

Quad City Symphony Orchestra
PROGRAM NOTES
Masterworks IV: Bruckner 8

*By Jacob Bancks
Associate Professor of Music
Augustana College*

ANTON BRUCKNER (1824-1896)
Symphony No. 8 in C minor, WAB
108

Instrumentation: Three flutes, three oboes, three clarinets, three bassoons, eight horns (horns 5-8 doubling Wagner tubas), three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps, and strings.

Premiere: December 18, 1892, Vienna Philharmonic, Hans Richter conducting. Musikverein, Vienna, Austria.

QCSO Premiere.

The music of Anton Bruckner is extraordinarily bold. The strength of its harmonic progressions and the inexorable quality of its near-endless melodic sequences exude confidence and conviction. His most intense melodies are doubled obstinately throughout the orchestra; his militaristic rhythms and searing brass drive the musical motion always forward. Even the whispered moments have a spirit of intrepid assurance; his music leaves little impression of hesitation, and seems to entertain few unanswered questions.



Anton Bruckner in 1896.

Biographers often like to connect characteristics of an artist's work with the personality of the artist. Wagner was impetuous, grandiose, and passionate, just like his music; Jennifer Higdon's music is vibrant and amiable, just like the composer herself. One might thus be tempted to assume that music as forceful and confident as Bruckner's was the work of a forceful and confident man. But, no. In Bruckner's case, the personality of the music and the personality of the composer could not be further apart.

Bruckner the man, in fact, was often hesitant and highly sensitive. Though his music is far from simple, he often struck his collaborators as something of a simpleton. This architect of ardent, passionate melodies was forever unlucky in love, trying unsuccessfully throughout his life to find a wife. And ironically, the creator of some of the most decisive music in the symphonic repertoire could be remarkably indecisive.

So while Bruckner's personality was not always clearly reflected in his art, it was exceedingly manifest in the

compositional process itself: he was notorious for revising his works, often many times over. Composers undertake revision for many different reasons; in the case of Bruckner's student, Gustav Mahler, for example, acts of revision were based on the practical experience of conducting his works with a wide variety of musicians over many years. Others have even more down-to-earth reasons for revision; Bruckner's contemporary and rival Johannes Brahms expanded the market for his clarinet chamber music by making parallel versions for viola. But Bruckner's many revisions were rarely prompted by such practical concerns, but rather arose most often as a response to solicited and unsolicited critiques of his work, often from musicians with gifts far inferior to his own. These critiques were frequently on very abstract aesthetic grounds related to form and melodic development; in other words, what we would politely call "opinions". Bruckner was eager—some would say far too eager—to yield to the often-theoretical criticisms leveled against his works, and this incessant self-editing has become one of his most distinctive details of his biography.

Near-endless revision of course leads to near-endless published editions, which in Bruckner's case now constitute a treasure trove for musicologists and conductors alike. Each Bruckner symphony exists in multiple versions, and the debate about which version is preferable can be heated.

In the case of the Eighth Symphony, Bruckner completed two full versions of the work, the first in 1887. Though he sent it to his friend, conductor Hermann Levi, with hopes of a performance, Levi was highly critical of the score. Based on input from Levi and fellow conductor Josef Schalk, Bruckner

revised the work considerably, producing a full second version in 1890 before hearing a note of the original version. It was this latter version that was published and premiered in 1892, dedicated to and with the assistance of the Austrian Emperor Franz Josef.

As might have been expected, the fact that Bruckner was so ready to revise his work kept the outside opinions on his work flowing, even well after the composer's death. Later scholars called into question not only Bruckner's original score but later modifications as well, doubting his wisdom in taking the advice of his critics. Hybrid editions of Bruckner's symphonies have thus emerged, often billed as improvements on his works created by undoing what the editors consider unfortunate renovations by the composer.

The edition of Bruckner 8 performed by the QCSO is just such an edition, constructed by musicologist Robert Haas in 1939. Most notably, Haas included passages that Bruckner cut between 1887 and 1890, restoring the third and fourth movements to their original gargantuan length. Some have made the case that this edition, constructed well after the composer's death in contradiction to his own expressed wishes, is somehow inauthentic. However, the fact that the Haas edition has become the most-widely-loved and most-frequently-performed version of the work indicate that perhaps the composer's first impulses were wiser than his second-guessing.

Most importantly, controversy about Bruckner's editions raises important questions about the nature of musical works and the definition of authenticity. Is the composer's last version of a work necessarily the best? Or could a composer be wrong in revision?

And is a musical work in its most authentic form when it descends from the mind of the composer like Holy Writ, or when it lands in the hearts of performers and listeners, often well after the composer is dead?

