

# Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 8



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*Placing the Eighth Symphony*

In late nineteenth-century Vienna the symphony was fraught with cultural significance; it was widely seen as the musical genre, if not the art form, that most directly could, as Paul Bekker later put it, build a “community of feeling,” a process of acute significance in the Habsburg Empire at a time when the old imperial system was increasingly strained by ethnic, nationalist, and democratic impulses.<sup>1</sup> As a result, music became the focus of great cultural and political energy, and aesthetic judgments often encoded cultural politics; in particular, Wagner and the “Music of the Future” excited nationalist, Socialist, racist, and aestheticist sentiments and fueled the energies of segments of society, especially youth, alienated by the liberalism and rationalism of the established social order. Bruckner’s symphonies, with their epic grandeur, monumentality, expressive fervor, and harmonic complexity, were widely linked to this Wagnerian ethos and cast as radical counterweights to the concert works of Brahms, who hewed more closely to traditional stylistic canons and, not coincidentally, was solidly entrenched as the composer of the Viennese bourgeois establishment. The critical reception of Bruckner’s symphonies makes it quite clear that, intentionally or not, they antagonized segments of the haute bourgeoisie.

It was in this context that the Eighth Symphony received its premiere. The symphony was the sole work in the Vienna Philharmonic subscription concert conducted by Hans Richter on 18 December 1892. Bruckner’s music had only rarely appeared on the program of a Philharmonic subscription concert.<sup>2</sup> The Philharmonic was a great bastion of bourgeois traditionalism and its regular patrons were generally ill-disposed – culturally and politically as well as musically – toward Bruckner’s music. The Eighth, which was accompanied by a lengthy explanatory program written by Bruckner’s young advocate Josef Schalk, did not go down easily with the Philharmonic subscribers, many of whom left after each

movement. Eduard Hanslick, the *éminence grise* of the group, ostentatiously left before the Finale, and his departure was greeted by sarcastic applause from Bruckner's supporters. (Bruckner later said that had Hanslick stayed he would only have been "even angrier by the end.")<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the concert generated great interest in other circles – it produced the season's biggest sale of standing room tickets – and the hall held many enthusiasts in addition to the dubious old guard.<sup>4</sup> Brahms attended the concert, as did many prominent supporters of Bruckner, including Hugo Wolf, Johann Strauss, Siegfried Wagner, Crown Princess Stephanie, Archduchess Maria Theresa, and the Bayreuth ideologue Houston Stewart Chamberlain. (The Emperor, to whom the symphony was dedicated, was off on a hunting trip.)

Previous Viennese performances of Bruckner's symphonies had invariably provoked energetic disagreement among competing factions of the musical community. An influential segment of Viennese musical opinion headed by Hanslick and Brahms vigorously opposed Bruckner's claim on the symphonic genre. Bruckner was hailed in other quarters as the herald of a new epoch of the symphony, and as Beethoven's true heir. The premiere of the Eighth Symphony marked a turning point in this conflict. While the concert did not wholly win over Bruckner's antagonists, it did seem to convince them that, if nothing else, Bruckner had finally secured a lasting place as a symphonist. As Theodor Helm saw it, "the artistic triumph Bruckner celebrated on 18 December belongs among the most brilliant of his fame-filled career, because the tumultuous applause came not only from his friends and admirers, but from the entire public."<sup>5</sup> One reviewer even suggested that "a breath of reconciliation wafted . . . over the parties that have battled for years *for* and *against* Bruckner."<sup>6</sup> Even Hanslick's famously negative review of the symphony betrays a hint of placation:

I found this newest one, as I have found the other Bruckner symphonies, interesting in detail, but strange as a whole, indeed repellent. The peculiarity of this work consists, to put it briefly, of importing Wagner's dramatic style into the symphony . . . In each of the four movements, especially the first and third, some interesting passages, flashes of genius, shine through – if only the rest of it was not there! It is not impossible that the future belongs to this nightmarish hangover style – a future we therefore do not envy!<sup>7</sup>

