

Bruckner: Symphony No. 4 “Romantic” (1888 Version). Benjamin M. Korstvedt (ed.) Musikwissenschaftlicher Verlag Der Internationalen Bruckner-Gesellschaft Wien (2004/6). Study Score.

Modern Bruckner scholarship has become a joke. When a composer leaves behind a scant handful of major works, most of which were transmitted in the form of bastardized editions, the musical scholar has one main job: to establish the composer’s authentic texts. Between Robert Haas and Leopold Nowak, this was accomplished decades ago with a thoroughness that brooks no dispute. By rights, then, the International Bruckner Gesellschaft no longer has any right or reason to exist. Yet all bureaucracies, especially in Austria, once born are notoriously difficult to kill. With nothing left to do, the Bruckner gang has systematically worked through just about every possible excuse to continue justifying its wretched existence, from publishing all of the composer’s juvenilia and ephemera, to issuing as many different editions of the same symphony as possible no matter how trivial the differences between them, to completing (badly) the finale of the Ninth.

The musical world needs none of this, and Bruckner knew it. Before his death, he gathered up his manuscripts and bequeathed them to the Imperial Library in Vienna, explicitly stating thereby that they represented his final intentions. He understood, if subsequent generations of musicologists with careers to manage have not, that the cause of popularizing his music and gaining its acceptance is not furthered by confusing the listening public with multiple versions of each piece, allowing them to metastasize to the point where they suggest that he either didn’t know what he was doing or simply couldn’t make up his mind. For the five people in the universe who confuse Bruckner with the God he worshipped so fervently, no amount of this nonsense is enough. For everyone else, though, it ill serves a composer whose contemporary friends did him just as much harm, if not more, than his enemies. Sadly, history seems to be repeating itself.

As regards the symphonies, the only significant exceptions to the rule favoring Bruckner’s final versions concern the “Linz” edition of the First, and the Haas edition of the Eighth (which is Bruckner’s revised score with a few cuts restored). Returning to the original versions of the Second through Fourth Symphonies also can be justified from time to time on the grounds that these do indeed represent the composer’s first thoughts, but in all of these cases we must also accept and acknowledge Bruckner’s unambiguous endorsement of the revised versions. More to the point, the work of preparing the original editions of the early symphonies has been done already. So what’s a Gesellschaft handling the legacy of a meagerly productive composer to do? It could be worse: they could be stuck with Duparc, or Hans Rott (trust me: the Rott people are even crazier).

Enter Benjamin Korstvedt. The American Bruckner scholar was selected to prepare the critical edition of what purports to be the 1888 version of Bruckner’s

Fourth Symphony. This turns out to be nothing more than usual Schalk/Loewe travesty, reluctantly published by Emil Gutmann after having extorted 1000 marks from the composer for the privilege. Bruckner was, at this time in his life, desperate both for performances, and to see his music into print. There's no question that he cooperated to some extent (we'll never know exactly how much) in preparing this edition, and even corrected it prior to publication. But that isn't the point. There's a world of difference between the compromises a composer in Bruckner's position feels compelled to accept, and those that he actively supports. In the case of the Fourth Symphony, the proverbial elephant in the room is the final version of the symphony bequeathed to posterity about which his views are not only unequivocal, they comprehensively discredit any claim to authenticity staked by the 1888 version.

Don't get me wrong: it can be interesting as a purely historical exercise to play one of these works occasionally as audiences in Bruckner's day heard them. But that's a job for academic symposia, not serious orchestral concerts. The publication of the present edition was ostensibly the outcome of the rediscovery of the *Stichvorlage*, or publisher's score, with some annotations in Bruckner's own hand. It is this happenstance that gives Korstvedt license to claim that this edition fairly reflects Bruckner's intentions as a totality, despite the fact that he readily concedes that it "certainly may contain some revisions that were instigated by Loewe or the Schalks." His inability or unwillingness to explain in detail in his preface who was in fact responsible for what speaks volumes about this edition's legitimacy as the work of Bruckner.

In fact, we know perfectly well what Loewe and the Schalks did, because we have both the original and revised versions of the symphony stemming entirely from Bruckner himself. And even if we did not, anyone with even a passing familiarity with an original work of Bruckner would know that the cuts, the diminuendo first ending to the scherzo, the wholesale re-orchestrations including the addition of a piccolo part and three cymbal crashes in the finale, have nothing to do with the authentic Bruckner style. Korstvedt pretends that this doesn't matter, pooh-poohing the fact that "this score may not fit easily with idealistic notions of 'pure Bruckner.'" This is an astonishing, even despicable statement, intellectually speaking, and a betrayal of the very purpose for which the Bruckner Gesellschaft was established in the first place.

Of course the Bruckner Gesellschaft cannot simply come out and say, "We no longer care about establishing texts that are 'pure Bruckner,' but now need to do whatever we can to keep ourselves in business, even if this means cleaning up and republishing the long discredited, bowdlerized editions current in Bruckner's lifetime." For let's not kid ourselves: that's really what is going on here. The edition that Korstvedt has produced is nothing more than the old Kalmus score that conductors like Furtwängler used well into the 20th century. It was available for years (and copies still can be found) in a pocket edition coupled with the

Seventh Symphony. It costs only a few dollars, and not the premium price commanded by the study score of a critical edition (I paid \$47 for Korstvedt).

To understand that this is not merely some theoretical discussion, but actually a relatively simple and straightforward matter, let's look at one concrete example:

360

Fl. 1

1. in F

Hrn.

3. in F

Pk.

