

Bruckner's Symphony No.9: Finally, a *Finale*?

By Richard Lehnert •April, 2010

I know of only one composer who measures up to Beethoven, and that is Bruckner.—

Richard Wagner, 1882

Anyone who has read the notes accompanying a performance or recording of Anton Bruckner's final work, the unfinished Symphony No.9, knows the story: Before he died, on the afternoon of October 11, 1896, Bruckner had been able to complete only preliminary and fragmentary sketches for the Symphony's fourth movement, the *Finale*, which he'd worked on that very morning. Those sketches show little musical, structural, or harmonic coherence—if there was any overall plan, it was still only in the mind of a man rapidly going senile. But even had Bruckner retained all of his faculties and lived another year, his vision for the Ninth, and especially for this movement, was probably unrealizable, at least on this earthly plane. Besides, Bruckner had himself described the last movement he completed—the *Adagio*, with its anguished 11-tone row of a primary theme—as his "farewell to life." What earthly music could possibly follow such an embodiment in sound of pain and suffering, followed by hard-won peace fading out at the last into barely audible acceptance? Surely, the three-movement Ninth, though left unfinished, has a completeness of its own.

The problem with this story is that so little of it is true. Gradually, in the 114 years since Bruckner's death, and especially since 1983, fragments of a more complete and accurate account of the work Bruckner had actually completed on the *Finale* have begun to cohere, as have the fragments of the movement itself. The real story is sadder, more interesting, and ultimately more hopeful.

When Bruckner died, his body lay in state for three days in his chambers, visited by friends, colleagues, and students paying their last respects. Bruckner's last amanuensis and secretary, Anton Meissner, encouraged the mourners to take with them, as memento mori, various belongings of Bruckner's. Mostly these were sheets of musical manuscript from a stack near Bruckner's deathbed, and chiefly of his most

recent work: the sketches, revisions, and final full orchestrations of the *Finale* of Symphony 9. What remained passed into the possession of first Josef Schalk, a pianist, writer, and former student of Bruckner's—and, four years later, when Schalk died, into the hands of his brother Franz, another of Bruckner's students who had also served as the composer's assistant, protégé, and sometime editor. For the rest of his life, Franz Schalk would imply, or state outright, that Bruckner in those final years had not been in his right mind, that the *Finale* fragments made little sense, and that he had saved Bruckner's legacy from being embarrassed by the composer's own decline. In the absence of almost any evidence to the contrary—many actual pages of the manuscript now more or less scattered to the winds—there was little reason to doubt the word of one of Bruckner's closest intimates, and Schalk's version of Bruckner's last works and days became the generally accepted one.

Bruckner seems to have been cursed with friends and colleagues who deeply loved him and his work while having little respect (albeit much affection) for the former or understanding of the latter. The Schalks were chief among these, having earlier cut by half the massively fugal *Finale* of Bruckner's Symphony 5, in an edition still occasionally performed today. While that was apparently done behind Bruckner's back, Bruckner was desperate enough to have his difficult and unfashionable works mounted that he is known to have said, "Do what you want, just perform them." But it now seems clear that Franz Schalk's bewildering later behavior was founded on his own bewilderment at what Bruckner was actually doing in his final work. Another of Bruckner's former pupils, Ferdinand Löwe, compounded this in the first performance, in 1903, of the Ninth's three completed movements, which Löwe entirely reorchestrated and "corrected" in an edition now universally condemned as wrongheaded and spurious.

Over the last century, however, and as recently as 2003, manuscript pages of the *Finale*—from Bruckner's sketches, revisions, and final, fully orchestrated autograph score—have continued to turn up in private collections and libraries in Europe and the US. From the evidence now available, it seems that Bruckner had actually finished a through-composed sketch of the entire *Finale* sometime in June 1896. In fact, portions of as many as half a dozen sketched versions survive, though none in full. This might have left unresolved the dilemma of exactly how many bars of lost music might have originally linked the surviving fragments were it not for one of

Bruckner's mental oddities—ironically, one that had also greatly delayed his completion of the Ninth.

Throughout his life, Bruckner's apparently innate tendency toward rigorous formalism was intensified by a degree of what might now be called obsessive-compulsive disorder. Evidence of this ranged from his keeping careful lists of how many Hail Marys and Our Fathers he recited each night, through the precise mathematical symmetry of the numbers of measures in his symphonies, to endless and often pointless revisions of earlier works. In fact, he interrupted work on the Ninth for a year to completely revise his Symphony 1, a project most Bruckner scholars now agree was not worth the effort. But Bruckner's meticulous bar-counting has helped greatly in the reconstruction of the Ninth's *Finale*. He wrote the final drafts of his symphonies on large, consecutively numbered sheets of score paper, each single-folded sheet comprising four pages of four bars each in full orchestral staff. According to Bruckner scholar Benjamin-Gunnar Cohrs, in his "The SPCM Completion to the Bruckner Symphony No. 9," an exhaustive essay available at www.abruckner.com, the number of missing bars can thus be known almost precisely: 223 of a probable total of 665. The 442 extant bars are less "fragments" than substantial chunks of continuous music, mostly in full orchestration, and as long as eight or nine minutes, separated by gaps of only 8 or 16 or 24 bars. Not only that, sketches and revised sketches, in various states of completion, exist for 127 of those 223 missing bars, leaving only 96 bars, most of them in the coda, for which nothing in Bruckner's hand survives.

Not everyone agrees that the *Finale* and its coda should match the respective numbers of measures Cohrs has come up with—in particular William Carragan, another Bruckner scholar, whose latest edition of his own completion of the *Finale* totals 717 measures. However, Cohrs is probably correct when he states that only about 15% of the *Finale* is missing in any form, these gaps comprising only 5% of the entire four-movement symphony. He compares this with Franz Süssmayr's completion of Mozart's *Requiem*, which has been in the standard repertoire for more than two centuries, and of which Süssmayr himself composed 22% of the music and orchestrated more than 90%.

