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PITTSBURGH SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
MANFRED HONECK, MUSIC DIRECTOR



BRUCKNER'S *FOURTH SYMPHONY* A TONE POEM IN THE ROBE OF A SYMPHONY?

When one thinks of Anton Bruckner, images and impressions such as a cathedral, the sound of the organ, master of counterpoint and a deeply religious man often come to mind. It is, in fact, impossible not to discover a profound, honestly felt catholic spirituality in his oeuvre, particularly in the last three symphonies.

The *Fourth Symphony*, by contrast, is a reminder that Bruckner was a highly talented folklore musician who regularly played light-hearted music. His violins, on display in the *Bruckner Museum*, at his birthplace in Ansfelden in upper Austria, witnessed Bruckner playing in taverns and at weddings. In this light, the *Fourth Symphony* can be considered his most secular. Spirituality is to be found only in rare moments and remains not more than hints.

Whereas Gustav Mahler, who was so profoundly influenced by Bruckner, is famous for the integration of Austrian and Bohemian folklore into his music, Bruckner had already found and used these popular treasures years earlier, albeit to a lesser extent. It is important to remember that Bruckner composed in a time that was absorbed with nature and the past. This was the taste of the time, exemplified not only in music, but also in art and architecture. For example, King Ludwig II of Bavaria built *Neuschwanstein* castle (1859-1886), Wagner composed the *The Ring* and Mahler, his *First Symphony*. Likewise, Dvorak's *Eighth Symphony*, recently released by this same label and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, incorporates the influence of nature and the world of fairy tales. Here too, Bruckner's *Fourth*

Symphony refers to the nature found in German-Austrian landscapes and its myths. It is also greatly influenced by the concept of Romanticism, which included the assimilation of folk music into the symphonic construct. This approach was both modern and debated at the time. Composers would write programs for their scores, but hesitate to print them, as the program might hinder impartial listening. The *Fourth Symphony* has such a program that Bruckner shared with his friend, Viktor Christ, and also partially notated in the score. While carefully considering this program of the *Fourth Symphony*, I remain personally convinced that Bruckner's musical phrases and thoughts require their own flexible tempi and expressions, particularly when referring to nature and folklore. It is for this reason that a rigorous reading of Bruckner as master of the organ and counterpoint might not always be thoroughly sound.

I was not surprised, therefore, what I discovered when listening to old recordings of the generation of conductors with firsthand knowledge of the tradition of playing Bruckner, perhaps sometimes through mentors who once knew the composer themselves. Bruno Walter is famous as one of the outstanding interpreters of Bruckner. He took many interpretative liberties, sometimes seemingly ignoring the score and thereby representing a totally different perspective.

It is interesting that this interpretive approach has been somewhat lost in the second half of the twentieth century. Rigorous fidelity to the score has the positive effect of being exact in looking at the notes, but also runs the risk of losing the tradition in which the piece was born or, as Mahler would describe, what "is written between the lines". Bruckner is exemplary for such an exacting approach, because

the master of counterpoint seems unlikely to favor non-written liberties. He was often, for that reason, in my opinion unjustly put into a far too strict corset. I believe that Bruckner deserves to be interpreted not only as a composer of sacred music, but also as a deeply folkloristic, creative and worldly musician. Based on these reflections, I would like to consider Bruckner's own program:

He writes of the piece's opening: "Dawn in a medieval city. From the city's turrets, awakening calls. Gates open, knights on proud horses rush outside. The magic of the woods embraces them. The forest rustles, birds sing...the romantic portrait further develops!" Here begins the creativity of the conductor and the musicians. One can only imagine the portrait Bruckner continued to draw in his mind! For me, this imagination is further nurtured by what the music portrays. The morning's awakening call is the famous horn solo at the beginning, no doubt. The description of the dawn's atmosphere suggests that the horn is played, as if from a distance, in solitude, a steady call in an air of peace and calm. The singing bird can be heard in the voice of the First Violins (bar 75 or 2:49"). Here, Bruckner notes "spiccato" (bouncing the bow lightly on the string) to depict the singing bird which Bruckner himself calls, "Zizibe," allowing one to almost sing this word with the music. A particularly special and charming moment that can be interpreted with liberties is found beginning in bar 179 (or 5:53"). Here, Bruckner speaks about "Night," later "Dreams" and after that, "Intricate Dreams". The music somehow "almost loses itself," disperses and sinks into a deep sleep. As if in an almost delirium, the flute and clarinet play their tiny phrases, perhaps symbolizing a sleep-walker. No ruling of the tempi here, no rigor of the organ! Furthermore, I have