Hanslick had a long, difficult, and personal, relationship with Bruckner. In the early 1870s, when Bruckner was still a relatively minor figure, Hanslick wrote favorably of him as organist and church composer, but in 1874–5 Hanslick staunchly, and ultimately ineffectively, opposed Bruckner's efforts to obtain a position at the University of Vienna (where Hanslick was on the faculty). As Bruckner's prestige and international success as a symphonic composer waxed – and as his Wagnerian affiliations grew clearer – Hanslick's opposition intensified. In the 1880s he wrote a series of openly antagonistic reviews of Viennese performances of Bruckner's symphonies. Soon Hanslick's position became so obvious and the battle-lines so clearly drawn that his criticism became a sort of reverse praise: in 1886 an advertisement for Bruckner's Seventh Symphony included not only the expected plaudits from various critics, but also Hanslick's verdict that the work was “unnaturally presumptuous, diseased and pernicious [*unnatürlich aufgeblasen, krankhaft, und verderblich*].”<sup>8</sup> By these standards, Hanslick's review of the Eighth is not decisively damning. Less than alarm and vituperation, it expresses a rather resigned concession that personal taste aside, Bruckner's star might, for better or worse, be ascendant. Hanslick's protégé Max Kalbeck also admitted stubborn praise: “overall [the symphony] made a surprisingly favorable impression . . . It surpasses Bruckner's earlier works in clarity of arrangement, lucidity of organization, incisiveness of expression, refinement of detail, and logic of thought, but this in no way means that we should accept it as a model of its genre worthy of imitation.”<sup>9</sup> Like Hanslick, Kalbeck acknowledged the work's relative merits, but he still suggested that “a third of the expansive score” could well “be thrown overboard” and with his disavowal of the work as a “model,” he betrayed a deeper uneasiness over what the work and its success might portend.

Bruckner's partisans saw the work as a culminating achievement, even, as one critic put it, “unreservedly, the crown of music of our time.”<sup>10</sup> These enthusiasts judged the work by different standards than did Hanslick and Kalbeck; they were less troubled by the symphony's novelties of form and style, and more impressed by its expressive intensity and compositional boldness. Many also felt that it embodied a sympathetic *Weltanschauung*. A review published in the Catholic paper *Das Vaterland*, which lauded Bruckner for “blazing a path of conviction,” explicitly rejected classicizing standards of evaluation and directly took

issue with the “main charge” leveled at Bruckner, namely “shortcoming of logic in the structure of his works.” “It is not to be denied,” wrote the anonymous reviewer, “that Bruckner’s fantasy reaches beyond the *established artforms*, that some contrasts strike us as overt, that some repetitions appear superfluous . . . But how do such actions infringe on logic? . . . This is precisely greatness and sublimity in symphonic artworks: the Master does indeed find a framework for the new creation of his fantasy in the basic pattern of the old building, but the fresh springs of his creative powers must not seep away into the ruins of rigid artforms.”<sup>11</sup> Josef Stolz, writing in the *völkisch* journal *Ostdeutsche Rundschau*, explained the significance of the Eighth with words worthy of Bayreuth: “what makes Bruckner so valuable a musician is his unconscious recognition of the true mission of music, namely the direct illustration of the primordial [*urewig*] shaping, destroying, conflicting world-feeling elements [*Welt-Gefühls-Elemente*].”<sup>12</sup> Hugo Wolf wrote simply, “this symphony is the work of a giant and surpasses the other symphonies of the master in intellectual scope, awesomeness, and greatness. Its success was . . . a complete victory of light over darkness.”<sup>13</sup> This success was measured at least as much by the relatively conciliatory reactions of Bruckner’s old nemeses as by the praise of his partisans.

### Changing critical criteria

Over the last century, the critical coordinates by which the Eighth Symphony has been located have shifted and shifted again. For the first decades of its existence, judgments of the symphony were still generally framed by the poles established in Bruckner’s Vienna. Laudatory responses unreservedly (and usually airily) praised the spiritual depth and expressive strength of the symphony, often to the edge of hagiolatry: Karl Grunsky wrote that “in the Eighth strife and struggle emerge with primeval force . . . One thinks inevitably of Prometheus or Faust.”<sup>14</sup> Negative appraisals carried forward Hanslick’s line of criticism and focused on Bruckner’s perceived lack of logical coherence and stylistic propriety. Schenker, to take an acute example, found in the Eighth a disturbing mixture of thematic inspiration and compositional failure. The symphony “begins so splendidly, like the beginning of the world,” but soon loses its way as Bruckner is betrayed by his inability “to allow two

musical thoughts [*Gedanken*] to follow each other properly.” Thus he can only “seek vainly to spin a thought by adding up moments of inspiration” and this “will not achieve unity.” “The individual tone-words [*Tonworte*] follow one another without necessary connection so that . . . the thought admits no inner need for a middle, a beginning, or even an end.”<sup>15</sup> Like Hanslick and Kalbeck, Schenker’s severe judgment contained a hint of ethical rebuke. Commenting on the “monotonous, clumsy” second movement Trio, Schenker wrote “in music there are not only beautiful and unbeautiful thoughts, but also good and bad.”<sup>16</sup> Schenker concluded, “thought-substance [*Gedankenmaterial*] of worth – of goodness and beauty – is forfeited by such bad presentation. And in this sense, I say, all of Bruckner’s works are, despite their . . . entirely singular flights of symphonic fancy, simply badly written.”<sup>17</sup>

