

Bruckner - Symphony No.9 (with finale completion SPCM 2011)
Het Brabants Orkest / Friedemann Layer

The "new" finale of the ninth symphony (by SPCM - Samale, Philips, Cohrs & Mazzuca)
THE NEWEST version of the Finale, that has been developed and improved through the years by Nicola Samale, Benjamin-Gunnar Cohrs and John Phillips, features some significant changes compared to the former version, issued 2004, so this newest edition could be assessed as the final judgement. The team have worked now for no less than 25 years on a 'perfect' solution for a completion using, of course, the already finished parts, but also fragmented score-parts and "Particelli" (a kind of augmented piano-version that offers all relevant notes and harmonies as well as several hints as to instrumentation) and other drafts. Using all these bequeathed documents the composers were able to elaborate a more-than-satisfying finale with musicological competence as well as aesthetic empathy. Now we can listen to a complete symphony that may be the most terrific since Beethoven's Ninth.

The Finale versions "SPCM"

It was 1984 when the two Italian composers Nicola Samale and Giuseppe Mazzuca presented a first astonishing (but still relatively inchoate) score. This was the first "Ricostruzione" SM-1984. (Back then I listened to that world première on the radio and pursued all further steps since.) In 1986 the now one-man "team", Samale, was enlarged by Benjamin-Gunnar Cohrs and, in 1990, John Phillips, both musicologists, composers and conductors, and issued a first revision that presented a musically satisfying movement, (the "Aufführungsfassung" Performing Version, AF-1992), while Mazzuca retired completely from the project. The work of the reconstruction team is now identified by the abbreviation: "SPCM". As a result of further investigation and consideration of the documents Cohrs and Samale worked out in 2004 an important revised version (the so-called "Neuausgabe" New Edition, NA-2004). Although there were some further changes in succeeding years, in 2011 the authors decided to publish a further significant revised version. According to the editors, this will be the last revision, therefore it can be evaluated as a "work accomplished" after all the former "work-in-progress" versions of the reconstruction. (This "Letztmalig revidierte Ausgabe", Last Revised Edition, LRA, will appear in print in 2012.)

Marginal note: Although this last revised edition is probably the most coherent and appealing edition, the former versions will (and should) nonetheless retain their own right of existence, on the one hand because there are still nice CDs you can listen to, and on the other hand the former "musical solutions" are still attractive variations. [Ed. Note: However, the Editorial Team has prohibited performances and/or recordings from older impressions. For those interested in such older phases, sound recordings remain to give an aural impression.]

The "new" Coda

Beside some changes, many minor and some less so, within the SPCM LRA 2012 regarding instrumentation, it is especially the avoidance of the breakdown of suspense in the lead up to the final plateau that is the most significant innovation to mention. It can be stated emphatically that this is a positive change.

In all former coda progressions the development collapsed just before the final culmination, and started building up again to the closing high in the final 37 bars, but this coda-approach was usually unable to achieve a new fully-satisfying tension. The consequence was that the end was not a last peak but appeared as a kind of artificial reverberation instead of a concluding climax. In the particular case of the spiritual content of the symphony - an inner debate on existence, dying and afterlife - a final and cathartic summit at the closing point is needed: the "arrival in paradise", as it were. The consequence for interpretation of the earlier versions was that an exceptionally slow speed was needed in order to fully achieve the last episode on a concluding high point. Only by Kurt Eichhorn in his interpretation was this satisfyingly achieved (on the Camerata label). In the LRA 2012 now presented, the composers structured an ideal intensification of the score embracing the whole coda. It is a brilliant orchestral crescendo with skilful variation of tension but ultimately achieving a glorious end.

Friedmann Layer's interpretation in Eindhoven was significantly oriented towards the finale. Especially in this movement Layer was unafraid to confront the nightmarish dissonances - they were skilfully sustained and appropriately absorbed. Thus, the chorale-episodes were celebrated with contrapuntal solemnity but yet without exaggerated pathos. The movement had an inner tension that granted its necessary spiritual logic. Layer concluded the whole symphony with a deliberate, controlled crescendo of the new coda that quite forcefully left the listener impressed and "redeemed".

Performing practice of the Ninth and their extra-musical content

While the traditional, and in my view false and nonsensical, interpretations presented by three-movement performances end with a mawkish, sweet, sighing "finale" of the Adagio, an authentic solution will only be achieved by a fourth movement Finale that accommodates correctly Bruckner's intentions: The painful, but redeeming Adagio (third movement) ends with - according to Bruckner's own remark - (his/one's) physical decease, "Abschied vom Leben" (Farewell from life). This leads unavoidably - by virtue of Bruckner's pattern of esoteric thought - to a statement of an after-world as the final element of the life-cycle. Bruckner's dedication of the symphony "Dem lieben Gott" (To the beloved Lord) is an indubitable indication of that interpretation. In that sense Bruckner conceives the symphonic structure, as a matter of course, necessarily to have a finale in order to express the "programme" coherently. It is true that the magnificent power of the Ninth works also without taking Bruckner's Catholicism as its basis (as Bruckner's own confession) - but the symphony can be understood even better then. Besides: This is the explanation for Bruckner's provision for his precipitate death before fulfilling the final magnum opus, to install the "Te Deum" as a compensatory finale. This choral piece can in that way also be understood as a "commentary" to the Ninth Symphony. In Bruckner's imagination there was a necessary circle from birth-life-death (movements 1-3) to purgatory-paradise (movement 4), and the Te Deum can be construed as a sublime thanksgiving to his Creator in heaven (where Bruckner will surely play organ rather than harp...)