But until the last two decades, most scholars were loath to even contemplate a performing version of the fragments of the *Finale* of Bruckner's 9th, and conductors

even more so; even now, when such versions are beginning to be performed, no conductor of first-rank stature has done so. It's not clear why this is so, given the present general acceptance of the Mozart-Süssmayr *Requiem*, the Mahler-Cooke Symphony 10, the Puccini-Alfano *Turandot*, and the Elgar-Payne Symphony 3, each of which (the Mahler excepted) contains far more music entirely written by someone other than the composer than do any of the completions of the Bruckner Ninth discussed here (the Marthé excepted). (Since the original publication of this article in the March 2010 *Stereophile*, I have learned that performances and recordings of a four-movement Ninth are being planned by two "star" conductors.)

However, there are now enough of these completions, and enough decent recordings of them, to give the listener a very good idea of Bruckner's plan for his final work. Currently, three completions, two of them in multiple editions, are important, and are the only ones to have been recorded in any format now available: the first, by William Carragan; the most recent, by Sébastien Letocart; and perhaps most important, and the most extensive and most exhaustively researched—it is certainly the most rigorously argued—by Nicola Samale and Giuseppe Mazzuca, later joined by John A. Phillips and Benjamin-Gunnar Cohrs. Here is what they have discovered.

For the *Finale* of the Ninth, Bruckner, a devout Roman Catholic, had conceived what has often been described (though apparently *not* by the composer) as a vast cathedral of sound, dedicated by Bruckner "to the dear Lord" and capped by a coda comprising the main themes not only of all of the symphony's preceding movements, but also of his symphonies 5, 7, and 8. Not all Bruckner scholars agree that Bruckner actually did intend to work in those themes from his earlier works, and the composer's alleged sketch of how all of those themes would overlap, which some claimed to have seen, has not survived, if indeed it ever existed. Still, on the strength of the evidence presented by the completions surveyed here, the music of the *Finale* almost defies description in its richness, density, and ambition, even for Bruckner. For example, the composer built most of his symphonic movements on the statements, developments, and contrapuntal workings-through of three themes or theme groups: a first main theme, a more lyrical theme developed from the main theme, and a stormy third theme, usually built on octave intervals. The *Finale* of the Ninth has eight main themes, many of them of a type new to his work—but it is Bruckner's rigorous developments and interweavings of these themes, in a

continuous organic process throughout the length of this long movement (20 to 30 minutes, depending on the conductor and the completion performed), that are so astonishingly complex. In this *Finale*, Bruckner's various musical funds—of melodic and rhythmic ideas, advanced harmony and tonal color, and rigor of development and counterpoint—seem inexhaustible.

Bruckner continued to chart new harmonic territory throughout the Ninth, but nowhere so much as in its *Finale*. Even those who have long known and loved the symphony's first three movements will no doubt find at first, as I did, the opening of the *Finale* to be disturbing, even alarming, and perhaps feel some sympathy for poor Ferdinand Löwe as he "corrected" all of the first three movements' many dissonances—here, there are many more. Bruckner always structured his themes with great care, to ensure maximum flexibility in their later development via counterpoint and inversion, but in this regard the themes of the *Finale* are in a class by themselves. The extreme and angular intervals of the first two themes seem at once to leap upward and fall further downward, then shriek in the violins with near-hysterical anguish before subsiding into what sounds like a wallow of grief and despair. But in this movement, every falling motif and figure later rises, every theme that first descends in angst later climbs to glory—and, almost always, these falling and rising figures at some point are overlaid to work against, then with each other to achieve a sense of great and ultimately triumphant striving against almost insurmountable odds. The *Finale* is one of the most thorough workings-through of musical logic I know of; like the greatest works of J.S. Bach, sacred or secular, it seems to demand to be heard as a spiritual journey.

But we are still at the beginning. A reassuring figure in full strings then enters, followed by perhaps the most beautiful chorale Bruckner ever wrote, led in its descent, alternately chromatic and diatonic, by solo trumpet. Soon after this comes a four-part fugue whose density Bruckner compounds by condensing the rhythm of the main subject's last few bars; this accelerates the end of each statement to launch the theme into its next statement in a crack-the-whip effect I've heard in no other fugue. The *stretto* is dauntingly dense. After further development of multiple themes in minor key there bursts, like a sunrise (or, this being Bruckner, the glory of God), a remarkably circular fanfare passage in the major for full brass choirs, interspersed with upward-striving string figures. This subsides into a silence preceded by what

sounds like an opening phrase for horn that is abruptly cut off—an entrance original enough that early completers of the *Finale* muted it as much as possible with dynamic markings (Bruckner provided none). Eventually, through more development, the chorale returns, then the "sunrise" fanfare completely reconfigured, then a restatement and combination of the main themes of the earlier movements, and a final statement of the chorale.

What then follows is, or was, the coda, the section for which no final draft pages survive. However, some of Bruckner's sketches for the coda have recently resurfaced, and conform to a verbal description Bruckner gave his last physician, for whom he played them on piano. Here—and especially in the latest editions of the completions by Carragan and by Samale, Mazzuca, Phillips, and Cohrs—the music does actually begin to sound like a vast cathedral by Calatrava or Gaudí, its high nave supported by asymmetric but structurally essential columns, arches, and crossbraces of sound. If architecture is frozen music, then this is music of a grandly flowing architectonics.

The finest examples of what is commonly called "absolute music" instill in the listener the sense of being told something of great importance that is as necessary as it is untranslatable. Listening over the last decade to Bruckner's dauntingly thorough working-through of his musical/spiritual calculus in the various completions of the *Finale*, and many times more in preparing to write this survey, my sense has grown that this music says or embodies not only something that Bruckner stated in none of his other works, but that no one else has either. At some point in my listening, the *Finale* was no longer a jarring, bewildering addendum to a work whose first three movements I and most others had long considered "unfinished but complete," but instead now seemed a lifting onto another plane of all that had gone before—something that, in retrospect, put the long-familiar first three movements into a scale and proportion that now seems as "right" as it is new. The effect is at once exciting, expanding, and humbling. To paraphrase Ursula K. Le Guin on the fiction of John Crowley: Those who enter this music are advised that they will leave it a different size than when they came in.

