

Anton Bruckner

b. September 4, 1824; Ansfelden

d. October 11, 1896; Vienna

Symphony No. 8 in C minor (1887/90, ed. Haas)

Composed between 1884 and 1887, this symphony exists in five different versions; its earliest performance in any version was that of the Bruckner-Schalk 1890 revision, which was led by Hans Richter in Vienna on December 18, 1892. The first performance of the present version (1887/90-Haas) took place in Hamburg on July 5, 1939. This 80-minute symphony uses a vast orchestra consisting of three flutes, three oboes, three clarinets, three bassoons (third doubling contrabassoon), eight horns (horns 5-8 doubling Wagner tuben), three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, two percussionists (cymbals, triangle), harp (preferably tripled) and strings. Most recently, Stanislaw Skrowaczowski led this work on our series in April of 1996.

After spending many years in the Austrian provinces, Bruckner came to Vienna in 1868 to take a post as a teacher of theory and organ at the Conservatory. He also became the organist to the court chapel, and later became vice-librarian and second singing-master to the choir. Despite his multi-faceted employment, Bruckner had neither the means nor the desire to live anything but an ascetic life devoted to music. He was uncomplicated, at heart a country choirmaster and organist, a devout Roman Catholic; a man whose soul found its finest expression in expansive symphonic constructions. After enduring years of diligent labor, Bruckner finally gained his first real success in 1885, when Arthur Nikisch conducted a performance of the Seventh Symphony in Leipzig. Already sixty years old, Bruckner was elated and hopeful that his *Symphony No. 8* which occupied him from 1884 to 1887, would be met with a similarly warm reception.

There was a negative aspect to the success of the Seventh Symphony; many noted certain similarities between its breadth of expression and instrumentation and the music of Wagner. Bruckner unexpectedly found himself amid a standing feud that raged between the followers of Brahms and Wagner. Although Bruckner certainly admired many aspects of Wagner's creativity, his music was created as a personal statement and not as some sort of gauntlet thrown into the arena of Viennese music. Disregarding the elements of Beethoven and Schubert in Bruckner's score, the vitriolic and influential Viennese critic, Eduard Hanslick, seized upon the Wagnerian aspects of the Seventh Symphony and re-attacked his old enemy through the unfortunate Bruckner.

When Bruckner completed his massive *Symphony No. 8* in the autumn of 1887, he hesitated to have it performed in Vienna, where it would be exposed to yet another blast from Hanslick. Instead, Bruckner sent it to Hermann Levi, a famed conductor in Munich. Bruckner was already at work on his last symphony when he learned that Levi couldn't fathom the Eighth Symphony. Terribly upset because he had great respect for Levi's opinions, Bruckner put aside his current project and spent three years revising the Eighth Symphony with his disciple Josef Schalk. The revision of this work was completed in 1890, featuring a new ending for the first movement, a new Trio section for the Scherzo, a change in the harmonic plan of the *Adagio*, and cuts (likely due to Schalk's influence) in the *Adagio* and finale. In this form, the symphony was premiered in Vienna two years later under Hans Richter. When the Vienna Philharmonic played that first performance on December 18, 1892, the Brucknerites were ecstatic and even Hanslick begrudgingly had to admit that it was well received. In a letter written to a friend a few days later, the famed lieder composer, Hugo Wolf, enthused: "This Symphony is the creation of a Titan, and in spiritual vastness, fertility of ideas and grandeur even surpasses his other symphonies. Notwithstanding the usual Cassandra prophecies of woe, even from those in the know, its success was almost without precedent. It was the absolute victory of light over darkness, and the storm of applause at the end of each movement was like some elemental manifestation of Nature. In short, even a Roman Emperor would not have wished for a more superb triumph."

These performances utilize the 1890 edition as edited by Robert Haas with his considered restoration of certain passages from the original version of 1887. This is, incidentally, the version most highly recommended by Deryck Cooke in his authoritative 1975 essay "The Bruckner

Problem Simplified." In his article for the *New Grove*..., Cooke characterizes this version as a "conjectural restoration of what Bruckner's revision would have been like without Josef Schalk's interference."

The *Symphony No. 8* is the largest of Bruckner's completed symphonies. Despite the magnitude of Bruckner's compositional concept, he had generally used a classic-sized orchestra. In his Eighth Symphony, Bruckner utilizes three each of the woodwinds and employs percussion and harp ("preferably tripled") for the first and only time in his symphonies. Bruckner also wrote parts for eight French horns, four of which also play tuben. Generally associated with Wagner's use of the instrument in *Götterdämmerung*, the tuben is a bell-front relative of both the horn and the tuba, whose mellow, yet penetrating sonority was employed by Bruckner in his last three symphonies (Nos. 7, 8 and 9).

- I. *Allegro moderato*, C minor, 2/2. Many of Bruckner's symphonies begin in a manner reminiscent of the beginning of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. The parallel is even more striking in the present work, for the theme arising from the low strings has the same rhythm as that which Beethoven used in his final symphony. Rather more foreboding than Beethoven's, Bruckner's theme gradually acquires his favorite rhythmic idea of two quarter-notes followed by a quarter-note triplet. Various permutations of these ideas evolve to a triumphant theme proclaimed by violins and upper woodwinds. Over pizzicato strings, the winds voice a yearning third theme. Actual development begins with an exchange of the opening thematic fragments between the low strings and oboe. Recapitulation is launched by a powerful restatement of the "Bruckner rhythm" above the opening theme in low brass and strings. After the movement's greatest climax, all is concluded by a hushed coda which the composer had referred to as the *Totenuhr*, like a clock near a dying man, life ebbs while time continues.
- II. *Scherzo: Allegro moderato*, C minor, 3/4. As part of his revisions of this work, Bruckner exchanged the positions of the inner movements, thus allowing the rustic humor of the *Scherzo* to better contrast with the solemnity of what was just heard. From the materials of the opening measures, Bruckner creates a spacious movement whose vital motion gives way to a Trio section of lyric grace.
- III. *Adagio: Feierlich langsam; doch nicht schleppend* ("Solemnly slow, but not dragging"), D♭ major, 4/4. Bruckner is justly famed for his slow movements; this particular *Adagio* was his personal favorite. A Wagnerian murmuring in the strings prefaces the first violins' utterance of the first theme. A melody of passionate intensity, voiced by the cellos, and a chorale-like passage by the tuben complete the main thematic materials of this sonata-form movement. Building fervently to an expressive climax, the *Adagio* ebbs to a close while meditating upon its opening idea.
- IV. *Finale: Feierlich, nicht schnell* ("Solemnly, not fast"), C minor, 2/2. Impelled by an insistent string figure, the finale's grandeur begins in an atmosphere of martial urgency. One of the composer's famed pauses forms a link to a chorale for strings and horn. This second theme group appears contrapuntally in the development section and later as a basis for *fugato* treatment in the recapitulation. This vast panorama of the finale is capped by a coda in which themes of each movement pass by in triumphant counterpoint.