

Review by Aart van der Wal, 18. 2. 2014

**Benjamin-Gunnar Cohrs:
Das Finale der IX. Sinfonie von Anton Bruckner
Geschichte • Dokumente • Werk • Präsentation des Fragments**

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Opus ultimum

»See, I have already dedicated symphonies to two majesties, to poor King Ludwig and to our illustrious Emperor, as the highest earthly majesty I recognise, and now I dedicate my last work to the Majesty of all Majesties, to the dear Lord, and hope that He will grant me sufficient time to complete it and mercifully accept my gift. I therefore intend to introduce the Allelujah (probably wanted to say Te Deum) of the second movement again in the Finale with all power, in order that the symphony end with a song of praise to the dear Lord.«

These were Bruckner's words to his physician Richard Heller, as they simply and convincingly efface the strongly rooted tradition of performing the Ninth as an all-inclusive three-movement body that should finally end with those very last murmuring and utterly moving bars for horns and strings in the Adagio, the movement that so clearly marks the «Farewell to life», its motto appearing for the first time in bar 29. You can read the whole story here.

Apart from the manuscript of the Finale that Bruckner left to posterity, his words to Heller also reveal that the Ninth was in no way intended and conceived solely from the perspective of a musical concept. On the contrary, Bruckner's unsurpassed semantics were religiously driven, and he commissioned his last work at the very peak of his creative powers to der liebe Gott . He must have known it, as he shaped the symbolism in his ultimate artistic gestures.

God is everywhere in the Ninth, its ample indications demonstrating Bruckner's devotion to and his recognition of God's majesty, in glorious moments of retrospection and farewell, adoration and ecstasy, humbleness and absolution, but also the Last Ordeal, Dies Irae, and the reality of the progressing shadows of death, the course of life coming to its closing chapter.

There can be no question that Bruckner's last Adagio contains the autobiographical elements anchored in his strong religious belief, and therefore his reliance on God's mercy in the presence of death, a clear and outspoken artistic statement embedded in the complexities of ambiguous harmonic progressions, strong and radically symphonic, not just sanctuary by fits and starts. The great chorale in tubas and horns bears Bruckner's own description: «Farewell to life», and in this elusive hemisphere, without a completed Finale at hand, it is not hard to understand why the long performance tradition confined Bruckner's opus ultimum to the first three movements, with the Adagio as the conclusive confirmation that «all has been said».

Do we really need Bruckner's own words to Heller to feel and to comprehend what the composer wanted to express in his last symphony? Not at all. We notice instantly that this work delivers the gigantic forward thrust with its tremendous semantic expansion of transcendental proportions, that the message reaches out to metaphysical borders, and that we do not need extensive program notes and exhaustive analysis to feel it all. This is the kind of music that has the spiritual resources really to uplift us, as in all great music from a great mind, be it, as in the case of the Ninth, in the familiar three-movement version, or – as it is now gradually recognised – as a full four movements symphony, as it should be.

First performance

Bruckner died in Vienna on 11 October 1896. It was Ferdinand Löwe, one of Bruckner's admirers and pupils, who conducted the first performance of the three movements at a concert of the Vienna Concert Society (now the Vienna Symphony Orchestra), on 11 February 1903. The performance in the Musikvereinssaal was no less than a triumph for Bruckner and Löwe, but it was seriously flawed by the many changes Löwe had made in the original score. His obvious reasoning was the success he wanted to achieve with this first performance, and in this sense the performance was almost pre-programmed, with Löwe less interested in Bruckner's originality and more in «marketing' the symphony. By polishing and softening the edgy instrumentation and by remodelling the bold progression of harmonics in the score he thought he could increase the chances to glorify, and the history books would mention it. Löwe succeeded, although at the expense of the purity of Bruckner's heritage.

