

Remembrance

37. Adagio

(Symphony No. 7 in E major, WAB 107)

Anton Bruckner
(1824-1896)
arr. William Melton

Bruckner, Josef Anton

(born 4 September 1824 in Ansfelden; died 11 October 1896 in Vienna)

Anton Bruckner, raised in a farming community in upper Austria, began his musical studies with his schoolmaster father and a cousin. In Anton's twelfth year his father died, and the boy was admitted to the choir school of St. Florian. After completing teacher training in Linz, he progressed through a number of teaching posts, finally netting a position as organist of St. Florian in 1845. He refined his compositional skills with years of study with the distinguished contrapuntist Simon Sechter in Vienna. He also won the organist post at the Linz cathedral, made a serious study of the older polyphonic masters from Palestrina to Bach, and composed a catalogue of sacred works that would include three fine large-scale masses and, much later, an inspired *Te Deum*.

At thirty-seven years of age Bruckner first heard a performance of the music of Richard Wagner. A pupil noted, "Carried away by the intoxicating harmonies and melodies, the astonished and enthusiastic Bruckner recognised that Wagner's great work was an ingenious fulfillment and extension of Sechter's theories". Hans von Bülow first introduced Bruckner to Wagner at a performance of *Tristan und Isolde* in Munich in 1865. In 1868 Bruckner again made the trip to Munich to attend *Die Meistersinger*, and afterwards exchanged letters with Wagner. In mid-September 1873, Bruckner took his Second Symphony in C minor and Third Symphony in D minor on a visit to Bayreuth to ask Wagner to accept the dedication of one of the of the works (Wagner chose the latter).

Bruckner had arrived in Vienna in 1868 at age forty-five to take up the posts of Professor at the Conservatory and Court Organist (Lecturer at the University was added in 1875). His undeniable gifts were joined with

such a naïve personality and an intense piety that fashionable Vienna had difficulties taking him seriously. The Philharmonic musicians were unenthusiastic about his monumental symphonies (each of which was ‘a cathedral in sound’ according to Robert Simpson) that juxtaposed sprawling Gothic outer movements with zen-like Adagios, demonic Scherzi and bucolic Trios. During the Bruckner-led premiere of his Third Symphony, masses exited the hall after each movement, leaving it almost empty at the end. In addition, Bruckner’s openly-declared admiration for the music of Wagner had made an adversary of the influential *Neue Freie Presse* critic Eduard Hanslick, who championed Johannes Brahms. As late as 1876 Bruckner complained, ‘Thus have I have lived in Vienna since 1868, heartily regretting ever having moved here, because support, recognition, and means of subsistence have all been wanting’.

Still, his fame as an organist had grown with successful concerts in Paris and Nancy (1869), and London (performances at Royal Albert Hall and the Crystal Palace in 1871), and he was lionized by his vocal and partisan students. Incrementally, Bruckner’s symphonies also began making themselves a niche — the arrival of Wagner’s former apprentice Hans Richter as musical director in Vienna in 1875 had been a boost to the cause. Though the composer remained wary of Richter’s close friendship with Brahms, Richter’s premieres of Bruckner’s Fourth and Eighth symphonies were popular if not critical successes. In Germany a growing number of conductors championed the symphonies, including Arthur Nikisch in Leipzig, Hermann Levi in Munich, and Jean Louis Nicodé in Dresden. Performances in Amsterdam and London, Boston and New York followed, though reception in the three latter cities was highly critical (and would remain so for decades, Baker’s Dictionary still maintaining in 1919 that Bruckner’s ‘music seems, in general, lacking in inspiration and individuality’).

As Bruckner’s health failed him, Kaiser Franz Josef approved the composer’s move to a custodian’s lodge at the Belvedere Palace in July 1895. The first three movements of his Ninth Symphony in D minor were finished by the end of November of that year. When journalist Theodor Helm visited him, Bruckner went to the piano, played the last Wagner tuba passage in the third movement Adagio with shaking hands, describing it with painful resignation as his ‘Farewell to Life’. By January of 1896, Vienna Philharmonic

cellist Joseph Sulzer wrote that the skeletal composer had to be carried on a chair to hear his Fourth Symphony, as he was too ill to walk: 'There was no one in the entire orchestra who was not deeply affected by the tragic scene. And then there was the horrible contrast: the mighty brass sounds – and their creator infirm and mortally ill'. Anton Bruckner died on 11 October 1896, profoundly mourned by a large and loyal band of his former students. Over half a century later, his symphonies had become staples of the international concert repertoire.

