

## Perspectives on Bruckner

By Bryan Gilliam

For decades Anton Bruckner has remained outside the mainstream of American musicological discourse, despite his importance to the late-nineteenth-century symphonic repertoire. The mention of his name at an academic setting thirty years ago would have inevitably produced a curled lip, or at least a condescending smile. But in the rapidly changing era of contemporary musicology, where the modernist curled lip seems to have relaxed a bit, it is perhaps not surprising that even Bruckner should have his moment. That moment was a four-day international symposium in February 1994 (*Perspectives on Anton Bruckner: Composer, Theorist, Teacher, Performer*), codirected by Paul Hawkshaw (Yale School of Music) and Timothy L. Jackson (Connecticut College). The proclaimed purpose of this conference, the first of its kind in the United States, was to examine Bruckner in various ways, with sessions on analytical issues as well as source studies, reception and influence, and his role as cultural icon.

The brochure described this symposium as “a timely re-evaluation of [Bruckner’s] music and its increasing significance in the 20th century.” It stressed the image of Bruckner as protomodernist, whose music was “avant-garde and innovative for its time” and “profoundly influenced the next generation,” including “Arnold Schoenberg and his circle.” Implicit in the brochure’s narrative is the notion that Bruckner, savored by a Viennese avant-garde and safely in the canon, achieves greater legitimacy through high-modernist endorsement.

The two concert programs for the symposium seemed to reinforce this view, with Mahler’s two-piano arrangement of Bruckner’s Third Symphony and a chamber-music version of the Seventh Symphony, an arrangement (clarinet, horn, piano, harmonium, and strings) intended for Schoenberg’s *Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen* (Society for Private Musical Performances). These rarities by Mahler and the Schoenbergian circle were fascinating and succeeded both in avoiding the substantial tolls of producing full-scale Bruckner symphonies and, wittingly or unwittingly, in offering the linear view of “Bruckner the Progressive” who led the way to the so-called Second Viennese School, sustaining the venerable Bruckner-Mahler-Schoenberg model.

The link between Bruckner and Viennese modernists was more explicit in the chamber-orchestral version of the Seventh Symphony, which, though

created in 1921 for the *Verein*, was never performed because the society was disbanded that year. We are, of course, accustomed to hearing wide-ranging genres transcribed for the keyboard, but the phenomenon of Bruckner's epic symphonic designs taking the form of a chamber symphony is a unique sonic experience that is difficult to describe. The project was a collective effort undertaken by none other than Hanns Eisler, Karl Rankl, and possibly Erwin Stein. Strings, clarinet, and horn essentially retain their parts, leaving the piano and harmonium to fill in the rest—and, to be sure, there was quite a bit to fill in at that. In his introductory remarks, Stephen Hinton drew attention to the sonic void when he spoke for Wagner's "living flesh of musical expression" (a phrase from *Opera and Drama*). In doing so, Hinton reminded us of a vital distinction—for Wagner, at least—between "abstract musical thought" (say, a Brahms violin sonata) and "actual hearing" (one would presume a Bruckner symphony).

What purpose, then, was there in paring Bruckner's ample musical flesh down to the bone of abstraction? Wasn't a central aim of those *Verein* reductions, devoid of the sensual timbral dimension, to put greater focus on the essentials of *modern* orchestral works? Was Bruckner, therefore, a modernist in the eyes of the Society, as Jackson's program notes and paper on the Seventh Symphony seem to suggest? Hinton was not so sure; he argued that, in the first place, the period of the *Verein* coincided with Schoenberg's transition from expressionism to neoclassicism, from "free atonality" to twelve-tone music, where the concept of pitch—abstractable from its sensual flesh—regained its primary status. And, second, in abstracting Bruckner, in using a work that by the 1920s was arguably part of the Austro-Germanic canon, they sought to validate a new method rather than to champion Bruckner as a modernist.