However, we should not forget that Bruckner's music had no fundamental part in Vienna's musical scene, with the mainstream of musicians and the public being indifferent or even hostile to the composer's creative output. Prominent critics like Eduard Hanslick had their share in the long and ongoing battle, taking each and every effort to condemn and to marginalise the modest composer, driving him to breakdowns and stimulating this poor man without adequate self-assertion to revise his works. Under these circumstances it was no less than the act of a hero to take the Ninth to the concert hall and to lead the musician through the hardship of long rehearsals to get the best out of them. This was certainly one of Löwe's great achievements, and despite our criticism we should be grateful for his advocacy of Bruckner's music, stubbornly knocking and heading against a strongly biased environment.

Löwe's concert ended with the Te Deum (finished twelve years before the Ninth), which was performed after the interval as a solitary work. In the program booklet, Löwe underlined that The Deum would be played in the right place and order, in accordance with Bruckner's wish [1]. He did neither mention the changes he had made in the first three movements nor did he show any substantial interest in what Bruckner had left of the Finale.

Many reviews of this performance – and the interval must have played a part in this – did not mention that the choral work was set in C major, instead of in D major, the tonal scheme that should have concluded the D minor symphony in all its splendour. Bruckner, although one of the great advocates of formal tonality schemes, had indeed suggested that the Te Deum would qualify to serve as the final movement for the symphony, failing a better solution. His decision got some support from Max Kalbeck, one of the leading Viennese critics, who persisted that after the closing bars of the Adagio in E major, the following C major did not sound better or worse compared to the usual D minor, and that there was no reason whatsoever to confine to the formal tonal scheme, with ample spiritual and esthetical arguments to left abandoning tonal unity (of the classical scheme) in this particular case. This was written clearly against the intentions of Löwe and Hirschfeld, who both suggested the symphony should better be performed without the Te Deum at all, and that Löwe followed Bruckner's own suggestion only with »piety for the master's decision«.

Hence, the discussion focused on the idea that Bruckner's illness and death deprived him of the opportunity to finish the work, that the Adagio was Bruckner's real farewell to the world, the heartfelt conclusion of his work on earth, and at the same time the quite moving announcement of the transition from suffering to transfiguration. Just from this perspective the soft drum roll that starts the quirky Finale is hopelessly out of tune... The myth was created hundred years ago and is still alive today, heartily joined by most great Bruckner conductors and their compliant audiences.

Needless to say that this is the wrong perception. The Ninth Symphony, as much as the Fifth, was clearly attuned to an all-overriding, broadly conceived final movement, and that Bruckner had already largely completed its conception several months before his death.

In that long history of performing the Ninth, the three-movement version is always predominant. Löwe's voice still sounds: although the symphony remained unfinished, it does not need to be finished. Or: the three movements say all that needs to be said, period. Even though nobody ultimately can know how Bruckner, had he been granted time and strength, would have completed the Finale, the Performing Version prepared by Nicola Samale, John A. Phillips, Giuseppe Mazzuca and Benjamin-Gunnar Cohrs, the fruit of many years of musicological and philological research, gave a broader public the possibility of attaining its sonic impression of this conceptually largely complete, if only fragmentarily transmitted movement [3].

One finale, many arrangements

One of the largest projects ever undertaken was the reconstruction of Mahler's Tenth symphony, and also here many scholars had – as can be imagined – different views: Krenek, Carpenter, Wheeler, Wollschläger, Mazetti Jr., Barshai, Mazzuca/Samale and, finally the one whose edition finally made it dominantly to the concert hall, Deryck Cooke. Indeed, there are still discussions about Cooke's final performing version, including some changes that had been made after his death (resulting in the well-known Cooke version III, published in 1989), but all other versions have either been forgotten or strongly marginalised. It is the Cooke version that foremost appears on the orchestral desks.

All these editions, be it performing versions or not, bear such a variety in approach and interpretation, defensible or not, that it diminishes confidence in their artistic validity; and even more so when public access to the original sources is either restricted or impossible, with critical annotation non-existent. Under the yoke of such wilfully created obscurity the question of who is right and who is wrong has lost its meaning.