From being unable to conceive of the Ninth with a *Finale* of any kind, I now find it difficult to conceive of it without this one, in these many versions of its lost true

form—any more than I can imagine Beethoven's Symphony 9 without its final movement, which sums up and transcends the three movements that precede it, even as it pulls them up after it onto its own loftier plane. The comparison is not idly chosen—the more I listen, the more the two works seem equal in scope, profundity, and originality. The various scholar-composers discussed below who have tried to bring us a version, in sound, of the last movement of Bruckner's last symphony have done far more than add a footnote to the historical record, and even more than rescue a lost masterpiece—they have retrieved from near oblivion the greatest work by one of our greatest composers.

Sidebar: Recordings of the Completed *Finale*

The missing passages composed by the various "completers" surveyed below—particularly the coda, for which the least evidence in Bruckner's hand has survived—cannot be considered to be what Bruckner himself would have finally composed or approved or wanted performed. They are thus, ultimately, speculative interpolations, and can never be more than that. However, each completion gives us a good idea—some so good as to be utterly convincing—of at least the scale of the work Bruckner originally envisioned. And in the best of them, every note is in Bruckner's own idiom, if not his hand.

In the brief description of each recording that follows, I discuss only the *Finale*. Unless otherwise noted, assume that the first three movements are one of the standard editions of the Ninth Symphony, and that any remarks about the conducting or playing of the *Finale*, or the sound of the recording, can be applied to the first three movements as well. With the exception of the Eliahu Inbal recording, all include the symphony's first three movements.

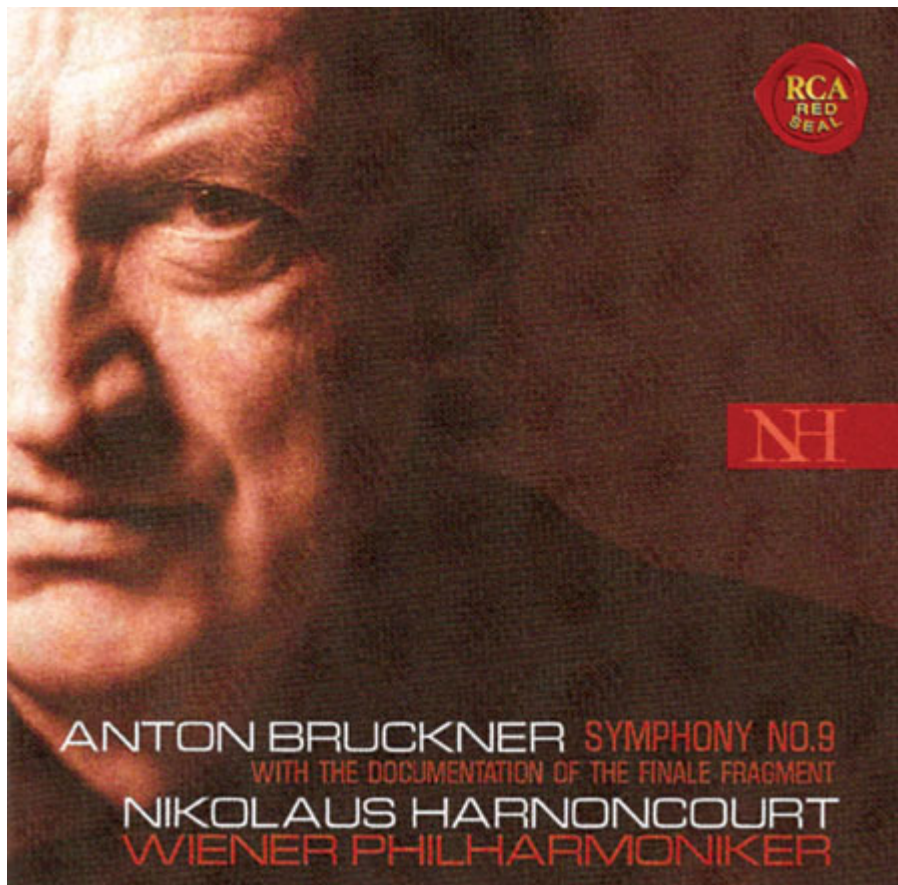
Most of these recordings are in print and easily available through [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) or [ArkivMusic.com](https://www.arkivmusic.com). Others are available in the US only through www.abruckner.com, a fascinating and comprehensive discographical website devoted to recordings of Bruckner's orchestral music; I indicate which these are in the head matter.

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Benjamin-Gunnar Cohrs, William Carragan, and John Berky in the preparation, revising, and updating of this article.

The Fragments

Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Vienna Philharmonic

RCA/BMG 54332-2 (1 SACD/CD, 1 CD). TT: 58:54. Fragments: 17:58



The best place to begin an exploration of the *Finale* is Nikolaus Harnoncourt's fascinating lecture-demonstration of *only* the fragments left fully orchestrated by Bruckner—about 18 minutes' worth of music. In his narration before a live audience, Harnoncourt, the highest-profile conductor to even approach "the *Finale* problem," however gingerly—he seems not to want to even consider performing any of the completions—tells the story of Bruckner's last days, then conducts the first fragment, after which he explains how many bars are missing. He then conducts the next fragment, and so on. The entire sequence is recorded twice, once each with commentary in German and English. Also included is an alternate version of a

fragment in which Bruckner's plangent dissonances were "corrected" by an early editor, to give an idea of how long it has taken for this music to be understood on its own terms. Harnoncourt ends with a heartfelt plea to anyone who might be hoarding any of the still-missing pages of the *Finale* to please send them along—anonymously if necessary, photocopies accepted. Since the release of this set, more fragments have indeed surfaced, but it remains a solid introduction to the task faced by the various completers, to exactly how much of the finished movement has come down to us in Bruckner's hand, and to how important this music is. Beautifully performed by the Vienna Philharmonic, in limpid high-resolution sound. (Peter Hirsch and the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra have also released, on Sony Classical SK 87316, a performance of the fragments. However, it was never released in the US, is currently out of print, and I have not been able to track down a copy.)