Beyond the twentieth-century connection, the conference also promised a general re-evaluation of Bruckner, but one wonders whether or not "re-evaluation" is the appropriate term for a composer who, despite his stature as a nineteenth-century symphonist, has all but been ignored by American musicology, where the paradigms of unity, balance, and economy have prevailed for so many decades. These virtues assured the German-born Brahms a spot in the canon of Viennese symphonists, while the Austrian Bruckner could never be more than, as Paul Banks once suggested in a radio broadcast some years ago, a "symphonist in Vienna." Early Bruckner commentators only complicated matters by making him the quintessential "logical" composer who, likewise, sustained the values of a nineteenth-century Viennese bourgeois cultural mainstream that, of course, never fully accepted him.

But there was more to it than that, as Margaret Notley observed in her paper on Bruckner in late-nineteenth-century Vienna. Bruckner was, after

all, a devout Catholic whose ties to the Austrian Catholic Church, and inevitably the Austrian court, were quite strong. After his move to Vienna, these very ties would alienate him from artists and intellectuals associated with the rise of liberalism, and in the 1880s, she argues, he found support among antiliberal Wagnerians, some of whom belonged to the reactionary “*völkisch* fringe” in Vienna. Notley suggests that he may have even “collaborated in their exploitation of his growing fame.” Bruckner was no doubt eager to get help wherever he could, but I wonder if “collaborated,” a word so active and specific, best describes a composer who, admittedly, allowed himself to be used. There can, of course, be no question that Bruckner’s music and persona would be exploited extensively, and with a disturbing ideological spin, by a later *völkisch* element with the rise of Nazism. But by then Bruckner had been dead for more than forty years.

Hawkshaw and Jackson sought to cover many methodological and disciplinary issues in this four-day conference. Organizing a gathering such as this one (where, rather than raise the level of discourse, one simply hopes to create one) is not without its challenges. Moreover, given the embryonic state of American Bruckner scholarship, it is understandable that many, if not most, participants would not be Bruckner specialists, but rather scholars in other fields hoping to shed light on the subject from their own perspectives and approaches. Certainly a major challenge in bringing so many scholars from various backgrounds is the assembling of papers in such a way that larger themes emerge, and in that respect there were significant moments of success.

In an analytical session Joseph C. Kraus gave a paper on phrase rhythm in the scherzi of Bruckner’s early symphonies, suggesting that in the later versions one observes a trend toward regularization. This movement toward regularity serves as a reminder that the attempt to make Bruckner more “logical,” along the lines of the Brahmsian paradigm, should not be attributed solely to his early, supportive commentators. Much of this strategy to make Bruckner appear more streamlined or unified originated, arguably, with the composer himself; it was an effort motivated in part by Bruckner’s life-long preoccupation with getting performances for his works. Notwithstanding specifically structural and compositional factors, his effort toward greater regularity in the revision process should be recognized in this broader context.

Semiotic analyses of selected symphonies included Robert S. Hatten’s study of interrelationships between the classical and romantic *topoi* in the Fourth Symphony as well as John Williamson’s discussion of thematic and contrapuntal *topoi* in the Fifth Symphony, with specific references to the fugal finale. Warren Darcy offered an analytical approach, or series of approaches, to the sonata-form movements of the symphonies. His meth-

odologies derived from James Hepokoski's theory of "Sonata Deformation," which recognizes important tensions between structural paradigms and expressive strategies. Darcy applied this deformational theory to Bruckner by offering several "key concepts" or structural procedures that serve to explain the composer's expressive aims. Though some of these concepts carry fairly intricate labels (i.e., "sonata-process failure and the non-resolving recapitulation"), they shed important light on the creative—perhaps even extramusical—thought behind many of Bruckner's compositional decisions. Jackson, likewise, explored the possibly extramusical in a Schenkerian-semantic analysis of the finale to the Seventh Symphony. He held that the Wagner connection does not end with the funeral adagio that commemorates the death of the composer but, rather, continues in the finale, a putative celebration of Wagner's arrival in heaven.

