It's funny that any time you think, "I will specifically help with this or that," and you do some kind of action, it's usually a disturbing factor.



Simone Young

Young recorded the original versions of the symphonies with the Hamburg Philharmonic. She will conduct the Sixth with the New York Philharmonic in May.

I think the first Bruckner symphony I did was the Sixth, and that's got to be 25 years ago, or more. I suspect that there is something about the vertical weight of the sound being carried through a horizontal line that resonates with me as a pianist. That was natural to him as an organist, and that informed his compositions. I found the language and the structural integrity of the Bruckner symphonies very natural and organic, in the same way, around the same time, that I found Schumann's symphonic language easier to deal with than Schubert's.

Bruckner is an intellectual undertaking. You can do a perfectly decent performance of a Mahler symphony pretty much going on your gut and spontaneity, if you've got a good enough orchestra. Bruckner, you need to sit down and work out as a puzzle.



Franz Welser-Möst

Welser-Möst's most recent Bruckner recording, a Fourth with the Cleveland Orchestra, was released in August.

I come from the same area where he came from. When I was 9 or 10 years old, a friend of my mother gave me a recording of the Second Symphony. Every day I came home from school, put on that recording, full power, and after three weeks, my mother said in her quiet way, "We know the piece now, we can give back the recording." I was simply mesmerized with that sound world. I'd never heard something like that.

In Bruckner's music, if you just go from one beautiful moment to the next, that's not enough. You have to create an arch, which makes the audience feel the piece is shorter than it really is. It's like with Wagner's music: If you don't get the architecture in "Tristan" right, or "Parsifal" or "Meistersinger," then there always comes a moment — sometimes earlier in performances, sometimes later — when you think, "Oh my God, when is this piece going to end?"



Nathalie Stutzmann

Stutzmann led Bruckner festivals this year with the London Symphony Orchestra and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra.

I always was fascinated by the feelings I was getting when I was listening to a Bruckner symphony. I always felt that the universe he offers us is unique because it's almost like a life experience. It's not about telling a story or describing a precise idea. It's more like if you sit in front of the sea and you listen to the waves. People always think about the grandeur of his music. But there are also so many moments of intimate feelings. The way he writes is so Romantic, but the form itself is super Classical, it's even from the Middle Ages sometimes. The way he treats the bass line, for example, and the counterpoint for the second violins, the violas. When you finish a concert with him, you feel like you went over five centuries of music in Europe.



Markus Poschner

Poschner recorded every version of the symphonies, 18 in all, with the Bruckner Orchestra Linz and the ORF Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra.

Somebody like Mahler takes you by the hand and pulls you from the darkness to the light. The same with Beethoven — it's all about fighting for human rights. Bruckner is totally different, because it's about us; it's not an ego thing. It's just floating, building up its own world, which is on the one hand so mystic, and on the other hand, so down to earth, grounded here. At the moment, I'm 10 kilometers south of St. Florian [the monastery in Austria where Bruckner sang, played the organ and was buried]. You always think Bruckner was from the church, from the organ. But if you leave St. Florian, you're touching cow manure. You're in the countryside. It's surrounded by nothing, just by animals. So it's always about, to find the right balance between church, which means choral music, and on the other hand polkas, Ländler, waltzes, because all this is particularly informative for his symphonies.



Manfred Honeck

Honeck has recorded Bruckner's Fourth, Seventh and Ninth with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra.

You can be Catholic, you can be Christian, you can be Jewish, Muslim, whatever. Bruckner's music is for everybody here, because he always looks up — not with one eye, with both eyes. There is enormous honesty in his spirituality; there is nothing which is artificial. I believe in our time, when, at least in the Western part of the world, we have reduced religious practice, we find this practice in Bruckner's music. There are a lot of people who don't regard themselves as spiritual or religious, but when it comes to listening to Bruckner, they are longing for something. And I think that's one of the reasons Bruckner might get even more popular. If you go to a concert and are open, you will always, always be touched by him, captured by the spirituality. Humans generally have this longing for something, or at least they ask: "Why? Why are we here? Where do we go?" That's the same question Bruckner asked himself. His answer was God in religion, of course, and he gave the answer through music.

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