Sustained discussion of the musical substance of the Eighth Symphony has always been quite rare, yet in the 1920s two sympathetic music analysts wrote extended essays on the work. Ernst Kurth discussed the symphony in depth in his extraordinary study, *Bruckner*. Kurth’s exhaustive discussion (which covers sixty-five pages) cuts an unusual path between technical analysis and metaphorical exegesis; it traces the entire symphony with sparing recourse to analytical terminology, or even musical examples, yet succeeds in explicating the phenomenal progress of the music’s unfolding with acute perspicacity.<sup>18</sup> Hugo Leichtentritt wrote an extensive essay on the Eighth (which was incorporated into the third and subsequent editions of his *Musikalische Formenlehre*) that was designed to complement Kurth’s analysis by detailing the “technical, structural features of the symphony” not covered in the earlier author’s “philosophical, aesthetic” study.<sup>19</sup> Kurth and Leichtentritt differed in their choice of emphasis – Kurth was far more interested in metaphysical symbolism, Leichtentritt more willing to provide detailed harmonic explanation – yet both essays, with their length and detail, respected the ineluctable complexity of symphonic meaning and resisted the urge to substitute verbal formulas for musical experience.

In the 1930s the landscape of Bruckner interpretation changed fundamentally. During this decade, the first modern collected edition of Bruckner’s works, edited by Robert Haas, set out to present the world, for the first time, with the “pure” and “true” texts of Bruckner’s music.<sup>20</sup> Haas’s version of the Eighth Symphony (1939) differed radically from



the previously available editions, and was based on questionable philology (see Appendix A). Also, in the Third Reich Anton Bruckner's image and his symphonies were appropriated as symbols of the Nazi ideal of German art and as a result the *völkisch* tendencies that had long colored the support Bruckner received in some quarters magnified terribly. In 1939, for example, Haas willfully described the Eighth in terms of contemporary cultural politics. He claimed the symphony as the "transfiguration" of the "deutscher Michel-Mythos," and suggested that this myth was finally reaching historical reality with the emergence of the "idea of greater Germany [*der großdeutschen Idee*]." Haas concluded that this aspiration was embodied by the fact that the "restored score [i.e., his edition] could ring out as a greeting from Ostmark [the Nazi term for Austria] precisely in this year": a transparently political statement a year after the annexation of Austria (and weeks after the occupation of Haas's native Czechoslovakia).<sup>21</sup>

After the War, when the ideological complicity of the fascist (and the earlier proto-fascist) Bruckner tradition seemed all too clear, commentators properly recoiled from the legacy of Nazi-era Bruckner criticism, and effectively broke with many of the interpretive approaches that had prevailed in previous decades. (In the process, many early twentieth-century connections were also severed and the tradition of Bruckner interpretation cut by the divide of the 1930s.) Partly because of this, the highly charged, impassioned partisanship that the Eighth inspired in its first half-century of existence waned.<sup>22</sup> Modern scholars have, with a few notable exceptions, been most comfortable addressing such relatively cool topics as textual criticism and formal analysis while leaving aside the passionate concern nineteenth-century critics had for the musical value and spiritual significance of Bruckner's symphonies. In other ways too modern Bruckner reception exhibits an ahistorical mien. Modern notions of editorial propriety have prompted us to forget all too well the text of the Eighth Symphony that was known in Bruckner's time. Current approaches to the performance of Bruckner's works similarly show little concern with history.

We face special problems, then, in placing the Eighth Symphony. For various reasons, many latter-day critics and scholars have been tempted to play Bruckner's advocate and treat his music with sympathy so deferential that it courts condescension, and posthumously balance the

critical ledger. Bruckner's music often therefore comes to us wrapped in a cloak of historicist piety that paradoxically thwarts the pursuit of more meaningfully historical understanding. To think freshly and critically about the Eighth Symphony, or any of his works, requires the diligence, as Adorno wrote of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, to "alienate it," to break through the crust of latter-day reception that "protectively surrounds it."<sup>23</sup> This can happen only if we are willing to prove our interpretations, and the ideas upon which they rest, against the historical density of the symphony's musical texts, its reception, and its original ideation.