Alternate <i>Finale</i> composed by Peter Jan Marthé

Peter Jan Marthé, European Philharmonic Orchestra
Preisler PR 90728 (2 CDs). TT: 100:41. *Finale*: 30:14

Peter Jan Marthé is a musico-mystical Austrian wildman of a conductor who recorded three of his *Reloaded* versions of Bruckner symphonies (3, 5, 9) before his European Philharmonic Orchestra disbanded in 2009. For the *Finale* of the Ninth, instead of composing links no longer than needed to bridge Bruckner's surviving fragments and complete the orchestration, he came up with his own free—and freewheeling—composition. It is only loosely based on the surviving fragments, some of which he rewrites, or discards altogether. He also adds cymbals, triangle, and contrabassoon to the entire symphony. The result is based at least as much on Marthé's conviction that he was channeling Bruckner's spirit than on what Bruckner wrote. As he says in his liner note, Marthé believes that Bruckner composed not so much "symphonies" as "shamanic . . . archaic rituals of sounds . . . the completed Ninth [is] a four-piece act of initiation."



Think of all that what you will, this needs to be heard to be believed. This 30-minute *Finale* sounds only intermittently like Bruckner and is, in a phrase, over the top. Marthé at times paints himself into musical corners from which he extracts himself only with the most extreme form of musical bootstrapping, with bombastic, even histrionic orchestral rhetoric that ends up sounding less like Bruckner than what those who loathe the composer's music are convinced it sounds like.

Still, Marthé should not be automatically dismissed. Despite some fanfares that sound more like Mahler, there are moments of genuine inspiration: a new brass chorale Bruckner might not have been ashamed to have written, a final quote of the *Adagio's* main theme, and then a greatly extended coda based on the climbing modulations of the *Adagio* of Symphony 7. No, they're not Bruckner, Marthé's composition doesn't ultimately hang together, and he doesn't know when to stop. But as a conductor he is a genuine Brucknerian who, to my ears, deeply understands what is most important about Bruckner's music—the combinations of richness and spareness, sonority and space, silence and sumptuousness, vastness and humility—and, in the first three movements, proves his ability to get an orchestra to embody it all in sound. His recording of the *Reloaded* Symphony 5 is probably one of the best

ever made—Marthé makes the final double fugue of that symphony "speak" more clearly than anyone since Sergiu Celibidache.

Marthé's recordings of Bruckner, including the Ninth, are among the slowest, for reasons of his own taste and because all were recorded in the vast cathedral space of the Stiftsbasilika St. Florian, where Bruckner was organist for so many years and is now buried—Marthé conducts the hall as much as his band. The sense of space is immense as, in the pauses between Bruckner's great periods, the reverberation seems to endlessly die away.

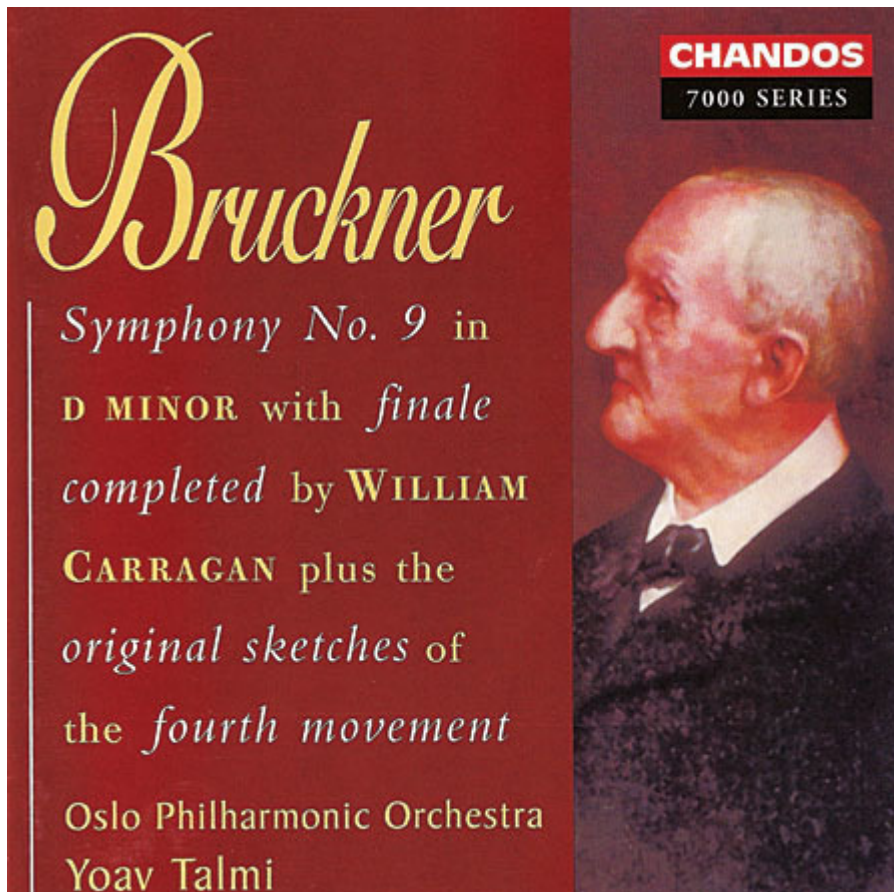
Completions by William Carragan

1983 edition

Yoav Talmi, Oslo Philharmonic

Chandos CHAN 7051(2) (2 CDs). TT: 81:56. *Finale*: 21:58. Fragments: 15:53 (out of print on CD; available as a download from www.theclassicalshop.net)

This completion is elegantly idiomatic. A decided minimalist, William Carragan does as little as possible in constructing transitions between the fragments, and they are all the more convincing for it. Though occasionally awkward, these are genuinely creative in sounding not as one would expect Bruckner to sound, but as one might expect to be *surprised* by Bruckner. This is one definition of creativity or genius: that which is utterly surprising while perfectly conforming to the voice or idiom already established. Carragan has been careful to incorporate every note that Bruckner wrote, sacrificing nothing original. But Bruckner, of course, was not himself a minimalist: I find Carragan's coda, and his *Finale* overall, to at least *feel* too short—coda, movement, and symphony all seem to end too soon, skewing the scale of the entire work, which, at the close, sounds almost abruptly attenuated.



