

BRUCKNER'S SEVENTH

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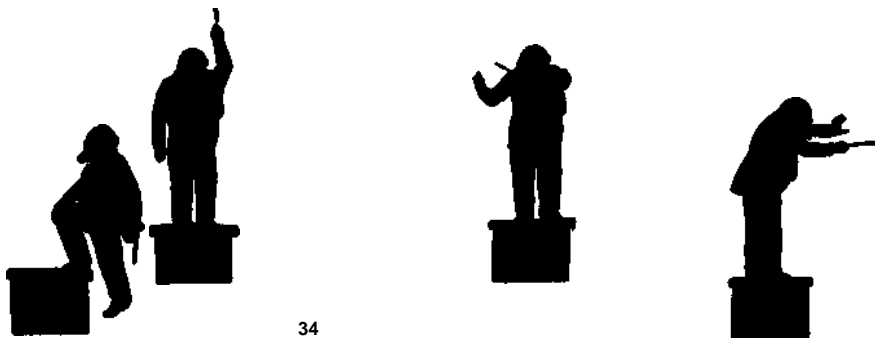


ANTON
AND THE MASTER

It is one of the richest ironies of music that Bruckner should ever have fallen amongst Wagnerians. They used him in the controversy with Brahms; they set him up in a high place; they even altered his orchestrations, making his adagios sound like the Trauermarsch, and his first movement climaxes like the God's entrance into Walhall. He was the simplest and least political man; Mahler found the perfect description of him — "half! god, half simpleton." Varied Nature herself could not create two men as unlike as Wagner and Bruckner; Bruckner was unworldly, naïve, "God intoxicated," without a hint of sex in his music, not Protean but always himself. And if he had nothing in common as man or artist with Wagner, so is it a mistake

to relate him closely to Beethoven in particular or to the, German symphony in general.

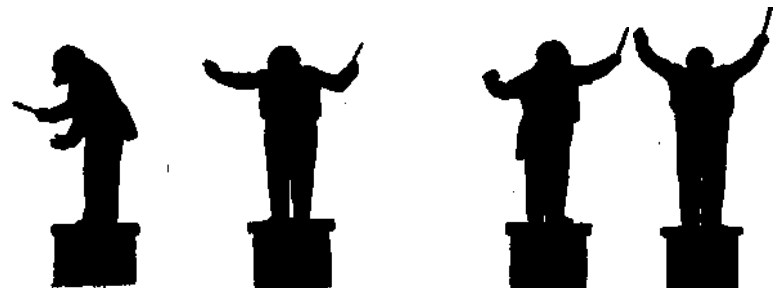
The instrumental symphony came to consummation through Haydn and Mozart. Beethoven fertilised it with drama; and the denouement was achieved by strength of an heroic conception of man's destiny. He created what the Germans called the *Apotheosen-Finale*. But from the Beethoven conception the classical symphony branched away in two directions:



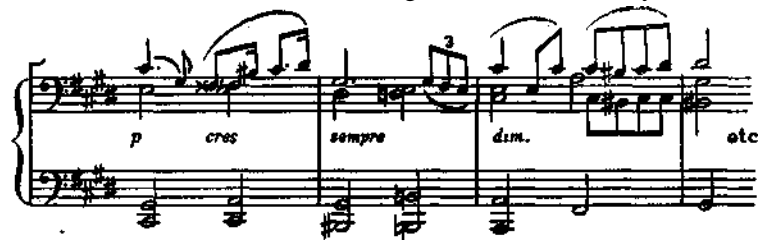
Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms gave the stamp and *Stimmung* of Mittel-deutsch bourgeoisie; after his first symphony, Brahms avoids the "Apotheosis" finale and the "heroic" gesture; the finale to his Fourth is a strictly musical apotheosis. Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms each composed German music, and observed the symphonic logic of the great school in which they were nurtured. Bruckner did not grow from this branch. With Schubert was born the Austrian symphony, less academically logical than the German, not heroic but inspired by nature-worship and poetry of heart, and as untrimmed as the *Wienerwald*. To the Schubert symphony (represented by the "Unfinished" and the "C major") Bruckner brought not an abstract ethic of humanity (Menschlichkeit is untranslatable, but that is what I mean) but a personally-felt religious note, deep-toned, trustful, and patient. The climax in fact of a Bruckner symphony is the adagio; Bruckner has little to add to his slow movement; his scherzi are genial and psychologically not exactly important; and his finales are too obvious "durch-komponiert," too plainly a matter of music-making—as in the finale of the Seventh Symphony.