Not even professional music critics and performers take serious efforts to read all underlying documentation, if available. They express their views without knowing the facts and based on personal taste, preferences or dislike just caught by the ear. This can hardly be stimulating for any editor spending much time and efforts to explore Bruckner's manuscripts in all their detailing. There is always that basic discrepancy between scholarly craftsmanship and unprofessional critical attitude.

Audience's tastes vary as far as performance versions of unfinished works by another hand are concerned. Despite their quality, some of them have been accepted over time (Mozart/Süssmayr Requiem, Mahler/Cooke Tenth Symphony, Bartók/Serly Viola Concerto, Elgar/Payne Third Symphony), other performance versions are mostly rejected or consigned to a minor role (Schubert/Newbould unfinished symphonies in B minor and D major), Bach/Schulenberg Contrapunctus XIV, Liszt/Maxwell De Profundis, Borodin/Glazunov Third Symphony, Tchaikovsky/Bogatyryev Seventh Symphony). Arguments pro or against such efforts are discussed rather irrationally under the aegis of musical critique and aesthetics. In such debates, philological research is of little concern. [4].

Conclusive Revised Edition

Both Samale en Cohrs have had the opportunity to conduct the Ninth and the Finale on various occasions since 1985; each performance brought new insights. Finally, in 2003 they became convinced that a revision of the Finales' entire score should be the next step, and Samale, as the initiator of this project, decided to prepare a new edition together with Cohrs, published 2005. Unfortunately, some subsequent performances as well as new manuscript research undertaken by Cohrs in preparation of his dissertation (2009) brought further new insights, requiring various corrections and revisions, to be included in a revised reprint (2008). In this shape, the Finale received its premiere in Stockholm, on 8th and 9th November 2007, by the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Daniel Harding.

Nevertheless, further insights led to a long and fruitful discussion between Samale, Cohrs and Phillips. The motivation to prepare a 'Conclusive Revised Edition' was owed to Sir Simon Rattle who decided to perform and record the Ninth including the Performing Version with the Berlin Philharmonic, and who charmlly wrote to the editors: »I must say at once what a stunningly impressive piece of work you have done. I have been looking at the sketches in a very on and off fashion for some years, and heard another nameless reconstruction that almost put me off for life... It is undeniably very strange music, but what you have done has a ring of truth, and is an extraordinary experience. [...] I have programmed the complete symphony with the BPhil in February 2012, also touring to New York. I feel increasingly convinced ny your plastic surgery, and feel that it should be more widely heard and understood. This from a man who has abandoned the Mozart Requiem! Congratulations again on your astonishing journey.«

In fact, already the first two performances of the score by Het Brabants Orkest under Friedemann Layer in Eindhoven and Breda, the Netherlands, on 15 and 16 October 2011, but in particular the performances of Rattle (with the German National Youth Orchestra in the Berlin Philharmonie on 23 October 2011, and the Berlin Philharmonic, 7 to 9 February 2012, and New York, Carnegie Hall, on 24 February 2012, as wel as the EMI recording brought fresh and widespread public attention [2].

These important steps gave ample reason to publish a score which should by all means be considered as the authors' 'Conclusive Revised Edition' (unless hitherto unknown, lost score bifolios might turn up in the future).

Transfiguration or truthfulness?

Despite all discussions, reservations, hymns of praise or severe criticism, the bare fact remains that if we want to do justice to Bruckner's own concept, we need to bid farewell to the transfiguration of the Adagio as the true finale of the Ninth. The boldness of the composer's original four-movement concept does not fit into the popular Bruckner cliché that so many (still) adhere to. If we were not looking at 'the Finale' here, but simply some 'Toccata infernale' found amongst the papers of a composer like Liszt, then the music itself would find unquestionably find easier acceptance. And one should be more inclined to accept a compromise solution worked out with care and love – good examples are the Mahler/Cooke Tenth and the Elgar/Payne Third – than to throw away this bold movement entirely, when so much has actually survived. Even in the fragmentary form that it has come down to us, this is still Bruckner's very own music and an indispensable part of a symphony that he designed in four movements.