This set, like Harnoncourt's, includes separate recordings of the fully orchestrated fragments, though these are even more fragmentary—Harnoncourt had the benefit of another two decades' worth of further scholarship and rediscovered autograph pages. Yoav Talmi's sensitive leadership of the Oslo Philharmonic makes great sense of all four movements with clarity and careful phrasing, and the recording is warm, spacious, and luminous.

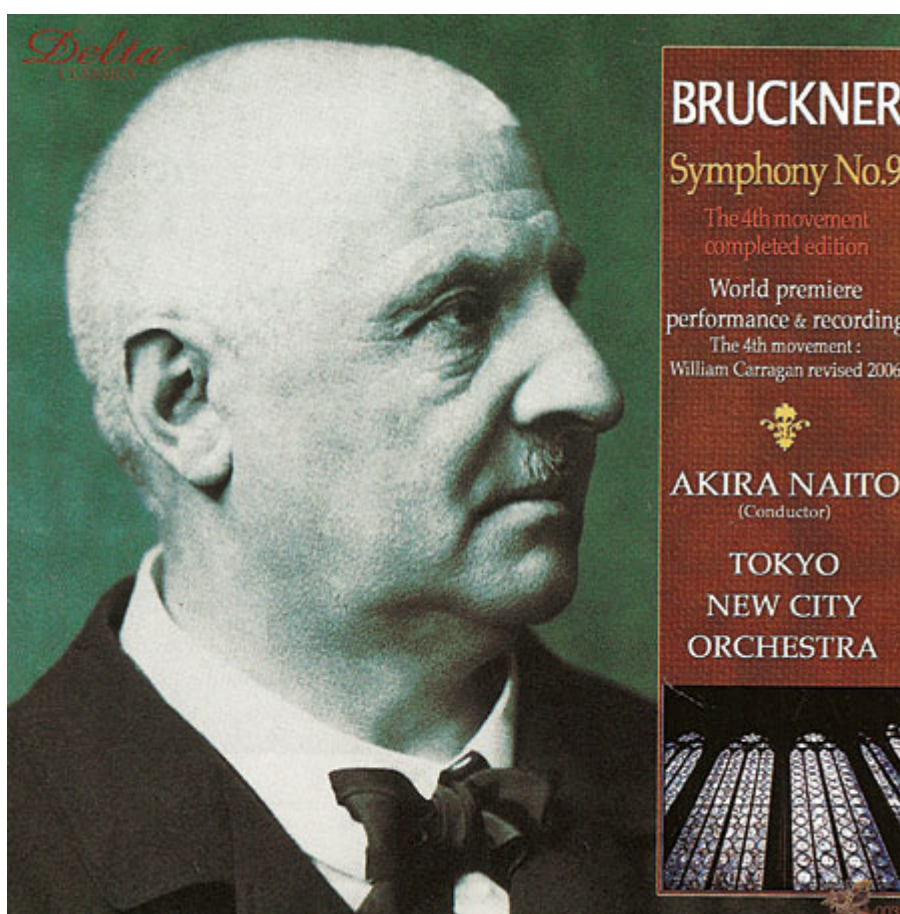
2006 edition

Akira Naito, Tokyo New City Orchestra

Delta Entertainment DCCA-0032 (CD). TT: 77:36. *Finale*: 22:51 (available from www.abruckner.com)

Carragan's recent revision of his original completion is better in every way, though this recording is marred by too-forceful timpani strokes at the precise midpoint of the movement, in the great "sunrise" fanfare—a leap from *mf* to *ff* that obscures the bounding string figures that here so perfectly counterpoise the brass, and that fulfill such an important role throughout the movement. Still, the coda is much improved, with pealing, cascading brass; in fact, this is the most joyful of all attempts at a coda,

though in this recording it still sounds as if wrapped up too soon. However, in a November 2009 performance in Scottsdale, Arizona, by Warren Cohen and MusicaNova, it worked astonishingly well. That event was the first performance of Carragan's new, 2009 edition of the *Finale*, which in summer 2010 will be performed and recorded at the Ebracher Festival, in Ebrach, Germany, by Gerd Schaller and the Philharmonie Festiva. Another curiosity of this disc is Carragan's revision of the second-movement *Scherzo*, in which he has reinstated Bruckner's original and far inferior Trio, which the composer discarded early on. As far as I know, this is the only recording of this curiosity.



