

ANTON BRUCKNER: NINTH SYMPHONY, FINALE (UNFINISHED)
PERFORMING VERSION SAMALE-PHILLIPS-COHRN-MAZZUCA (1983–2012):
CONCLUSIVE REVISED EDITION 2012

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John Phillips on the Finale Reconstruction

For a start we undertook our score not to impress everyone with our compositional skill and out-bombast Bruckner, but simply to place the surviving fragments of this tragically dismembered movement into a form from which we could gain a general idea of what the composer intended, working at least as diligently as he did on this not independent work but fourth movement of his Ninth Symphony. That is why the Finale is important. The existence of the first three movements imposes certain stylistic pressures. We learnt a great deal out of the effort. Like recreating a Viking longship or rebuilding a medieval castle using the techniques of the time, an enormous amount of knowledge about practical ways and means can be gleaned from the attempt to reconstruct, as precisely as possible, using every avenue of knowledge at our disposal, authentic Brucknerian textures with absolute veracity as concerns part-writing, counterpoint, texture, scoring etc. So this is really a work of practical musical archaeology.

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, as the saying goes. We have been at work on the problems associated with this score for over 20 years, and not just solving problems of philology which many uncritically and innocently take for granted, but which required an exhaustive understanding of the hundreds of pages of manuscripts and a comprehensive working knowledge of every aspect of Bruckner's compositional craft. Setting aside the enormous contribution of my colleagues, considering my own studies of Bruckner's contrapuntal and harmonic thinking and the theoretical foundations of his style and vastly more detail concerning the composition and reconstruction of the Finale (work I began in 1989), much but not all of it written up in a 1600 page doctoral thesis (2001), I might be forgiven if I can claim to have learnt a certain amount about Bruckner's compositional technique – harmony, counterpoint, orchestration, the staggeringly consistent and rigorous Mutationsverfahren Bruckner used in the Ninth as well as issues of metrical structure, the details of the Alleluiah conclusion etc. – all issues which were clearly quite unimportant to others with their enthusiastic efforts to write Bruckner pastiche.

Composing in another composer's style as a student of composition is one thing – nothing wrong with that. Claiming such efforts are better than those of a whole consortium of very serious scholars who have spent literally decades on the problem is quite another. With that sort of approach, how can be sure we are not simply exploiting Bruckner's compositional artefact and adding our own ideas? Only with the utmost stringency of approach, and a great deal of circumspection and objectivity is reconstruction work of this kind ethically justifiable. Art restorers, faced with a damaged fresco, for instance, don't try to improve on the original or restore it to perfection as they think it would have been, but circumspectly limit their efforts to what is absolutely essential to give a general impression of the lost work, and make the extent of their interventions clear from the techniques (brush strokes, kind of paint etc.) that they use. We tried to do the same thing; anything more than that is, in my opinion, appropriation, and egotistical aggrandisement at the expense of an existing, ruined masterwork and a composer who could not, under such circumstances, do anything but end up being patronised, being 'spoken for'.

John Phillips, Adelaide, November 2007