

ANTON BRUCKNER

(1824 - 1896)

Symphony No. 4 in E-flat Major, WAB 104 "Romantic"

The son of a schoolmaster and the eldest of eleven siblings, Anton Bruckner grew up surrounded by music. When his father fell ill in the autumn of 1836, the young Bruckner, who was already a gifted musician, filled in as organist at the local church. When his father died the following June, Bruckner's mother sent him to the abbey of Saint Florian. Following his student years there, he served for a decade on the school's music faculty. In 1855, he sought out the best harmony and counterpoint teacher he could find to help him remedy what he perceived as his deficiencies in those areas. During this time, he grew increasingly infatuated with the music of Richard Wagner and, in 1865, traveled to Munich to attend the premiere of "Tristan und Isolde". The following year, he relocated to the musical capital of Vienna and accepted the position of Professor of Harmony and Counterpoint at the Vienna Conservatory. The University of Vienna welcomed him to its faculty, too, though the powerful music critic Eduard Hanslick, who was already on the university's faculty, did everything he could to prevent it. Hanslick would become a thorn in Bruckner's side, condemning practically every note Bruckner wrote (Hanslick was an ardent supporter of Johannes Brahms and thought Bruckner to be Brahms' rival). It was during his first few years in Vienna that Bruckner finally dedicated himself to the composition of a symphony. He had, in fact, completed a "Study Symphony" and a "Symphony No. 1 in c minor" while living in Linz. Between 1869 and 1876, he composed the Second through the Fifth of his symphonies as well as a "Symphony in d minor" which was later withdrawn (it is occasionally revived under the title "Symphony No. 0").

Bruckner's life and music present an intriguing set of contradictions. Far from the typical figure of the 19th-century Romantic artist, he was modest and self-effacing, diffident toward perceived superiors, spoke and dressed plainly, and his personal habits and religious and political views were unfashionably conservative. He continued formal studies of harmony, fugue, and musical form until he was nearly 40 and, as a result, his first important compositions date from his middle age – the stage of life when most composers have already established their reputations. Unlike his public persona, Bruckner's symphonies are compositions of heroic stature, grandeur, and drama with imposing scale, bold themes, ambitious development sections, and powerful orchestrations.

Bruckner's Fourth Symphony is widely considered his first unqualified masterpiece. The composer began writing it early in 1874, only two days after completing his Third Symphony, and it marked a positive reversal of fortunes for the composer. The Vienna premiere, under Hans Richter, in 1880 was a resounding success and Bruckner was called out for a bow after each movement. The subtitle "Romantic", evoking images of medieval knights, castles, damsels, and hunting, was derived from a program that Bruckner was persuaded by friends to append to the work. Apparently, he halfheartedly accepted the suggestion based on his statement, "I've quite forgotten what image I had in mind."

Following its premiere, the original version of the symphony was reworked into an almost totally new work. The most conspicuous changes include the replacement of the mysterious-sounding scherzo with the now-familiar "Hunting" scherzo, a new finale subtitled "Volkfest" (which was, subsequently, replaced with another finale two years later), and extensive reworking of the first two movements. These changes were all incorporated into the version most commonly known and performed today, and commonly referred to as the 1880 version.

Since the 1930s, Bruckner scholars have generally recognized three principal versions of the Fourth Symphony; however, at least seven authentic versions have been identified.

OF NOTE:

It is interesting to note that Bruckner composed his First Symphony at the age of 40. By the age of forty, Franz Josef Haydn had composed nearly fifty symphonies, W.A. Mozart (who died at age 35) had composed forty, Franz Schubert (who died at age 31) had composed nine, Ludwig van Beethoven had completed six, and Felix Mendelssohn (who died at age 38) had left a legacy of five mature symphonies plus another dozen youthful works that he had penned as a teenager.