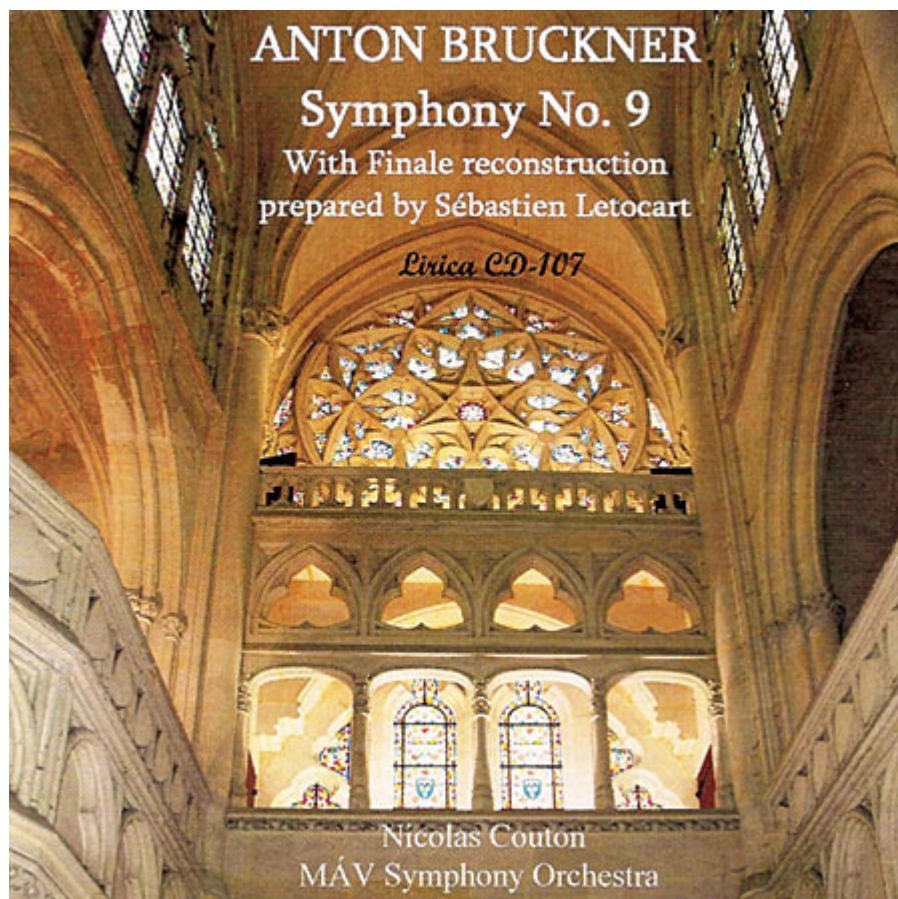
Although Carragan's *Finale* is now the longest in sheer number of measures, it and the coda still *feel* too short to me—coda, movement, and symphony all seem wrapped up too soon. However, this may be as much a result of the tempo chosen as of the completion itself. Carragan, who has made a study of the steady slowing of the tempos taken in Bruckner's symphonies since the composer's time, insists on a brisk pace that I find too fast overall, at least under Akira Naito's baton—ultimately, a matter of taste.

Completion by Sébastien Letocart

Nicolas Couton, MÁV Symphony

Lirica CD-107 (2 CDs). TT: 82:04. *Finale*: 24:45 (available from www.abruckner.com)

This intelligent and authentically Brucknerian completion by the Belgian-born composer Sébastien Letocart, still in his 30s (the completion and its exegesis comprise his PhD thesis), is intermittently somewhat awkward and extremely convincing. Overall it works very well, but its real strength is its coda. Letocart is perhaps the only completer to quote *all* of the themes from the symphonies 5, 7, and 8 that Bruckner may or may not have intended to incorporate into the coda. Here Letocart has written some thrilling modulations and superimpositions of themes—as many as four at once—that not only work superbly on their own terms, but also within the contexts of movement and symphony. And if Letocart's coda is still not *quite* of the scale Bruckner may have envisioned, it comes very close (but see Samale-Mazzuca-Phillips-Cohrs 2008, below). I would love to hear a revision of this, should Letocart write one.



The conductor is second-rate, the orchestra third-rate, the sound muddy. However, the liner notes include not only references to the folio and bar numbers of the score, but also to the minutes and seconds of this recording. You can watch your CD player's time display to hear exactly where Bruckner leaves off, Letocart picks up, and Bruckner then resumes. (The only other recording to do this is the Carragan/Naito.)

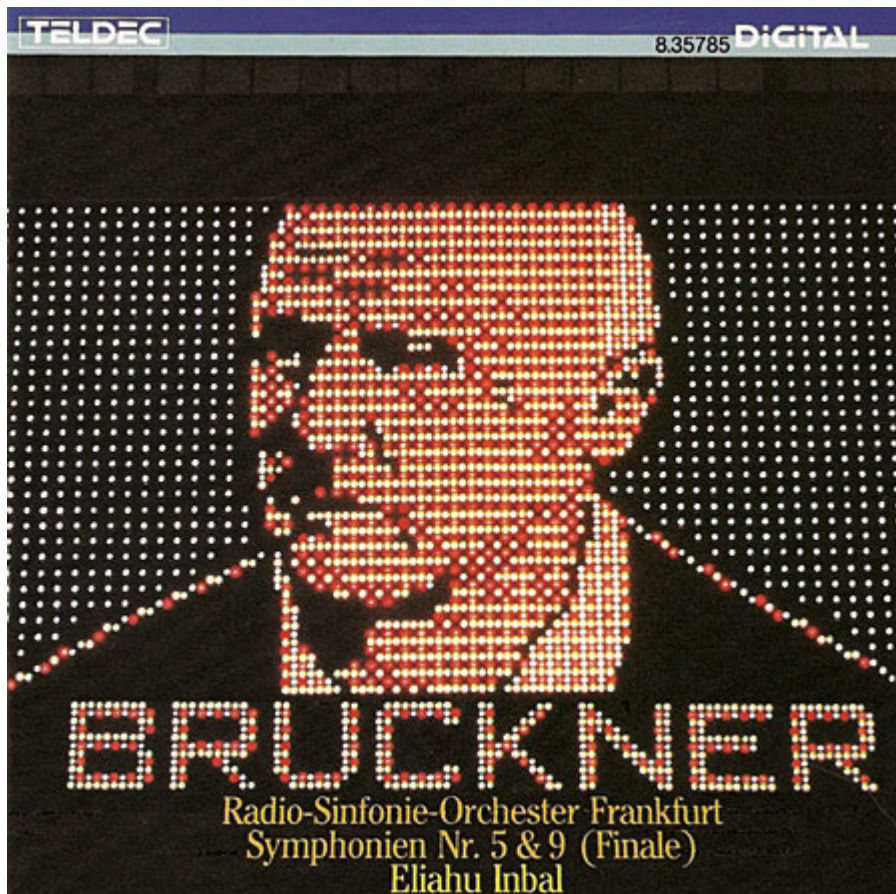
Completions by Nicola Samale, Giuseppe Mazzuca, John A. Phillips, and Benjamin-Gunnar Cohrs
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1985 edition (*Finale* only, with Symphony 5)