balanced the period before bar 297 (or 9:39”) and following in a way that the violas can be heard, despite heavy writing for the brass. Here, the violas are substituted for the cellos and double basses. If the brass were to play *fortissimo* (very loudly) in a soloistic manner, one wouldn’t be able to hear the violas at all. This subtle rebalancing then allows for an interpretive arch, spanning 25 bars and embedding a beautiful effect of a chorale-like phrase that almost foreshadows the spirituality of the later Bruckner Symphonies to come. In my opinion, this is really the only part of the first movement that can be described as sacred, but at the same time, it is heroic in the sense of Wagner’s *Lohengrin*. Likewise, the sequence-like blocks recalling a romanticized Bach or Vivaldi (bar 87 or 3:10” and bar 449 or 14:43”) and especially in the 4th movement (bar 283 or 10:34”) are thrilling. Stokowski would not have had to arrange this moment at all! Here, Bruckner seemingly enters the world of *Lohengrin*, the world of German legends, knights and heroes.

Bruckner writes of the second movement: “An amorous boy sets out to court in front of the window.” It is known that Bruckner behaved in a rather peculiar way with regard to women. All of his advances were unfortunately doomed to fail. I interpret the “amorous boy” here as Bruckner, himself. He, himself, is knocking at the window. Perhaps Bruckner composed this “Staendchen” (serenade) to express his desires in music, a “night-music”. It is clear that the first bars already reveal the time of the day: night. There is a tender knocking at the window (in the horns, bar 10 or 0:40” and bar 21 or 1:15” and following). For me, I see the two great entries of the viola like a troubadour’s song. The *pizzicato* (plucking of the string) of the

other string instruments substitute for a guitar or mandolin that might typically accompany a troubadour song. Therefore, the pizzicati must be played in a simple, light-hearted and unexcited manner, in the medieval style of courting music. I have asked myself often why Bruckner chose the violas for his “serenade”. I believe that it must have something to do with the color of the viola sound which has neither the dense sonority of the cello, nor the lightheartedness of the violin. Might the viola sonority be the pitch of Bruckner’s own voice? The viola’s sound does, in every case, match the melancholic undertone that underscores the partially dark and hopeless feelings of this movement. (It is interesting to note that nearly thirty years later, Mahler would compose the *Adagio* of his *Tenth Symphony*, another grand solo for violas in symphonic literature, with a similar bleak message). Here, it seems that the “amorous boy’s” courting was not successful and that Bruckner shared his sadness by composing the rhythm of his own name into the score (bars 238/239 or 15:01”). The movement seems to be, however, not just a serenade of deep sorrow, but also ironic in a certain sense. Bruckner adds the specification *Quasi Allegretto* to the *Andante* marking and the interval of the fourth in the lower instruments creates an almost dance-like effect. Remember that Mahler used this same interval of the fourth with the same instrument (timpani) in the beginning of the third movement of his *First Symphony*, incidentally composed around the same time as Bruckner’s *Fourth*. A further similarity between Bruckner and Mahler is shown in a small passage that recalls Yiddish music (bar 205 or 12:47”).

The *Fourth Symphony* was revised several times. The third movement was, in

fact, entirely recomposed. It is hunting music that needs to be played quite rhythmically, but at the same time, requires certain liberties and flexibility that allude to the passion of hunting. For me, it is important to underscore the expectant listening of the hunting party (bar 93 or 1:27”) and what I see as the tricky eye-twinkling of a popular figure like *Till Eulenspiegel* (bar 121 or 2:00”). The re-emergence of the world of birds is also pure genius. Bruckner describes the *Trio* in simple words: “A dance that is played before hunters during their meal”. It is a typical Austrian *Ländler* (a type of traditional Austrian countryside dance) that invites a certain easy-going spirit, the famous Austrian “Gemütlichkeit”. Here, the music is simple and full of stylistic *rubato* (push and pull in tempo) in the tradition of the great Viennese Strauss family.

The fourth movement was titled “Volksfest” (folklore feast) in its first version. For the second version, however, Bruckner notes: “The frightening raining of the night is described which breaks out after a beautiful day.” It is indeed somehow menacing: clouds gather, unloading themselves in a forceful thunderstorm. Bruckner calls the eighth-notes of the Second Violins “rainy weather”. It is for this reason that I do not ask them to merely play *ponticello* (bowing on or near the bridge), but possibly agitated and unbalanced, as well, to prepare emotionally for the upcoming fatality. With the lyric, slower second section, by contrast, Bruckner seems to walk through Austrian landscapes. One can hear the “be funny” “Lustig sein” quote (bar 256 or 9:22”) from the *Flying Dutchman* and I also add a trill in the horn which seems quite logical to me as an answer to the clarinet. Additionally, there is a Hungarian-sounding figure (bar 129 or 4:27”) and a melody of the Alps

reminding me of Austrian folk music (bar 187 or 6:35”) which is later interrupted by harsh interjections of mighty sound blocks like stark, rugged mountain rocks (bar 237 or 8:48”). I find the fourth movement to be especially beautiful and exciting as the mood passes through different sound worlds. The Coda (bar 477 or 18:26”), which in Bruckner’s music is always sublime, rises steadily, ending not in drama, but instead, very heroically and majestically. The main theme of the first movement returns in triumph.