When Bruckner began work on the Adagio of his Seventh Symphony in E major in late January 1883, his mood was sombre. He composed the opening theme of the movement for the quartet of Wagner tubas that he remembered from the premiere of the *Ring* cycle at Bayreuth. Their sound had moved Bruckner profoundly, Ernst Kurth noting that they contributed to the 'expression in tone colour of his being and religious sublimity'. The tuba quartet intones the opening theme three times in its entirety during the course of the Adagio. The passage is followed by a climbing three note motif in the strings, quoted from Bruckner's *Te Deum*, where it appears to the text, 'In te, Domine, speravi: non confundar in aeternum' ('In you Lord I put my hope: abandon me not through all eternity'). It was then that news of Richard Wagner's death reached Vienna. Of the dejected band that met at the *Café Parsifal* on the evening of 14 February, 'no one was more distressed and paralysed than poor Bruckner.[...] He moaned heartrendingly, "It's awful, terrible! I knew that I would lose the master! He has gone, and has left me behind!"' Bruckner then composed music of tragic intensity before a last reminder of the main theme concluded the Adagio.

Artur Nikisch conducted the premiere of the Seventh in Leipzig on 30 December 1884. But when Bruckner wrote Nikisch that he was 'looking forward to the movements with the tubas', Nikisch's answer was disappointing: 'For the Seventh we have no tubas at our disposal, and so must use four horns as substitutes'. Bruckner travelled to Leipzig for the premiere, in which Friedrich Gumpert played principal horn. The reception was mixed, and Bruckner pupil Franz Schalk wrote, 'After the performance Bruckner was desperate'.

So it was that the premiere of the Seventh complete with Wagner tubas fell to Munich, where conductor Hermann Levi was full of enthusiasm for the

work, and solo hornist Franz Strauss had used his considerable influence as a leading orchestral politician to force it past an unwilling orchestra. Bruckner made the journey to hear the performance on 10 March 1885, which was both an immense popular and critical success. Bruckner, 'particularly impressed with the imposing tuba sound', called it the happiest week of his life:

On the 11th, my Viennese friends and I attended a performance of *Walküre* in Munich. It was glorious, as I had not heard the phenomenal work complete since 1876. After the public had left, H. Levi, responding to my request for a tribute to the blessed, beloved, immortal master, played the Funeral Music from the second movement of the Seventh Symphony with the tubas and horns three times. Countless tears were shed. The atmosphere in the darkened Court Theatre was indescribable.

Friedrich Eckstein reported that 'The rendering of the powerful, dusky tuba sounds in the empty gloom of the hall, after midnight, was an unforgettable experience'.

The positive Munich reception (the *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten* asserted, 'With the Adagio, a truly exalted hymn of mourning, Bruckner has made an immortal contribution to musical art') encouraged performances of the Seventh elsewhere. When the symphony was finally performed in Vienna on 21 March 1886 (meanwhile Cologne and Hamburg had also beaten Vienna to the punch), the critical reception was mixed, as a positive reaction from Theodor Helm ('The sonic effect the tubas bring to Bruckner's Adagio is indescribable') was more than balanced by Eduard Hanslick's vocal distaste for this 'symphonic anaconda'.

Despite Hanslick's hostility, the Adagio of the Seventh, with its unique Wagner tuba sound, became the closest piece that Bruckner had to a widespread popular success, and the next two years saw premieres of the work in Berlin, Dresden, Amsterdam, London, Boston, New York, and Chicago. In critical reaction since, commentators have praised Bruckner's 'highly individual use of the brass, producing such crushing, demonic, holy, noble, and mystical effects' (Richard Wetz) and proposed, 'It is especially the tenor and bass tubas, the so-called Wagner tubas, that are the innovation that

Bruckner adopted to expand the horn section beginning with the Seventh Symphony. Their sacred, majestic sound gives particularly the Adagios of the last three symphonies their special stamp' (Wolfram Steinbeck). The Seventh Symphony was first published by Albert J. Gutmann of Vienna in 1885 (Plate No. 576), and 'Dedicated with deepest respect to His Majesty King Ludwig II of Bavaria'. Although Anton Bruckner's funeral in Vienna's Karlskirche featured many memorable musical tributes, the conclusion of the service was reserved for the Adagio from the Seventh Symphony, played from the choir loft by the Philharmonic brass section directed by Hans Richter.

Text by William Melton