

Bruckner's Ninth Symphony at the BrucknerTage 2015, Saint Florian

20 August 2015, 8 pm, Sala Terrena, St Florian monastery, nr. Linz, Austria

Symphony No. 9 (with Finale completed Carragan)

arr. 2 pianos, 4 hands, by Karl Grunsky & Prof. William Carragan.

Till Alexander Körber & Reinhold Puri-Jobi (pianos)

21 August 2015, 8 pm, Basilica, St Florian monastery, nr. Linz, Austria

Symphony No. 9

Altomonte-Orchestra / Rémy Ballot

The very heart of the celebration of Bruckner's music is today to be found at St Florian, a vast Baroque monastery in Upper Austria. This is entirely appropriate for it was Bruckner's favourite place, where he was brought up by the monks as a teenager and where he could find refuge throughout his life from the vicissitudes of his situation as a socially ill-equipped composer, organist and teacher in Vienna. That heritage is now centred upon the Bruckner Tage (Bruckner Days), a week-long festival that from small and inconspicuous beginnings has flowered into a major event in the musical calendar, characterised by the adventurous and broad appeal of its programme, which focuses each year upon one symphony, and where you will always hear a full orchestral performance, but will also have an opportunity to hear other approaches to the work, from piano transcriptions to jazz improvisations.

In recent years the reputation of the festival has been much enhanced by the work of Rémy Ballot whose recorded performances of Symphonies 3 and 8 have been received with great acclaim. They are characterised by a combination of very slow tempi and incandescent visionary power. For these reasons and others, expectations were very high for his performance of Bruckner's Ninth symphony in this year's festival. The burden on the conductor of these expectations must be daunting. In the rehearsals one sensed an interpretation of immense power emerging; in the concert itself this conception was not unceasingly available to the audience.

As with many ecclesiastical buildings, the acoustic is blessed and cursed with extreme reverberation, sounds ricocheting in all directions for several seconds. Slow tempi where the harmonic rhythm is active are essential, but not always enough to ensure coherence. In post-concert discussions it became obvious that we had all been to different concerts depending primarily upon where in the basilica one found oneself seated. From my vantage point I heard a performance of cataclysmic power, a symphony reported to be dedicated to "the Dear God" here seemed to confront the Universe itself. The opening was especially powerful. The symphony launched after a long preparatory silence, the opening horn theme rising nobly heavenward but already ominous and filled with dread. Come the vast unison octave drop of the first theme group climax, and its implacable final cadence, the extraordinary and courageous scale of the conductor's and orchestra's aspirations were revealed.

Always in his opening and closing movements Bruckner presents three theme groups, the second of which is a lyrical section Bruckner called 'Gesangsperiode' - song section - which will often call for a slower tempo than the more dramatic music of the 1st and 3rd themes between which it is sandwiched. Already at a slow tempo, Maestro Ballot nevertheless kept this tempo relationship, so that the Gesangsperiode at first seemed shockingly slow. But the glorious intensity of the playing of the Altomonte Orchestra became increasingly passionate and the structure of the exposition maintained its proportions. In the course of what Bruckner regarded as the second part of the movement, primarily an elaborated restatement, it was as though some overwhelming volcanic turbulence was with slow and inexorable power forcing its way through the crevices of a wasted landscape - only the even more passionate recapitulation of the Gesangsperiode offering succour to the human spirit. The idiosyncrasies of the acoustic forced shimmering, glinting and blazing orchestral sound unpredictably to the forefront, the high strings suddenly emerging, all the climaxes delivered with indomitable strength.

Somehow in this cavernous acoustic the Scherzo must be made to bite, and the musicians were more effective in this in the da capo than in the first statement, but even so it was, as a colleague put it, "as though the gates of hell had opened" and the frenetic trumpet fanfares of the closing bars embellished the full horror

of it all. The trio was able to be played somewhat faster because the harmony remains static, but I didn't quite feel that this new tempo had an organic relationship with that of the Scherzo sections.