Bruckner is really a curiosity. In Vienna he came to be ranked with the greatest—far above Brahms. Outside Austria he has led a chequered posterity. No Italian could sit through music so un-vocal, no Frenchman could listen for long to music so little of the world of wit and women. He has recently enjoyed a vogue in the Woolworth's Store of music, which is the U.S.A. In England he is invariably dismissed as a "bore," and an "organist" thrown in (Bruckner was indeed a very great organist). "Bruckner," writes Frank Howes in *Full Orchestra*, "may be described as a Wagnerian operating in the sphere of symphony, though his own musical origin was the organ." Bruckner, it is true, frequently uses the orchestra like an organist; he cuts-off suddenly a mass of block-harmonised tone, then you can almost see him pulling out a stop—consider, for example, the middle part of the adagio of the Seventh Symphony. The recurrent pauses in a Bruckner symphony, especially during an adagio, are as though born at the organist's fingers and feet; but Bruckner uses them with absolute tightness in the development scheme of the Austrian symphony, which, as I say, is not of a German rigidity of logic. The sense of improvisation, or of a reflectiveness that turns so rapidly inward that the outer world and its prosaic consequentiality, is forgotten—here is the unmistakable mark of a Bruckner adagio.

Adagio in music is not merely a term indicating a certain tempo; the word has come to mean a certain kind of musical emotion conveyed in a certain style. If you were to play quickly the adagio of the Ninth Symphony



of Beethoven, it would still remain an adagio in *feeling*; a real adagio is a meditation along labyrinthine ways; and it must sound with a spaciousness of harmony, and the melody must be broad and unhurried. So, the adagio of the Seventh Symphony of Bruckner, the greatest I think since the adagio of Beethoven's Ninth: it begins in this noble way:



This is not only a noble and symphonic sound; it is a noble idea, expressed with a power not forcible, but simple, even though Bruckner conveys it to us by means of two Wagner tubas, two bass tubas and contrabass tuba and violas.

It runs almost imperceptibly into—



These quotations do not represent separate themes; rather they are sentences in a continuous paragraph, with the suggestion of a pause, the semi-colon. After Bruckner has "stated" a thematic group, he quotes phrases from it and contemplates their significances at his organ. There are devout intakings of breath during the sequential treatment of—



Next, after a modulation naively Brucknerian, comes one of the most seraphic melodies in existence, a song entirely at peace and lost to the world, which goes its ways echoing, in the wood-wind, its own hearteasing cadences:



Such a melody is not only beautiful as music; it contains the quality of a mind unburdened with earthliness. If any mortal man may be said to have held communion with bliss it is here; the music is in a state of grace . . . From the mundane point of view of composition, I may add that the melody is scored with a perfect feeling for string and wood-wind tone counterpoint and responses.

The length of the development-section in a Bruckner symphony has served as the basis of much complaint, but critics have seldom taken the trouble to understand that development-sections in Bruckner are elaborate because of the elaborate and rich nature of his material. Even musicians who belittle Bruckner as a whole are prepared to admit that his themes are magnificent. There are none *more* magnificent. Take the theme that begins the Seventh symphony



and so on, for twenty-one bars. Bruckner certainly does not build from straws or bricks, he handles rocks, and encompasses his symphonic world in one sweeping glance. But the point is generally overlooked that not only are his themes broad and long; more than that, he goes beyond the two complementary and contrasted themes of classical usage and instead, he gives us two theme groups, each group consisting of separate germ-melodies. To refer back to the image I employ above, Bruckner thinks in terms of sustained paragraphs or periods, each sentence a related idea or nuance. Inevitably he needed to widen the scope of the development-section; and many times he is unable to support the heavy wheel of his universe. He is reduced often to "marking time," deluding himself that he is moving from point to point when as a fact he is remaining in the same place, employing sequences,—sentences taken from the organic paragraphs and rendered rather lifeless by this process of fission. None the less, we must realise that the length of a Bruckner movement is not just the consequence of prolixity; he is not deliberately garrulous. There is another aspect of this matter of duration in a symphony not as a rule considered with enough musical or psychological insight.

