
PHILIPS MASTER SERIES



Charlotte Margiono
soprano

Heinz Wallberg
conductor

June 23, 24, 26 & 28, 1993 at 8pm
SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE
CONCERT HALL

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Pre-concert speaker: Gordon Williams at 7.15pm, Northern Foyer

Thursday evening's concert will be broadcast live across Australia
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'Understanding' Bruckner

The constant reproduction of music in concerts and on recordings and the resulting omnipresent availability of music of all kinds and ages for anybody in any situation does not give rise easily to a reflection about our approaches to particular composers and their work. Hinting at the possibility of the individuality and non-communicability of our encounter with the essence of a work provokes the (supposedly discrediting) suspicion that an 'elitist' aesthetic attitude may be advocated. Yet, the fact that music - regardless of its origin or essence - is as readily available to us as an international variety of cheeses in the local delicatessen is an entirely 'modern' phenomenon. It must allow itself to be questioned in respect to its influence on our recreation and encounter with music itself.

How do we approach Bruckner's symphonies? We hear them in concert programs where they are offered to us just like the works of Beethoven, Boulez, Mahler and Monteverdi. We hear them in the comfort of our own homes, in automobiles and aircraft. We hear Bruckner's music; acknowledge the notes in programs and on record covers; read the newspaper reviews; form our 'opinion' about performance and music and return to our daily business. We might try to acquire some 'stylistic awareness' with the help of a musicologist or biographer who will tell us that Bruckner's orchestration is influenced by Wagner's 'innovations' and that he left a great impression on the young Gustav Mahler. This will enable us to classify music systematically, making it easier to manage and handle.

We might also be introduced to Bruckner's character; his inferiority complex, his untimely appearance and often uncouth manners; his manic idiosyncracies like his numeromania or his uncanny interest in corpses; his devotion to authority; his deep-seated religiosity; and we may be able to further extend our 'understanding' of Bruckner by identifying these 'character-traits' in his music. Our fascination for 'personalities' and our presumption that the music is somehow the expression of such a personality helps us to draw clever conclusions and make discoveries: We relate Bruckner's constant need for the revision of his symphonies, the simplicity of their 'tunes', the supposed formlessness and repetitive extension of the works and the organ-like orchestration to the relevant biographical or psychological characteristics. We are 'critical' listeners, who are able to form opinions about Bruckner's life and work, discuss them at dinner parties just as we discuss and deal with other interesting issues and evaluate performances according to their level of 'excitement' or 'dullness'.

But: who was Bruckner, what are his symphonies? We seem to know this always already when we 'deal' with music in the above fashion. We have always already heard Bruckner's music before we bother to listen to it. Bruckner wrote 'symphonies', of course, just like Beethoven or Shostakovitch, only stylistically, 'technically' different. Yet, if we attempt to listen to Bruckner without our ready-made opinions and understanding, we will perhaps be able to wonder anew what these monumental, orchestral revelations actually are.

We are inclined to understand the music of the 19th century in a unified mode when we approach it as the expression of the individual artist's subjectivity. I would like to suggest that an abyss separates Bruckner's symphonies from our common approach

to and understanding of the works of such composers as Beethoven, Mahler and Wagner. His symphonies are not expressions of any individual subjectivity, but revelations of the composer's vision of the 'One'.

The 'One' is the unity and existential ground which embraces the artist's being, his world and God. Behind it, Bruckner's individual subjectivity recedes. Bruckner's symphonies are not 'expressions' of the individual subject who will 'grab fate by the throat' (like Beethoven), who longs for redemption (like Wagner) or who struggles with himself and his identity (like Mahler). Rather, they reveal the grounding unity which embraces the 'unsophisticated' persona Bruckner, his upper-Austrian world and his God.

The 'person' Bruckner lives in an unquestioned, immediate and innocent groundedness: he composes his symphonies 'omnia ad majorem Dei gloriam' (all to the greater glory of God). In the nihilistic society of the late 19th century, Bruckner is the hermit of Nietzsche's 'Zarathustra', who has not heard that 'God is dead': to the politically cunning suggestion that he dedicate his 'Te Deum' to the emperor Franz Joseph, Bruckner replies that he had 'already dedicated it to his dear God'. Asked why he did not marry he responds: 'But I must compose my fourth symphony'. He composes because he is 'not allowed otherwise'. He is not concerned if his works are performed, he only wishes to be able to face the judgement of God if he 'is to call me and ask me: 'What did you do with the talent I have given you, little rascal?'

How should modern audiences respond to Bruckner? Should we decide to take an interest in this 'ecstatic, medieval monk in his cell' (as the Bruckner biographer Oskar Lang formulates it) in the way in which we are fascinated by Palestrina, Meister Eckhart or Mathias Gruenewald?

Bruckner is first and foremost a destiny to which we need to correspond. This is not achieved by taking an interest in his 'religiosity' or by performing his symphonies in catholic cathedrals. Bruckner's symphonies are not dogmatic sermons, but immediate and innocent visions of the 'One' or, in the words of the poet Hoelderlin, the 'Holy' as the unified ground of man's being, his world and his God. It is a unity which is lost to the modern person who 'pursues' his aims and ambitions, 'manages' his affairs and 'achieves' his position in and against the world.

Bruckner is for us a destiny because he confronts us with the 'Holy'. The oblivion of the 'Holy', 'the betrayal of the heavens' ('der veruntreute Himmel' in the words of Franz Werfel) is the characteristic of the history of our time and music. No composer stands in a more striking contrast to this oblivion than Bruckner. He embodies the prophetic words of Friedrich Nietzsche according to whom 'the person who would wish to liberate art, to re-establish its sacred Holiness (*unentweihete Heiligkeit*), would have to liberate himself from the modern soul; only as an innocent would he be allowed to find the innocence of art'. If we, audience and musicians, correspond to this 'radical innocence' we will not just hear Bruckner's music, but listen to its logos and we will be 'wise to agree that all is One'.

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