Eliahu Inbal, Frankfurt Radio Symphony

Teldec 8.35785 (242 426-2) (2 CDs). Symphony 5, TT: 65:03. *Finale*: 20:44 (out of print)

Nicola Samale and Giuseppe Mazzuca were still feeling their way in this, the first edition of their long project of reconstruction. Some of the new linking passages are awkward and timid, not built fully or boldly enough to sound like much more than flimsy scaffolding connecting large blocks of ruins. The quotations from the earlier movements, and the very few from earlier symphonies, sound perfunctory. All of which makes this first, rudimentary stage of this series of completions, in combination with Eliahu Inbal's brisk pace, sound less like a completion than a condensation.

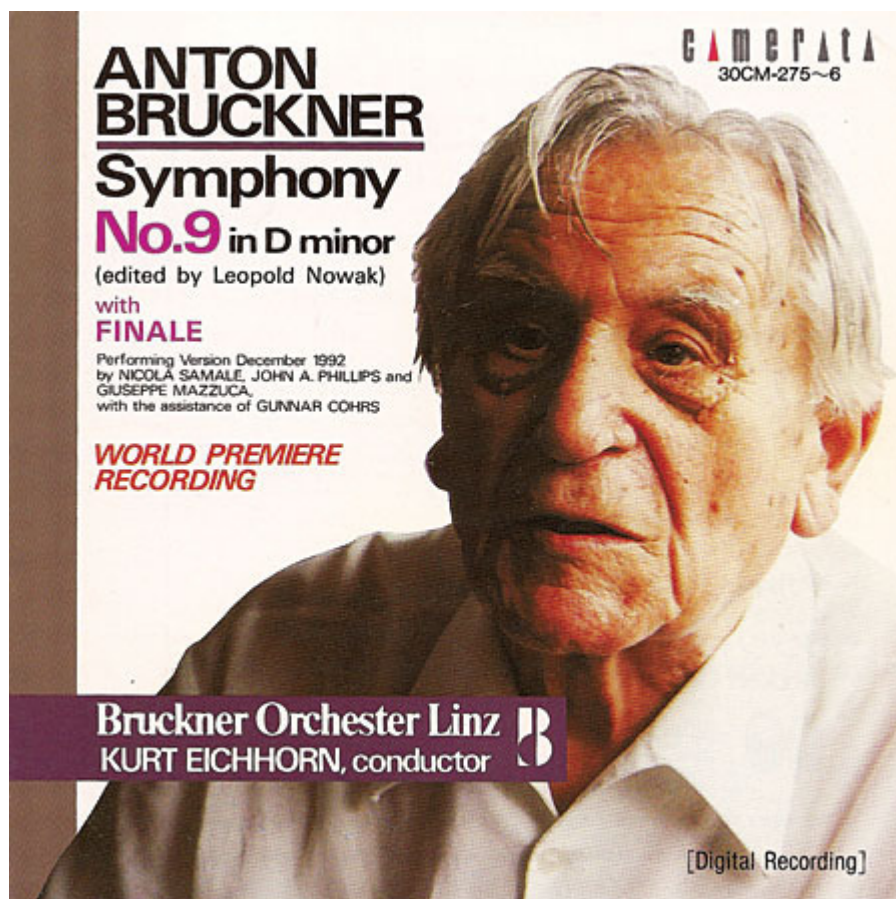


Still, Inbal is never less than deftly musical, with a *cantabile* feel very like that heard throughout his Mahler cycle but seldom heard in Bruckner, let alone any other completion of the *Finale*. The FRSO sounds lovely in the spacious acoustic of Frankfurt's Alte Oper. For some reason, Teldec paired the *Finale* with Inbal's recording of Bruckner's Symphony 5. Inbal's recording with the FRSO of the first three movements of Symphony 9, once available separately, is also out of print.

1992 edition

Kurt Eichhorn, Bruckner Orchester Linz

Camerata 30CM-275-6 (2 CDs). TT: 92:47. *Finale*: 30:11



Samale and Mazzuca were joined by composer-scholars John A. Phillips and Benjamin-Gunnar Cohrs to create this edition in which the coda has been completely reworked, and now includes themes from Bruckner's Symphony 7 and *Te Deum*. The result sounds like Bruckner *almost* all the way through, though parts of the new coda still sound like boilerplate musical rhetoric, however Brucknerian. (Those who have heard the coda of Bruckner's original version of the first movement of his Symphony 8 will know what I mean.) This is partly the fault of the conductor, the late Kurt Eichhorn (1908–1994), a Bruckner specialist of the craggy Knappertsbusch school: *ie*, deep feeling married to a great sense of a work's overall structure and arc, but considerable disregard for polish and tight ensemble work. Though Eichhorn is unfailingly musical, his very slow pace, although never *too* slow, at times simply loses momentum, most tellingly in some of the new transitional passages. But there are glorious moments here: the "sunrise" fanfare and its reprise get a more richly

sumptuous treatment than in any other recording. The horn section alone seems to number dozens, all playing instruments of solid gold.

1996 edition

Johannes Wildner, New Philharmonia Orchestra of Westphalia

Naxos 8.555933-34 (2 CDs). TT: 82:47. *Finale*: 23:28



Now incorporating themes from Symphony 8 as well, this is the first edition of the Samale-Mazzuca-Phillips-Cohrs *Finale* that sounds entirely like Bruckner from beginning to end, with many of the new linking passages subtly revised to be brought more fully within the composer's idiom. Wildner's hand on the orchestral tiller is very sure, the orchestra is disciplined, the sound very natural. Wildner has great control of orchestral ensemble and dynamics. Don't let the brevity of this capsule review dissuade you: This is a great first choice of completed version, following a full digestion of Harnoncourt's presentation of the fragments alone. But see the 2008 edition, below.