Bruckner’s *Fourth Symphony* has undergone numerous revisions by Bruckner, himself. I chose to record the 1878/80 version which was the same version used for the premiere on 20 February, 1881. It is surely a challenge for every conductor to enter Bruckner’s world. His deeply religious spirit is omnipresent (Bruno Walter once said: “Gustav Mahler looked for God, Bruckner found him”), but it is this *Fourth Symphony*, in particular, where one can find infinite earthly, worldly aspects and discover that Bruckner truly was a child of his time. For me, it was essential to adjust the Bruckner sound to match the character and nature of the “Romantic” music, seeking a variety of colors ranging from the enormity of the sound blocks to also unbelievably soft and lyric playing. Furthermore, it was important for the woodwinds to be transparent and clear while the strings are warm and full, without losing the famous Bruckner counter melodies.

Bruckner, himself, called this symphony “The Romantic”. I believe that it tells a fictional and fantastic story. In my opinion, it is almost a tone-poem in the robe of a symphony.

—MANFRED HONECK



MANFRED HONECK

Austrian conductor Manfred Honeck who is in high demand by the world's leading orchestras, has served as music director of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra since the 2008-2009 season. After two extensions, his contract will now run until the end of the 2019-2020 season. He and his orchestra present themselves regularly to the European audience to great acclaim. Since 2010, annual tour performances have led them to numerous European music capitals, including a week-

long residency at the Vienna Musikveren, and major music festivals.

His successful work with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra is now captured on CD by Reference Recordings. The first two CDs, Strauss tone poems and works by Janáček and Dvořák, released during the 2013-2014 season, received rave reviews, and several additional recordings await release.

Born in Austria, Honeck began his career as conductor of Vienna's Jeunesse Orchestra, which he co-founded, and as assistant to Claudio Abbado at the Gustav Mahler Youth Orchestra in Vienna. Subsequently, he was engaged by the Zurich Opera House, where he was bestowed the prestigious European Conductor's Award in 1993. In 1996, he began a three-year stint as one of three main conductors of the MDR Symphony Orchestra Leipzig and, in 1997, served as music director at the Norwegian

National Opera in Oslo for a year. He also was principal guest conductor of the Oslo Philharmonic for several years. From 2000 to 2006, he was music director of the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, and principal guest conductor of the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra from 2008 to 2011, a position he has resumed for another three years in 2013. As music director of the Staatsoper Stuttgart from 2007 to 2011, he conducted new productions of Berlioz's *Les Troyens*, Mozart's *Idomeneo*, Verdi's *Aida*, Richard Strauss's *Rosenkavalier*, Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites* and Wagner's *Lohengrin* and *Parsifal*. As a guest conductor, Honeck has appeared with the finest orchestras around the globe, such as the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, Staatskapelle Dresden, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre de Paris and Vienna Philharmonic. In the United States, he conducted the New York Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Cleveland Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, National Symphony Orchestra and Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Honeck received honorary doctorates from St. Vincent College in 2010 and Carnegie Mellon University in 2014. He has been artistic director of the “International Concerts Wolfegg” in Germany for more than 20 years.



THE PITTSBURGH SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, known for its artistic excellence for more than 117 years, is credited with a rich history of the world's finest conductors and musicians, and a strong commitment to the Pittsburgh region and its citizens. Past music directors have included Fritz Reiner (1938-1948), William Steinberg (1952-1976), Andre Previn (1976-1984), Lorin Maazel (1984-1996) and Mariss Jansons (1995-2004). This tradition of outstanding international music directors was furthered in fall 2008, when Austrian conductor Manfred Honeck became music director of the Pittsburgh Symphony. The orchestra has been at the forefront of championing new American works, and gave the first performance of Leonard Bernstein's Symphony No. 1 "Jeremiah" in 1944.

The Pittsburgh Symphony has a long and illustrious history in the areas of recordings and radio concerts. As early as 1936, the Pittsburgh Symphony broadcast on the airwaves coast-to-coast and in the late 1970s it made the ground breaking PBS series *Previn and the Pittsburgh*. The orchestra has received increased national attention since 1982 through network radio broadcasts on Public Radio International, produced by Classical WQED-FM 89.3, made possible by the musicians of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra.

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