Bruckner's Eighth Symphony Listening Guide

First movement: *Allegro moderato*

♫ *PITCH*: Bruckner's music can be described, like Wagner's and Strauss's, as highly *chromatic*. The term, which means literally "colorful", refers to the motion between notes in melodies and between chords. Chromatic motion is the closest motion possible, for example, between any two immediately adjacent keys on the piano; chromatic melodies and chord progressions often evoke extreme, distressed emotions and are most commonly found in instrumental music, as chromatic music is infamously difficult to sing.

♫ *MELODY*: Bruckner makes almost-constant use of *melodic sequences*. (The first two phrases of "Happy Birthday" are a very simple melodic sequence.) Sequences are short fragments of melody repeated several times in succession, each time keeping the same rhythm but moving a bit in pitch (usually upward). Once you start noticing sequences in Bruckner, you'll hear them everywhere.

♫ *ORCHESTRATION*: Bruckner was a virtuoso organist, and many commentators have likened his orchestration to organ registration. Organists change the tone color of the instrument by making adjustment to the *stops* on the organ (all those little knobs and tabs). If playing a four-part chorale, for example, it is impossible for the organist to play each voice in a distinct tone-color; far more

commonly, all voices in the chorale are played in the same registration. So if you notice, for example, all the strings, or a particular combination of woodwinds, playing a passage together, imagine Bruckner at the organ, with different sounds on different manuals (keyboards) of the organ.

♫ *FORM*: The first movement reaches its expressive climax with an incredible unison C in trumpets and horns. Almost immediately, Bruckner backs away from this fateful moment and the first movement ends quietly.

Second movement: *Scherzo. Allegro moderato*

♫ *FORM*: The "dance" movement of a symphony was, for Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, the third movement. Like many later symphonic composers, Bruckner moved the dance movement to the second place, delaying the slow movement for maximum dramatic impact.

♫ *RHYTHM*: As scherzos go, this one is relatively slow. While slower dances like minuets are usually felt "in 3", often scherzos are felt "in 1", meaning the tempo is so fast, each measure is felt as one large beat. This scherzo falls somewhere between the two, so you can watch the conductor's gesture to see whether a given passage is felt more "in 1" or "in 3."

♫ *RHYTHM*: In most dance movements, the "trio" is the middle passage which contrast with the main section but keeps the same meter (time signature), usually 3/4 (three beats per bar). Somewhat unusually, this trio is in 2/4 (two beats per bar).

♫ *INSTRUMENTATION*: The trio includes some mellifluous harp gestures

which are impossible to miss; Symphony No. 8 is the only time Bruckner used harp in a symphony.

Third movement: Adagio. Feierlich langsam; doch nicht schleppend (Solemnly slow, but not dragging)

♫ **FORM:** This is an extremely lengthy movement with many emotional twists and turns. The best way to listen to it for the first time may be to simply let each moment wash over you, rather than try to make sense of the large-scale form.

♫ **TEXTURE:** The movement opens with a pulsing, thick accompaniment in the strings. Notice, though, that only the double basses are playing short notes. This trick, which may be rooted in Bruckner's organ-pedal technique, keeps the texture from feeling too heavy.

♫ **HARMONY:** Many harmonic shifts in this movement may strike the listener as mysterious, uncanny, or otherworldly. Composers use relationships called *chromatic mediant*s to make these emotional effects happen: moving to a different, seemingly unrelated key with wildly different key signature, but a few notes in common to bridge the gap.

♫ **FORM:** The middle of this movement is beautifully sparse, with lots of open spaces. You know we have returned to the opening material when Bruckner brings back the opening pulsing accompaniment in the strings (and those short notes in the basses).

Fourth movement: Feierlich, nicht schnell (Solemnly, not fast)

♫ **RHYTHM:** For several minutes, the accompaniment in the opening of this movement has an incessant grace-note figure on every beat. Grace notes refer to rhythmic figures that are not accounted for in the regular beat, but are

rather "squeezed" in, usually quickly, before or just on the beat. In the loud passages the effect of these notes is intense and *Star-Wars*-like; in quieter passages, it creates a mood of urgent expectation.

♫ **DYNAMICS:** Here more than anywhere, notice Bruckner's huge dynamic contrasts, shifting very suddenly between loud and soft passages. Again, this recalls organ registration which, at the push of a button, can quickly transform the loudness and tone-color of the music.

♫ **HARMONY:** The historical example of Beethoven always loomed large over later symphonic composers, especially the German-speaking ones like Bruckner. The overall trajectory of this symphony is quite obviously a nod to Beethoven's Fifth: both symphonies are in the moody key of C minor, and both end with in the *parallel* key of C major. This means the *tonic* (home note) is the same at the symphony's beginning and end, but the movement from minor to major gives the impression of the triumph of light over darkness.



Bruckner's sarcophagus in the church of St. Florian, placed according to his personal wishes underneath the pipe organ to which he was deeply devoted.