Surprisingly enough, even Bruckner's clear stipulation that the Te Deum be substituted for the unfinished finale has hardly ever been adhered to and performed by conductors (and only the Japanese conductor Takashi Asahina ever issued the Ninth in combination with the Te Deum on CD!). This disesteem comes mostly because of the "old-tradition" of misinterpretation alleging an "accomplished three-movement-symphony", a view which needs strenuous proactive rethinking. Another simple explanation could be a banal monetary reason, as the Te Deum necessitates additional organ, soloists and chorus. What luck Beethoven's Ninth sells quite well with chorus and Mahler's Eighth is an established aural-sensation...!

Friedemann Layer's musical realization in Eindhoven

This was a very special and a very good, indeed a sublime concert. Layer, together with Het Brabants Orkest, understood well how to organize the spiritual (but not programmatic!) progression of the particular movements - but even more the whole symphony - creating a long overriding arc of tension.

It may have been on account of some ignorance in the audience that they strangely began clapping after the third movement, and that seemed to lead Layer to become more incisive in the finale (The conductor admonished the audience instantly for the required silence, but it was perhaps this unwanted interruption that provoked the orchestra to intensify the vehemence and emotion of the ensuing finale.) The proper transition from the gentle *ppp* pizzicato strings conclusion (Adagio) to the *ppp* timpani fade-in (*Misterioso* - Finale) was slightly disturbed, but this was soon forgotten.

Apart from some rare moments, the orchestra played together with great harmony and developed, in spite of the relative small numbers, a brilliant full sonority. Only on rare occasions woodwind and brass wobbled slightly, but that could not detract from an altogether outstanding performance; on the contrary: a sterile perfection would maybe conflict with the emotions of the symphony.

Layer's well-balanced dynamics corresponded well with the tempi of the movements. The opening movement's 26 minutes allowed enough space for the development of the ideas and the typical Bruckner-sections. The Scherzo discharged its infernal, apocalyptic verve in somewhat over 11 minutes. The Adagio, at round about 23 minutes, was a bit more rapid than in most performances, but this was positive in a performance targeted to the closing bars of the finale. The finale, at a little over 25 minutes, built again with spacious, solemn tempi, but without laying a drowsy patina over it.

Especially remarkable was the (historically) "correct" placing of the instruments. Regrettably in only few performances are the strings placed antiphonally so that the sound is ideal for the audience: by positioning the second strings on the right the intended stereo-effect can be obtained. Also the position of the double basses (in this performance placed fully behind the orchestra and therefore sounding directly into the audience) creates a much better bass foundation. Finally, surprisingly good was the hall itself. It produces a punchy and always transparent resonance. Both in quiet and loud, solo and *tutti* sections, the acoustic of the "Frits Philips" concert hall is impressive.

I am convinced that most of the audience that had made long journeys to Eindhoven, enjoyed the concert thoroughly. The open-minded Bruckner aficionado, committed to truth, could experience and enjoy a baptism by a perfect symphony with a (final-)version of the finale.

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In this issue:

With this issue and henceforward the sequence of contents has been altered, with articles to the fore, reviews to the back

Letters	Page 2
<i>The First Forty Years: the early Music of Anton Bruckner</i> by David Singerman	Page 3
<i>Listen Without Prejudice</i> by Tom Service	Page 7
<i>Bruckner and Elgar: A Comparative Sketch</i> by Martin Pulbrook	Page 8
<i>Toward a Theory of Coherence: Compositional Use of the Turn in Bruckner's Symphonies</i> by Eric Lai	Page 20
<i>Book Reviews: Bruckneriana from Austria</i> by Crawford Howie	Page 23
CD Reviews	Page 27
<i>Two Bruckner Marathons!</i> A report by Neil Schore	Page 33

Bruckner Abroad

The world-wide concert listing, published at the back of *The Bruckner Journal* for the coming 4 months, shows a heavy preponderance of performances in Germany, with over 90 concerts over the period. The bachtrack.com listing for the year 2011 shows that much more Bruckner was performed in Germany than elsewhere, and there is no reason to think that this concentration will alter much in the near future. Particularly active this season has been the Staatskapelle Berlin, under the direction of Daniel Barenboim, venturing out of Germany and touring Europe with clusters of Bruckner symphonies, visiting London in April with 'The Bruckner Project' and reaching an extraordinary climax in Vienna in June 2012, in which over a mere 11 days they will be performing symphonies 1-9 (mostly programmed with a Mozart piano concerto, Barenboim as soloist/conductor and all no doubt performed from memory). It will be an heroic achievement. Would that we could all afford to be there!

But Bruckner studies and performances are slowly spreading beyond the confines of Europe, Japan and America. The wonderful concert in the Dominican Republic in which the Requiem and Te Deum were performed, thanks to the efforts of Massimiliano Wax, has been followed by a performance of the Seventh Symphony. The cycle in Santo André near Sao Paulo continues. A Russian Bruckner specialist, Anna Homenya, has made contact and we hope to review her book *The Phenomenon of*