Viol. 1

Viol. 2

Via.

Vc.

Kb.

369

Above is the start of the first movement recapitulation, in the Haas edition. Korstvedt, duplicitously, refers to this as the “1878/80 version,” thereby suggesting that it was in fact superseded by the Gutmann score of 1888. This ignores the fact that it was precisely this “1878/80 version” that Bruckner bequeathed to the Imperial Library in his will, which dates from the period just prior to his death in 1896. So much for chronology. Now consider Korstvedt:

370

Fl. 1.

1.2. in F

Hrn.

3.4. in F

Viol. 1

Viol. 2

Via.

Vc.

Kb.

379

As you can see, the instrumentation is significantly different. Muted violins double the flute, the basses no longer have their tremolo, the horns' dynamic has been reduced to make it more "mysterious," and the wonderful timpani solo echoing the horns has been eliminated. The general effect softens the music's clear outlines, blending its colors and making it more "Wagnerian." Leaving aside the issue of whether Bruckner personally might have "sanctioned" this passage by correcting it in some way prior to publication, or the more significant but unanswerable question of what he truly might have felt about it, how can we see from musical evidence alone that it does not represent the genuine Bruckner style?

One option is to have a look at this same passage in Bruckner's first version of the symphony, from 1874, published by Nowak:

The image shows a musical score for measures 389 and 390 of Bruckner's Symphony No. 6, 1874 version. The score is for measures 389 and 390, with a box around the measure number 390. The instruments listed on the left are: Flg. 1. 2., Horn. 1 in F, Pk., Viol. 1, Viol. 2, Vla., Ve., and Kb. The flute line is transferred to the violins. The piano part has a *sempre pp* marking. The violins have a *p* marking in measure 389 and a *pp* marking in measure 390. The viola, cello, and double bass parts are marked *sempre pp*.

As you can see, the flute line has been transferred to the violins, but crucially, the two do not play together, nor are the violins muted. All of the other strings are marked tremolo, and most importantly, the timpani solo is also present. This makes it most unlikely that eliminating it was Bruckner's idea, particularly since he did remove the bassoons echoing the horns, which only makes the timpani part more prominent. What we see in these passages, both singly and in comparing them, is Bruckner's love of pure, unmixed colors and textures, a feature of his style at all times and in all of the versions of his symphonies that flowed unambiguously from his own pen.

Looking at analogous passages about which there is no controversy as to Bruckner's intentions confirms this. Here, for example, is the close of the exposition of the Sixth Symphony:



In this passage Bruckner once again features the flute with an accompaniment figure, totally unsupported, succeeded by the (unmuted) violins with the same figure. The two do not play together. Bruckner does, incidentally, very rarely require muted strings, but never as in the Korstvedt edition. In the Fourth Symphony's Andante, for example, the violins employ mutes, but keep them on for the first 100 bars and whenever the analogous passage returns. In other words, Bruckner tends to use this particular tone color to characterize whole sections, and not just for a few measures as a special effect.

Finally, to conclude this simple case study, consider the Kalmus edition, which is identical to Korstvedt:

This image shows a musical score excerpt from Bruckner's Fourth Symphony, marked 'Tempo I. sehr ruhig und feierlich'. The score includes parts for Flute (Fl.), Horns (Hr. (F)), Violin (Vl.), Brass (Br.), Viola (Vo.), and Cello (Cb.). The flute part is marked 'ppp so ruhig und leise als möglich' and the violin part is marked 'ppp so ruhig und leise als möglich'. The score is in G major and 4/4 time. The tempo is marked 'Tempo I. sehr ruhig und feierlich'.

We have to ask ourselves why anyone with a shred of integrity would waste his time and energy producing a critical edition of a text that is blatantly corrupt and unstylish to begin with. The economic incentive is clear: the old Kalmus edition is now back in print and under copyright, but its artistic value as an expression of Bruckner's intentions is nil.

Interestingly, whoever published the Kalmus edition¹ evidently knew that it wasn't entirely authentic. At the opening of the scherzo we find the following footnote: "The editor believes the 3rd Flute resp. Piccolo to have been tolerated, but not originated by Bruckner." And this statement, of course, summarizes the core issue in a nutshell. Imagine a critical edition consisting of "things composers tolerated." Trying to establish an accurate text often is difficult enough without asserting that the vicissitudes a composer merely "tolerated," for whatever reason, deserve to be placed on the same level of importance as his definitive artistic intentions.

Finally, what's really alarming about Korstvedt's bastard score is that it reveals the very term "musical scholarship" to be an oxymoron. At the end of the day, some questions can only be answered by a combination of individual creativity and stylistic insight, such as Haas demonstrated in preparing his edition of the Eighth Symphony. In Korstvedt's world, though, there is no such thing as stylistic insight because there is no such thing as a genuine Bruckner style. The music itself doesn't matter. This is what Bruckner scholarship has come down to: an effort to replace the necessary understanding of the composer's special sound world with an empirical process, defining his intentions as "whatever might have happened on any given day." Nothing is more important than anything else as long as he happened to be in the vicinity or have knowledge of the event. This edition may retain some interest as an historical document, but as a work of Bruckner scholarship it is a fraud. It is sickening. It is a disgrace.

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¹ Ken Ward, editor of the *Bruckner Journal*, very kindly advised that the Kalmus score is in fact the Hans Redlich revised edition of 1954, which is not precisely 1888, but for our purposes close enough as to make no difference. Indeed, it only goes to show that in publishing his own "critical" edition of this corrupt score Korstvedt has done something that is neither new, nor relevant.