

Devotees of weddings will feel right at home when the orchestra swings into the Prelude to Act III of *Lohengrin*. It prefaces the wedding scene between Elsa and the mysterious knight, Lohengrin, who had arrived by a swan-drawn barque.

Wagner was enraptured by the old German medieval tales of courtly love, derring-do, and the clash between the old paganism, with its magic and potions, and the new Christianity, with its prayers and miracles and its notion of redemption through love.

*Lohengrin*, which Wagner completed in 1848 in Dresden, represents a stepping stone in his career as an opera composer. With it he completes the move from apprentice to master. What came next - *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, and *Parsifal* - changed the course of Western music forever.

At the time Wagner was writing *Lohengrin*, brass instruments fitted with valves had just been developed, and he took full advantage of the new chromatic resources they made available. Certainly this triumphant Prelude to Act III of *Lohengrin* could not have been performed by the brass instruments available to Beethoven, just a quarter-century before. In addition, Wagner increased the strength of the woodwinds from two in each section to three.

And so the Romantic orchestra was complete, valves at the ready, with Wagner at the helm.

Doubtless the cellos and woodwind at the première of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* in 1865 had little inkling of the devastation they were about to unleash as they played the opening bars of the *Prelude*. From it came modern music! Some will not thank Wagner for

bequeathing us this seed, others will shake their heads, wondering how our 'new' music (some would even question the noun!) could possibly be related to the ultra-romantic score of *Tristan*. But it was a seminal moment in the history of Western music, the moment when tonality slipped over the precipice and, like that famous character on a wall, would never really be put back together again.

Wagner, in his attempt to convey the yearning (which, as the opera progresses, becomes violent longing) for unattainable 'true' love, spread the tonal resolution of the opening bars' harmonies to such lengths that, to all intents and purposes, tonality snapped. There is no real resolution: the anticipated assertion of A minor does not come to resolve these phrases as the nineteenth-century ear expected, just as the passion of Tristan for Isolde is not properly resolved until the final bars of Isolde's *Liebestod* (some five hours later!). Her phrases rise to such an ecstatic climax that the only possible resolution is for her to join Tristan, lying dead at her feet, in the transfiguration of death.

It was indeed a turning point in musical history, but not an entirely original one. Liszt had already used a similar harmonic progression in one of his love songs, and even Mozart (as Deryck Cooke points out) had ventured into these harmonically precarious fields in his *E flat* String Quartet. But it was left to Wagner to develop an entire opera from this kernel, with all its ambiguity and uncertainty. From it came music of restless, sensual, passionate emotion that led eventually to the music of Mahler, the young Richard Strauss and ultimately, to the Second Viennese School of Schönberg, Berg and Webern which wielded enormous influence on post-war composers.

We, however, can sit back and let these 'bleeding chunks' of gorgeous music encompass us, noting as they pass that Wagner's symphonic concept of opera is so all-embracing and overwhelming that the music of the *Liebestod* can still exert its magic even without Isolde!

There is something about the music of Anton Bruckner that encourages one to contemplate the grandeur of creation. While Mahler, in the next generation – and often overcome with *angst*, grappled with the meaning of existence in his ten symphonies and several substantial song cycles, Bruckner, who was old enough to be Mahler's father, had a deeply passionate conviction that all existence was the work of the Creator and that therefore *his* creative response was not one of anxiety but one of awe and worship. Or, as Wilhelm Furtwängler, the great German conductor said when addressing the German Bruckner Society in 1939: “[Bruckner's] destiny was to render the transcendental real and to attract, even to compel, the element of the divine into our human world.”

Bruckner (with his thick country accent) was a devout Catholic from near Linz, Austria – which translates into Bruckner being regarded as a country bumpkin as far as the sophisticates of Vienna were concerned. But, since 1848, he was also the virtuoso organist at the Augustinian monastery Church of St. Florian near Linz. When he visited London in 1871 he had no problem filling the vast Royal Albert Hall or the Crystal Palace night after night with the huge crowds who came to hear his remarkable grasp of the art of improvisation. He had had a similar success two years before when he performed at the recently built church of St. Epvre in Nancy and on the new organ in Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris before a jam-packed audience. Yet it was not until he was 40 (in 1864) that Bruckner considered his studies to be complete. Then Bruckner's creative lights went on and he began his career as a symphonist of great originality. Bruckner's music tells us that he thought in an immensely spacious way, not to mention that he had also succumbed to the siren call of Wagner (after his studies with the Wagner-loving Otto Kitzler, Principal Cellist of the Theatre Orchestra in Linz). Yet it was not Wagner's theoretical views that attracted Bruckner, it was the colour, the timbre of Wagner's orchestration that captured his imagination. The long-breathed phrases came naturally to an organist of Bruckner's power and accomplishment given the vast space under the gloriously baroque, soaring ceiling of the Church of St. Florian in which he created much of his early music (for instance, his three Masses).