Anyone who pretends in retrospect that Bruckner needs 'protection from himself', as it were, can be accused of arrogance, and reveals the deepest lack of respect to the composer. [4]. As anyone who finds that the soft drum roll that starts the quirky Finale is hopelessly out of tune with the (at least) preceding Adagio, and that this should be reason enough to abandon the finale's concept as a whole. Needless to say that this has nothing to do with the finale's objectively unfinished status, but solely with subjective evaluation, which is a rather worthless judgement from this perspective.

Benjamin-Gunnar Cohrs: From Scholar to Doctor

Benjamin-Gunnar Cohrs defended his dissertation on the Bruckner Ninth Finale in Hamburg in 2009 and presented it officially to the Academy of Sciences in Vienna on 3rd December 2013. The paper is available in print since then and comprises a meticulously detailed account of what Bruckner exactly left to us and the various development stages of this immense project. Quite interesting if not amazing is the second chapter which focuses on the original setting of the various sources. Included are Bruckner's death, funeral and testament (1896), Ferdinand Löwe's own arrangement and his first performance of the three-movement version (1903), the <battle> about the <real Bruckner> (1903-1932), the premiere of the original version of the Ninth and its consequences (1932), the first attempts to perform Finale fragments (1934-1974), the first broadcast and CD productions of the Finale fragment (1974-1986) and finally the musicological discussions and the new publication of the fragment (1986-2003).

Pages 78 to 139 contain an impressive listing of supporting and at the same time indispensable documents, another <must read> for every <Brucknerian>. The last two chapters, named <Work I> and <Work II>, can be summarised as a final account, the kind of musicological responsibility which is essentially required to determine both the musical and technical validity within the scope of the entire project. Reconstructive work is here presented in the smallest detail, in terms of a scientifically accountable blueprint, from start to finish. No one, not even the most brilliant Bruckner scholar, will feel disappointed after studying (<reading> would be less appropriate!) all this magnificent material.

The last chapter, <Work II>, contains the score of the recently (2012) partially reconstructed Finale fragment.

In his introduction the author makes perfectly clear that this is not THE Finale of the Ninth Symphony, but an editorial interpretation and a partial reconstruction at the most recent project stage (2012). For this purpose Dr. Cohrs refers to the facsimile edition of Bruckner's own manuscript. It is neither a performing version (which was made available by John Phillips in the first place).

This great odyssey and adventure spread out over many years takes us unquestionably to the almost tenable reality of the Ninth Finale, the ramifications of which definitely will need time to land and to be appreciated. This is not solely a milestone from both the musicological and historical perspective, but also for the music lovers all over the world, listening to one of the most daring pieces of music: the real Finale of Bruckner's Ninth Symphony. We might even see the day that Bruckner's Ninth Symphony will be customarily played in its original four-movement version.

In my interview with Sir Simon Rattle, in June 2012, he exclaimed: »We [*the Berlin Philharmonic, AvdW*] will play the <full> symphony because it is from now on an inseparable part of our musical heritage, of our history. Yes, I am sure that other conductors will still keep the traditional three movement version alive, but it just might happen that our contribution will finally change that. That a new generation stands up to try it and at the end make it part of the standard repertoire, as has happened with that remarkable Mahler Tenth. As if you are given a glimpse into Bruckner's workshop, and this is incredibly valuable. And it can tell you a lot about the other Bruckner symphonies.«

Let me just add that it can also tell us a lot about deeply serious and respectful musicological work and its rewards for those who love this music, be it on the rostrum, in the audience or just at home.

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[1]: Anton Bruckner Gesamtausgabe, IX. Sinfonie d-moll, Finale, Vienna 1994

[2]: Preface to the Conclusive Revised Edition, Munich 2012

[3], [4]: Anton Bruckner, IX. Symphonie d-Moll. Finale (Unvollendet), Study Score 444, Munich 2012

[5]: Das Finale der IX. Sinfonie von Anton Bruckner (Geschichte, Dokumente, Werk, Präsentation des Fragments), Wiener Bruckner-Studien 3, Vienna 2012