

Bruckner/Fauré - Christ Church Cathedral, 1 March 2002

Christ Church Festival Orchestra/OGC

directed by James Ross and Richard Vendome

Three motets - Anton Bruckner (1824-1896)

1. Ave Maria
2. Locus iste
3. Ecce sacerdos magnus

Bruckner's musical background was rooted in the Roman Catholic Church, which he served as an organist first in St Florian and then Linz for the first half of his career. He composed a substantial number of motets, including the seven-part *Ave Maria* (1861, revised 1887), the Mozartian *Locus iste* (1869, revised 1886) and the antiphon *Ecce sacerdos magnus* for double choir, three trombones and organ (1885).

Messe des Pêcheurs - Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) / André Messager (1853-1929)

1. Kyrie
2. Gloria
3. Sanctus
4. Agnus Dei

The *Messe des pêcheurs de Villerville* is the original version (1881/2) of the much plainer work known today as the *Messe basse* (1907). Fauré used to take holidays in Normandy with his friend Messager, best known for his *opéras comiques* and as a distinguished conductor who gave the first performance of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1902. Both men were also organists, Messager succeeding Fauré at St Sulpice in 1874. It was on one of their visits to Villerville that they collaborated on this charming mass for female chorus and chamber ensemble (flute, oboe, clarinet, strings and harmonium/organ); Messager wrote the *Kyrie* (as well as a setting of *O salutaris*) and Fauré the *Gloria*, *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei*. The writing is highly effective and makes full use of the instrumental colours of the day. The original score is in private ownership and has only recently been published.

Richard Vendome

Symphony no. 9 in D minor - Anton Bruckner

1. *Fierlich, misterioso*
2. *Scherzo: Bewegt, lebhaft - Trio (schnell) - Scherzo*
3. *Adagio: Langsam, fierlich*

Bruckner's Ninth Symphony shows the power of music at its strongest and deepest. The monumental scale, depth of emotion and relentless spiritual searching invites comparison with epic literature such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and in music, Beethoven's Ninth, with which it shares the home key of D minor. But if the latter work is a public affirmation of faith in

humanity, Bruckner's presents a radical alternative. Wittgenstein claimed that 'Bruckner's Ninth is, as it were, a *protest* against Beethoven's, and that is what makes it tolerable, which it would not be if it were some kind of imitation. Its relationship to Beethoven's Ninth is very similar to that between Lenau's *Faust* and Goethe's - between the Catholic and the Enlightenment Faust.' The same parallel is drawn by Peter Palmer, for whom both Lenau and Bruckner 'embodied the main pre-occupations of the European nineteenth-century Romantics: the reaction against rationalism, Nature-worship, nostalgia for a childhood faith, metaphysical ecstasy.'

However, to regard Bruckner's Ninth as a metaphysical reaction to Enlightenment values imposes too rigid and narrow a vision. Bruckner, who was famously naïve and unworldly, dedicated his final Symphony to 'my dear God'; when Joseph Schalk, a former pupil, gave a pictorial explanation of the Seventh Symphony, the composer asked: 'If he has to write poetry, why should he pick on my symphony?'. His music defies all superficial fashion, subjective feelings or sentimentality; far from transient postmodernism, Bruckner gives us art of unshakeable conviction.

Bruckner symphonies are famously expansive, and in the Ninth both the first and third movements last around twenty-five minutes. However, what is extraordinary about these movements is not their length but, given the amount of musical ideas Bruckner presents, how concise they are. Macaulay observed: 'What could be more vile than a pyramid thirty feet high?'; a ten-minute symphony by Bruckner would be no less absurd. From the opening bar of the first movement, Bruckner's vast scale is *compelled* by the logic of his music ideas. In such large structures, conventional sonata form as used by Beethoven or Brahms are redundant, and Bruckner 'telescopes' his form to combine development and recapitulation; in the hands of a lesser composer using the same amount of musical material, these movements could easily have lasted half as long again.

Bruckner worked on the Ninth between 1887 up to the day of his death in 1896. He completed the first three movements and sketched most of a fourth; however, it remained unfinished. There is no doubt that Bruckner intended the Symphony as a four movement work - at the first performance his great *Te Deum* in C was used as a finale - but the three surviving movements form as richly rewarding a work as Schubert's two-movement *Unfinished Symphony*. The third movement's quiet conclusion works as naturally as the end of Brahms' Third Symphony, Tchaikovsky's Sixth, or Mahler's Ninth.

The first movement explores three sets of ideas. The Symphony opens with the fragments of the first group assembled inexorably, then swept into an almighty unison tutti. A short transition dominated by pizzicato strings prefaces the second group of themes. Bruckner's name for this section was his 'Gesangperiod' (song-period): we hear two related themes dominated by the utmost lyricism, building to a forthright fortissimo statement. A colder, more ritualistic third section concludes the exposition. During the rest of the movement, Bruckner develops and reaffirms all three groups of ideas in an 'expanded counter-statement' (Robert Simpson) before a timpani roll starts the coda's massive peroration.

The demonic visions and primitive rhythms of the second movement bear scant relation to the German folk-dance inspiration of his earlier Scherzos. The link between D-minor and the Diabolic, dating back to Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, is exploited vividly; 'if', as composer Robert Simpson writes, 'the first movement is a kind of *Dies irae*, the Scherzo is the business of the fiendish attendants of those found wanting.' Dissonance and consonance are juxtaposed remorselessly; the trio, in the remote key of F# major, is a surreal version of the sound-world of Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The 'slow and solemn' third movement opens with an anguished minor 9th leap in the violins; a brief vision of E major is revealed by a motif reminiscent of the 'Dresden Amen' used in Wagner's *Parsifal*; the rest of the movement is an unyielding quest to establish this key - to give the music its point of ultimate destination and rest. The structure is similar to the first movement: the first group culminates in a fanfare whose rhythm then underscores the second section, dominated by a motif in the Wagner tubas which Bruckner is supposed to have

described as a 'farewell to life'; then follows a two-melody 'song period' before a combined development (starting with the minor 9th again) and recapitulation. A recurrence of the 'song period' music provides a deceptive beginning to the most intense section of the entire symphony. The dissonant opening melody supported by an ostinato in the strings and woodwind cross-rhythms leads now to the loudest and most tortured six-note chord of unprecedented dissonance. After this music whose 'rugged and angular lines which make late Mahler look like Mantovani' (Derek Puffet), the closing stages achieve transcendent peace.

James Ross