The Adagio, that in rehearsal had hung together well, seemed on the night to have been extended to the point of fracture. Continuity through the long pauses was not guaranteed. Nevertheless, it was a performance of great beauty, the playing of the strings in their opening gesture, presented with a wonderfully clean rising ninth. In the lyrical second subject, after the heartfelt descending chorale that Bruckner described as his 'farewell to life', the string playing was especially moving. Progress did not come over as unremittingly purposeful, but nevertheless the lyrical theme that had been so sweetly played was eventually transformed into an ominous and increasingly discordant rising sequence, and the shattering dissonance that crowns the movement, pulsed, screeched and thundered through the vast spaces of the vast church. The rhythmic pulse of the winding down seemed a little uneven: maybe it was necessary to shy away from requiring the long held E major chord on the brass to be extended beyond the capability of mere humans.

It had been a performance to challenge the mere human capability of the audience, especially those sat on hard pews in the reverberant nightmare of the central nave. Even for those of us more kindly accommodated, the performance was a sobering experience, an uncompromising glimpse into the inhospitable world of a composer already very ill and haunted by the prospect of a death that would deny him the opportunity of finishing the work with the D major song of praise and hallelujah his religious faith may have granted.

* * * * *

Something of the composer's extraordinary conception for this finale had been brought to life by a spectacular performance on two pianos (four hands) by Till Alexander Körber and Reinhold Puri-Jobi the previous evening. This was a real triumph. The players gave a performance of the first three movements as transcribed by Karl Grunsky, and after the interval Prof. William Carragan gave a short introduction outlining the three principles of the completer's work: firstly to use all the latest surviving sources in the form in which they exist; secondly to fill the gaps and fill out the texture appropriately; and thirdly, to use such other information as is available. The three principles are in order of importance. Then we heard the Finale as completed by Professor Carragan and transcribed for two pianos.

The pianists displayed extraordinary skill of ensemble, and of recreation of orchestral sound. The opening tremolo - a frequent feature of Bruckner symphonies that usually sounds too loud, too lumpy, and totally lacking in atmospheric magic when performed on pianos - was miraculously recreated, misty and distant and the perfect background for the rising horn theme. The piano cannot create the full range of orchestral dynamics, but the pianists used every resource of energy and attack to bring the great climaxes to life. The rhythm of the inner parts registers more strongly when presented on the piano, and this was especially true of the Gesangsperiode in the first movement, which thereby gained a glittering texture and forward moving lilt that was utterly beguiling. Indeed, the awareness of continuing rhythmic activity that is not quite so apparent from full orchestra gave to the whole first movement an underlying unifying pulse.

The finale benefitted similarly: the animated and restless toccata-like music was full of rhythmic vitality, and the very limitations of the piano transcription maybe helped to ensure that the finale sounded entirely of a piece with previous three movements. Sustained notes, especially in the Adagio, were often achieved by repeated notes which also create rhythmic activity not delivered by the orchestral version, so the whole symphony seemed to be wonderfully transported within a rolling, rarely interrupted rhythmic overlay.

The Scherzo was predictably percussive, and had plenty of bounce to it, though one missed something of the sustained woodwind in the opening pages, and the Trio was the only passage where I thought perhaps the pianists could have managed something a little more delicate, primarily in the repeated staccato quavers - but nevertheless the whole movement was gripping and suitably ominous.

The Adagio, which one might have thought would suffer most from the absence of sustained strings, was in the event deeply moving. The quieter passages had an affecting meditative quality, deriving from and strongly communicated by the concentration and sensitivity of the performers. The climax was very

effectively paced, Grunsky's transcription miraculous, and the wind-down leading to closing pages of peaceful beauty, the long held chord on brass in effect replaced by four pianissimo chords.

Maybe it was the benefit of Professor Carragan's introduction which included a brief formal summary, and perhaps it was an added benefit of hearing the piano transcription, or of the communicative power of the pianists, but never before has the formal clarity of the Finale been displayed to me with such focus and coherence. The double-dotted rhythms that have obsessive pervasiveness in this movement are well presented by the percussive quality of the piano. Of course you miss the trumpet shining out atop of the chorale but even so, it sounded good and strong. The complexities of the development somehow seemed to make complete sense, and the fugue gained a Beethovenian muscularity. The two great waves of Carragan's coda attained considerable dramatic power, the symphony sounded complete, its finish positive and triumphant. The audience responded with a standing ovation for the completer and the superlative performers!