2005 edition

Marcus Bosch, Sinfonieorchester Aachen

Coviello Classics COV 30711 (SACD/CD). TT: 69:54. *Finale*: 20:19



The Samale-Mazzuca-Phillips-Cohrs completion is further improved, especially in the coda, as well as by the inspired insertion of a horn descant over the first, *piano* reappearance of the chorale following the fugue and "sunrise" fanfare. The further development and "stacking" of themes from the first three movements just before the coda proper has also been refined, each theme now more clearly voiced. However, while Marcus Bosch makes his brisk pace work well in the *Finale*, I found his tempos in the first three movements simply too fast for the music to register in any way that could be actually felt. And while the high-resolution sound is rich and lush, the acoustic of the sizable sanctuary in which this concert performance was too distantly miked, in combination with tempos too fast for the space as well as the music, result in a muddy, swimmy sound in which entire choirs of trombones or Wagner tubas are buried, virtually unheard under mounting layers of reverberation. Bosch is now more

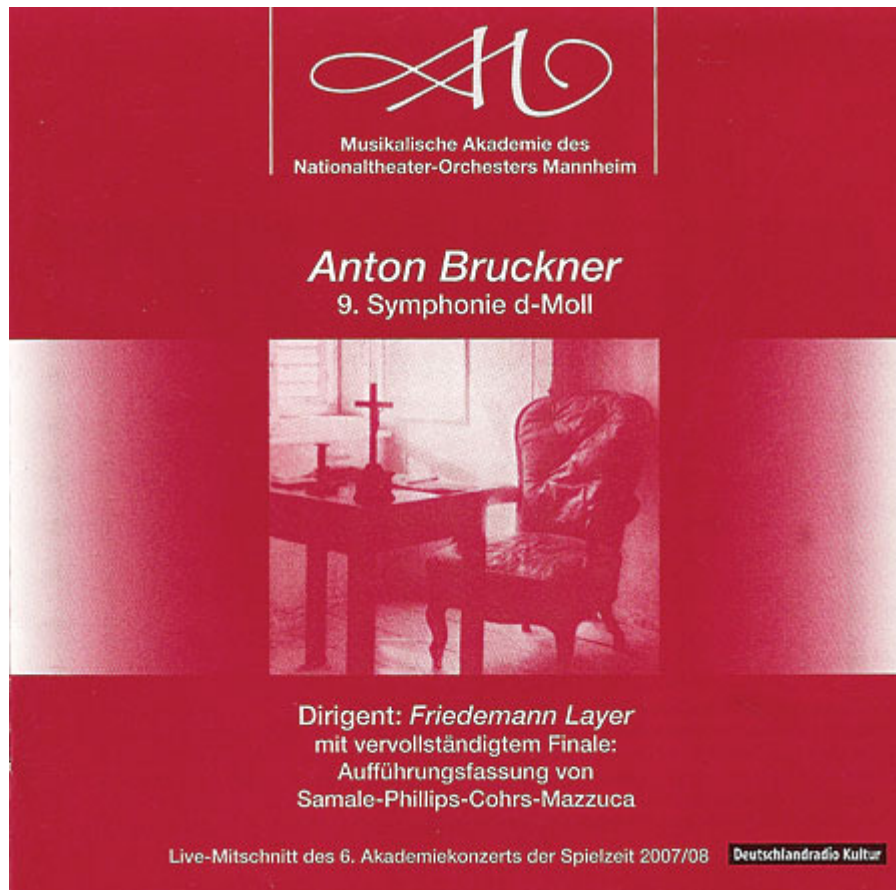
than halfway through a complete Bruckner cycle, but on the evidence of this recording seems to have oddly little feel for or sympathy with the composer's music.

2008 edition

Friedemann Layer, Musikalische Akademie des Nationaltheater-Orchesters
Mannheim e.V.

Deutschlandradio Kultur (2 CDs). TT: 83:24. *Finale*: 25:29 (available from www.abruckner.com)

What lifts this most recent edition of the Samale-Mazzuca-Phillips-Cohrs completion into another league entirely from earlier editions and all other completions is the addition of a final restatement of the chorale, followed by an extended development in the brass of the leaping theme from the *Finale*'s first few bars, and a considerably expanded final peroration, again in the full brass. And in the recapitulation just before the coda proper, Layer's combination of dynamic balance and slow tempo brings to the fore the quotation of a theme from Symphony 8—a chromatically descending four-note passage for solo oboe, repeated in various modulations—in a way that balances the mounting excitement of the prefiguring of the coda to come with the certainty of its fulfillment. Here, for the first time, Bruckner's aural edifice sounds fully constructed as he might have intended, all scaffolding removed, and on a scale in proportion with the rest of this astonishing work. Also for the first time, I can imagine someone familiar with all of Bruckner's other symphonies except the Ninth hearing this set, listening to all four movements, and never once thinking that Bruckner didn't actually write every note.



Conductor Friedemann Layer is fully up to the task, even if the Mannheim orchestra is a bit rough in spots. His articulation of the fugue is terrific—the *stretto* is crystal clear. Here, apparently, Layer gave the violins detailed bowing instructions that bring out references to the leaping theme from the movement's first bars; hitherto this has seemed little more than a supporting figure, but it now sounds as important as the fugue's main subject, and adds another dimension to a fugue already overwhelming in its complexity.

In short, this recording, the most recent of any completion of the *Finale*, is also the most satisfying by far. It is the only completion with which, after listening to it, I have *not* found myself looking forward to the next edition's incremental improvements.

Bruckner's Ninth Symphony may never be finished—indeed, Benjamin-Gunnar Cohrs has just informed me that he and his colleagues are considering a new revision of the coda. But here, in the four movements presented in Layer's recording, it sounds at last complete.

Richard Lehnert