This adoration of Wagner got Bruckner into a lot of trouble in the musically conservative Vienna of his time in which musical opinions were led by the ultra-conservative and very powerful music critic Eduard Hanslick. (Bruckner moved there in

1868 as a professor of harmony, counterpoint and organ at the Vienna Conservatory. Later, in 1875, he was appointed lecturer in music theory at the University of Vienna.) Yet had Hanslick bothered to really listen to what was pouring from Bruckner's pen, he would have noticed that underneath the Wagnerian soundscape was a mind more in tune with Hanslick's own theories of the beauties inherent in absolute music rather than the more programmatic enthusiasms of the Liszt/Wagner school of thought.

In September 1873, the shy, bumbling Bruckner had summoned the courage to go to Bayreuth where Wagner was in the middle of building his *Festspielhaus* with funds from King Ludwig II of Bavaria. There, he asked Wagner's permission to dedicate either his second or third symphonies to him. Wagner chose No. 3 because of its striking opening trumpet theme. So the title page of the original version of Symphony No. 3 contained a fulsome dedication to Wagner – after which there was little hope of Bruckner receiving an unbiased hearing in Vienna.

And now we enter the quagmire of the many versions of Symphony No. 3. The manuscript (begun in 1872 and completed on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1873) that Wagner saw contained quotations from *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger*, *Die Walküre*, *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser*. (How could Wagner *not* prefer No. 3!) But Bruckner, still at the beginning of his career as a symphonist, and one trying to paint on a large canvas (Symphony No. 3 is significantly longer than Beethoven's epic *Choral* Symphony) was unsure of himself. So he revised it from 1876 to 1877. That resulted in most of the Wagnerian quotations being deleted, yet in some circles Symphony No. 3 is still referred to as Bruckner's *Wagner* Symphony, though that title more properly applies only to the 1873 version. No matter – it is the beginning of Bruckner's long haul to fame (if not fortune).

After the respected conductor Johann Herbeck died just six weeks before he was due to conduct the première of this version with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1877, the inexperienced Bruckner was forced to lead the performance in Vienna himself. It was an utter disaster. After licking his wounds for a number of years (and after the success of his Symphony No. 4), Bruckner then made some major revisions to the 1877 version in 1889, with some heavy-handed encouragement from his disciples Josef and Franz Schalk. These 1889 revisions were by no means a little tweak here and a little alteration there. Indeed, whole passages were completely re-orchestrated and chunks excised, especially in the Finale. However, this time (on December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1890), with the renowned conductor Hans Richter at the helm of the very same Vienna Philharmonic

Orchestra that had murdered the earlier version, the performance was a *huge* success. Bruckner was called out to acknowledge the applause *twelve* times.

Yet it was not Wagner but Beethoven who inspired the beginning of Bruckner's Symphony No. 3 – and especially the mysterious opening of Beethoven's *Choral* Symphony. Both begin with shimmering strings in D minor. Clearly Bruckner was very struck with this effect because he used it to open five of his nine published symphonies, starting with Symphony No. 2. [There are also two earlier symphonies, the second of which was eventually published as Symphony No. 0!] Out of this magical *pianissimo* D minor chord emerges the quiet trumpet main theme that had so impressed Wagner. Quiet – yet there is already a tension in the air to make us suspect it will take on great significance as the symphony progresses. In this theme, Bruckner places great emphasis on the most powerful intervals of the diatonic scale – the octave and the fifth. Indeed, it has all the purity and clarity of a fanfare. This trumpet theme is answered by the French horn and then the flute. Gradually, the tension increases until the entire orchestra erupts in unison with a terse *fortissimo* downward declamatory motif. It is the warm lower registers of the strings in octaves that answer this cataclysm with an upward rising, questioning figure which drops suddenly to *pianissimo*. These ideas are repeated before the entry of the second thematic group of this huge sonata-form structure. This begins with one of Bruckner's favourite rhythmic patterns – a triplet of quarter notes followed by two regular quarter notes per measure (and *vice-versa*) which initially appears in the second violins. The violas take the lead with the announcement of a concurrent theme but are swiftly overtaken by the solo French horn which then extends the material. Bruckner also adds a very beautiful cello counter-melody as well as triumphant brass interjections. Then comes a passage of octave leaps throughout the orchestra but at wildly contrasting dynamics – *fortissimo* versus *pianissimo*. It is not difficult to imagine Bruckner at the keyboards of the organ as he creates these huge waves of abruptly alternating dynamics. At the development section, which begins very quietly, he makes much play with his initial trumpet theme which he inverts, intersects and intertwines to create a tapestry of sound that soon begins to glow. As well thundering unisons, canonic thematic treatment and contrasting dynamics are all thrown into the development melting pot before Bruckner reduces the heat and lets everything simmer quietly to set up the entrance of the equally quiet beginning to the recapitulation, this time shorn of the repetitions originally presented in the exposition. The coda (introduced by the insistent brass that rise by a very abrupt and unexpected augmented second accompanied by a very prominent timpani roll) initially reiterates the quiet cushion of shimmering strings and the trumpet theme – but we are soon on the road to

a huge climax which is temporarily broken by the flute leading a *piano* woodwind interjection. But then cascading strings with brass in full cry lead us to the final triumphant cadence which melds the intensity and perfection of the octave and the fifth so that the entire orchestra resonates on the tonic of D. It is a magnificent conclusion to this movement.