To object to the duration of a symphony, and of a Bruckner adagio especially, is irrelevant, if no doubt only natural at times. Duration and stature are necessary to the truly symphonic style; you can no more have a short adagio than you can have a Rossini crescendo that goes on for half an hour. If there is a recurrent tedium in a Bruckner adagio, here again is an attribute which is part of the sublime manner. A sleeping sort of grandeur falls over sublimity; only the artist who is always aware of an audience remembers to make points bar by bar. Bruckner was never a

conscious artist; he seldom tried to arrest attention; he composed with no heed of the phenomenal and transient universe.

This music is called "old fashioned" nowadays. Possibly. But perhaps Hindemith Britten, Stravinsky and Bartok may one day become "old-fashioned," too. Bruckner was advanced enough in 1880 to assimilate technical ideas from Wagner (note that I say "technical ideas"); and Wagner was then as "advanced," to say the least, as any of the present-day experimentalists. Nothing matters except genius. And perhaps greatness of spirit is something even above what is generally understood as "genius."

Mahler was right—"half god, half simpleton." The way to the heart of Bruckner is through love; you must get rid of the idea, so prevalent amongst the young today, that music depends on cleverness or a formulated aesthetic. Bruckner's music was the man himself, the man who was born when Beethoven walked the earth, who died in Vienna, ill at the age of seventy-two, still a rustic by nature. When his Fourth symphony was conducted in Vienna by Richter, Bruckner went round after the performance to the artist's room and shyly gave Richter a four-shilling piece as a tip — a *Trinkgeld*. He was so grateful.

The adagio in the seventh symphony was once supposed to have been written after Bruckner had heard the news of the death of Wagner; but later researches suggest that the movement was nearly finished before Wagner died, and that the coda is really Bruckner's tribute to the composer he always called "The Master." But the approach to the coda is one of the majestic crescendi of all symphonic music, built on rising sequences and the second theme quoted in this essay; the climax is achieved by a stroke on the cymbals which elevates this usually anonymous instrument to a radiant height. It was with this cymbal clash probably in mind that Hugo Wolf uttered his infamous "One cymbal clash in Bruckner is worth all the symphonies of Brahms, with the Serenades thrown in."

The coda begins with brass echoes from Walhall and Wotan, and now like a benediction we hear the ineffable cadences of



Bruckner, made the adagio both the musical and psychological apotheosis of the symphony. His scherzi, are redolent of Upper Austria, not grotesque in the Beethoven way, but homely with the *Lokal* tone. The middle section of the scherzo of the Seventh Symphony is a nostalgic memory of little Styrian villages, cosy low-raftered interiors and check tablecloths at noon, and bird-calls and hazy distances. But the great first movement and its magnanimous exposition, and the subsequent adagio have exhausted the underlying imaginative conception; for the rest, Bruckner has to be content with "music," excellent and resourceful enough, but unable all the same to achieve a synthesis of the grandeur that has gone before. The conception of the symphony as a continuous unfolding activity of the imagination, each movement not only a musical form complete in itself, even if under the obligation to go into a context and serve the uses of contrast, but as an act in a drama carrying onward a creative shaping energy—this is a conception that has not troubled many symphonic composers in England,

France and Russia; but Beethoven was awake to the problems presented by such a conception. He wrote no adagio after the Fifth until the Ninth Symphony, then he was urged to call in massed voices for the finale. Bruckner left *his* Ninth symphony unfinished, without a finale. Mahler, a pupil of Bruckner, ended his Ninth, as Tchaikovsky ended his Sixth, with an adagio.

An age very much in a hurry may not wish to stay long enough to absorb Bruckner's secret. It doesn't matter really. And it is not of major importance that Bruckner does not command audiences in every land. Who has heard "Gerontius" in Vienna? How many musicians anywhere know by heart the "Requiem" of Faure? As a lover of the Wessex novels, I am not a bit dismayed whenever I am told that Thomas Hardy is unknown in Italy, France and Central Europe.

The foregoing silhouettes are an impression, by an Austrian artist, of HANS RICHTER conducting the Fourth Symphony, in Vienna, and receiving the homage of the Composer.