Documentary studies covered various issues and much new ground: editorial (William Carragan on the genesis of the Second Symphony), sketch studies (Mariana Sonntag's discussion of the relationship between sketches, and Ernst Kurth's concept of disintegration [*Auflösung*] in the adagio of the Ninth Symphony), revisions (Hawkshaw on the F-Minor Mass), and documents (Elisabeth Maier's report on Bruckner's diaries and Andrea Harrandt's paper on Bruckner's work as *Chormeister* for the *Liedertafel* "Frohsinn").

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Given the wide variety of papers, I was initially surprised by the amount of publicity given to the subject of Bruckner and the Nazis. Only a few of the twenty-some papers actually touched upon the issue, among them my own, which addressed the subject of Bruckner, the National Socialists, and the politics of appropriation. Was this emphasis on the Nazi era meant as a lure to attract local, national, and even international attention in the press? Despite initial skepticism, I believe such publicity was indeed warranted. By the end of the conference—after all the papers and discussions—I began to realize the full scope of the issue and how pervasively the National Socialist problem affects current Bruckner reception, analysis, and research.

During the twelve years of National Socialism, a vast body of ideological literature on Bruckner was created, and the composer was ultimately deified as a Nazi cultural icon. This very literature was all but ignored after the Second World War, and, more important, this code of silence extended well beyond the postwar years—exemplified by Leopold Nowak's bibliography for the Bruckner entry in the *New Grove*, in which most Nazi-vintage publications are excluded from his list. During the years immedi-

ately following the war, articles in the German-language journals became overwhelmingly positivistic; references to race and soil gave way to editorial problems, documentary studies, and analytical issues. Positivism may well have offered a refuge for scholars who wished to forget the recent past—a motivation ultimately in dialogue with the broader *Nullpunkt* strategy of rebuilding rather than reflecting. But by ignoring the National Socialist past, scholars inevitably have allowed the Nazi shadow to be cast well beyond the twelve years of political and cultural dictatorship. Like it or not, postwar Bruckner scholars must inevitably address this problem, for can we edit or analyze Bruckner today ignoring the fact that such words as “authenticity,” “purity,” and “organicism” were encoded with distinct political meanings during Nazi-era Bruckner discourse? Three papers (Benjamin Korstvedt on the politics of Bruckner editions during the Third Reich, Christa Brüstle on the reception of the Fifth Symphony during the Nazi years, and Stephen McClatchie on the intersection of National Socialist ideology and Brucknerian analysis) warned that we cannot.

This warning provided a striking context for some of the analytical papers that afternoon, particularly a detailed presentation by Edward Laufer on prolongation procedures in the Ninth Symphony. Remarkable in analytical insight, the study was based on the premise that, contrary to common belief—a belief generated by Bruckner’s student Heinrich Schenker—Bruckner’s music is organic after all. But in the wake of the probing discussions from the morning session, this narrow, autonomous conclusion left many in the audience wanting more. Having delved into the complex ideological implications of organicism just a few hours earlier, one wondered about the broader implications of Laufer’s conclusion.

An issue not covered at the conference was that of performance practice and ideology—one that may prove to be a fruitful area for future research. The rise of Bruckner recordings (mostly by Austro-German conductors and orchestras) during the 1930s and 40s, when technological advances made recording orchestral performances more feasible, coincided with the rise of National Socialism. Could one argue that the Nazi-deified “German” Bruckner, removed from his Austrian heritage and placed alongside Wagner, became a paradigm for a modern Bruckner performing tradition? Have postwar Bruckner interpretations (exemplified by, say, slow tempi and lush sonorities) unwittingly carried over this phenomenon of Bruckner as Nazi religious icon to the contemporary symphony hall or recording studio and, thus, minimized the more important—and historically more accurate—relationship between Bruckner and Schubert?

These and many other related topics remain to be explored. Certainly, without confronting its past, Bruckner research cannot make significant strides forward, and during this conference there were some important

strides indeed. American Bruckner scholarship is admittedly in an early phase, and in years to come this conference will no doubt be seen as an important turning point. One hopes that it will inspire further studies that explore Bruckner and his music beyond the narrow lens of editorial problems and localized analytical issues, as important as those may be. Hawkshaw and Jackson are to be congratulated for their efforts on behalf of this important, yet underappreciated, "symphonist in Vienna."