But if we think it's time for a little balm after the epic nature of the opening movement, we find that Bruckner has other things on his mind. The *Adagio*, though it begins with a prayerful chorale, is halting, even fragmented at times, and ever questioning. There is also a very brief yearning phrase reminiscent of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. And you will notice that the *Adagio* has shifted to the very unrelated key of E flat major which will tweak your ears and might make you register surprise. What is coming next? The strings and woodwinds are the main forces that discourse in this unsettling manner, the brass being reserved for just a few interjections. It seems that wherever this quest is heading has yet to be revealed.

The Scherzo, on the other hand, is lively, even rumbustious, and is definitely not philosophical – quite the contrary. It is a very human discourse; very down to earth. The Trio is a gracious *ländler* (in the Austrian country tradition), and is a charming antidote to the Scherzo.

The Finale is another huge sonata-form movement filled with enormously contrasting sections which somehow manage to cohere into a remarkably positive movement. Robert Simpson, the British composer and expert on Bruckner, has this commentary on the peculiar nature of this Finale's use of sonata-form: "As in the first movement Bruckner has produced a huge stretch of music that can be just construed as a sonata exposition. This one, however, is even stranger, because it is, as it were, thrown out in chunks, great slabs of contrasting musical masonry placed in blunt juxtaposition with airy gaps between them. There is something fascinating about this method ... Its essence is deeply opposed to the sonata principle of continuous muscular tonal action; it is like Stonehenge compared with the settlements in which its makers lived. In this early example of Bruckner's *genre*, the achievement is not always pure; there are a few mud huts among the colossal stones."

The movement begins with agitated strings driving forward with rapid upward eighth-note chromatic figurations. They begin *pianissimo* but rapidly crescendo to *fortissimo* to introduce the heavy artillery of the brass as they launch the first very powerful theme, which is then reiterated. There is an abrupt break, and then the strings enter with the second set of themes at a slower tempo – this is a huge contrast for it is nothing less

than a gracious polka! Concurrently, the brass counter this with a majestic chorale-like theme. This intermingling of such contrasting ideas was explained by Bruckner to his student and first biographer, August Göllerich, as they were strolling by the Schottenring in Vienna. They had passed a building in which lay the body of the eminent church architect Schmidt while from across the street came the sound of dance music from a house. "Listen," said Bruckner, "In that house they're dancing, but there the master lies in his coffin. That's life, and that's what I wanted to show in my Third Symphony. The polka represents the fun and joy of the world, and the chorale represents its sadness and pain." Then comes an abrupt interruption as the heavy-weight brass feel it is time for them to express their opinions once more with a third theme – except this time they do it not only in octaves but also in a syncopated fashion that injects considerable energy into the proceedings. A quartet of French horns heralds the beginning of the development section where the chromatic string figuration is kept in constant play while the brass and woodwind alternate fragments of the main themes. You may even notice a brief reference to Brünnhilde's sleep motif from the last act of *Die Walküre* (a snippet that escaped Bruckner's deletion of the original Wagnerian motifs before the première performance in 1877). This is followed by a quiet ruminative passage from the woodwinds which brings the development to an end. Then the strings start to stir again as the recapitulation begins. All the amazing delights of the exposition re-appear until the Coda where Bruckner's master-stroke is to end with the first movement's trumpet theme ablaze in D major.

Bruckner's Symphony No. 3 is a flawed masterpiece. Neither of the official published versions (of 1878 & 1890) succeeds in solving the supposed technical problems that endless commentators have listed in graphic academic detail. The best of a mixed bag of possible versions is clearly Bruckner's 1877 manuscript – as preserved for us in Oeser's 1950 edition. The Schalk brothers never got their hands on this version – it is pure Bruckner, warts and all. Accordingly, this is the edition that Maestro Currie has elected to perform this evening.

This early work may not have the mastery of the late symphonies but it still packs a wallop – especially in this uncut, unre-orchestrated 1877 version. As absolute music it has no hidden programmatic message, yet, as mentioned initially, Bruckner's style of musical discourse leads one to muse on the enormity of creation. Bruckner had a truly remarkable musical imagination that gives all of us reason to contemplate the very nature of our existence.

