

Bruckner - Symphony No. 9

(with finale supplemented from original sources and completed by Gerd Schaller)

Philharmonie Festiva / Gerd Schaller

THE BRUCKNER concerts that have been a regular part of the Ebrach Summer Music festival are always very special events. Ebrach is really little more than a small village in Upper Franconia, set amongst the agricultural land and extensive forest of the *Steigerwald*, but it boasts a large monastery (now a prison) with an immense Gothic abbey built in the 13th century, that dwarfs all around and is sumptuously decorated within in elaborate rococo style. It is in this abbey that most of the Ebrach Summer Bruckner performances have taken place and it is a source of wonder to visitors from abroad such as I that this vast venue, that would seem to be almost in the middle of nowhere, should be absolutely full for performances of works that would often fail to fill major concert halls in large European cities. This is the great achievement of the Philharmonie Festiva and their conductor, maestro Gerd Schaller, and the festival he set up, the Ebrach Musiksommer.

The loyal local followers and visitors from distant realms were treated to an especially challenging and especially interesting concert, in that this was the world premiere of a completion of the fourth movement of the Ninth Symphony of Anton Bruckner that Schaller had himself over a long period worked on and brought to performance, bringing to bear all his knowledge and experience as a renowned Bruckner conductor, a highly-praised full cycle of the symphonies already having been performed and issued on CD under his baton. As a four movement work the symphony is immense, this performance running to 90 minutes; even so, the audience sat silent and attentive throughout, hardly a cough or a rustle to be heard.

From my seat near the front between the choir stalls, courtesy of the generosity of the Ebrach Musiksommer, the opening quiet tremolo was more than usually alive and filled with energy, the ensuing horn theme paced with just a hint of urgency, so that there was sense of anticipation, purpose and direction from the start. The final wave of the coda to Gerd Schaller's completed finale is ushered in by a reminiscence of this opening, so the purposefulness of the opening had its destination to this coda wonderfully sign-posted and attained. This vast architectural overview was at the heart of Schaller's mighty performance and of his completion of the finale.

It was the overall shape and significance of the finale, as Schaller understands it, that was the guiding consideration with respect to how to make Bruckner's fragments and sketches performable. In conversation he was anxious to point out that this was just his view, his aim wasn't to produce a work with pretensions to being a definitive reconstruction, and certainly not drily academic, but to use what Bruckner had written in a way that made best musical and spiritual sense to him. In looking through the vast amount of material Bruckner left, he chose to use what he felt worked best, rather than necessarily the last version that Bruckner had penned, and in this his approach differs to that of SPCM and Prof. William Carragan - although I must emphasise that neither Gerd Schaller himself, nor Rainer Boss in the very fine programme notes*, make any comment on the other completions: there is no sense of competition here, merely another honest attempt to make the best of what there is.

Did it work? Well, first let me give some idea of the nature of the performance of the preceding movements. The opening movement was magnificent. It tended towards opulent and visionary nobility, rather than the austere, craggy sublimity of less humane performances. The pacing was exemplary, with the climaxes perfectly constructed to maximum effect, the excitement of perceptible accelerandos in the approach, a glorious shining clarity at the summit. Transitions, such as that between the second theme group, the Gesangsperiode, and third theme, handled with consummate skill that provided a sense of flow not always present in Bruckner performances. In the Gesangsperiode itself, Schaller resisted the tendency to exaggerated rubato, or ritardando between phrases, and so maintained an irresistible lyrical flow. This was, for me, Bruckner conducting of the highest order.

The orchestra responded to Schaller's approach with warmly lyrical playing, especially very characterful and communicative woodwind in their solos and ornamental material, sounding prominent over the wash of sound in the reverberant abbey acoustic. This cavernous echoing space is hard for a conductor and orchestra to cope with, but the Philharmonie Festiva have been long familiar with it, and Schaller knows how best to accommodate the music to it, to give it time and space where possible. The splendid timpanist made up in visual drama for the muddying effects of reverberation which undermined the transmission of his incisive

enthusiasm, creating a generalised rumble of his rhythmic precision. He will no doubt be heard to his best in the forthcoming CD on the Profil label, due out in Autumn 2016.

The opening of the Scherzo sounded really spooky, the pizzicato quite ghostly and the sustained woodwind able to hang on with enough power to give a wild shrill crescendo into which the fortissimo thumping stormed. It was admirably quick, and sounded not merely terrifying, but massively angry - as though Bruckner was not only presenting a terrifying dance of giants, but also in this last symphony letting out a lifetime's resentment of his treatment as a musician. The Trio's three-in-a-bar quavers had a lovely accented lilt to them that brought an unexpected smile to the music, and the violins phrased their fiendish spectral dance with a fleet-footed delicacy.

I have heard the strings of renowned orchestras slither and slide as they present the opening gesture of the Adagio, the leap of a ninth, and chromatic descent to the falling octave, but the Philharmonie Festiva strings were immaculate, the intervals precise and the shaping of this unsettling dramatic phrase nicely controlled. As with the first movement, there was a sense of forward movement, almost urgency, in Schaller's moulding of the tempo. The Wagner tubas' 'farewell to life' was sonorous but moderate, and the second theme had the appropriate warm though somewhat melancholy, flowing lyricism. The reverberant acoustic provided dissonant overlays that added to the unearthly nature of the landscape the music conjured up. There is an admirable dignified restraint to Schaller's approach to this movement, no Mahlerian *molto espressivo* or agonised sentimental indulgence, but the great dissonant climax built up until it towered like a threat of total meaninglessness. Thereafter a numbed winding down that maintained its tempo and refused to linger.

The orchestra retuned (as they had after the first movement), and the rumbling quiet drum roll crept in to launch the finale. The introduction and exposition of the first theme sounded more coherent than sometimes it does, with the various fragmentary motives in a steady crescendo leading to the fortissimo statement of first theme very convincingly. The acoustic meant that from my position the quieter violin lines were hard to pick up, so some of the very spare, hypnotic second theme material didn't register as clearly as I expect it to in the forthcoming CD. The big chorale of the third theme group rang out resplendently, as it did in its recapitulation. There seemed to be less disruption to progress from rather fussy changes in dynamic, and more frequent and effective use of fortissimo statements of the main theme material than I have noticed in other performances of other versions - though on one hearing and without a score I can't be sure. The fugue worked very well, with tension maintained and intensifying strongly. The recapitulation of the triplet horn theme, where Bruckner's completed bifolios cease, continues and builds and then falls quiet. After a pause the inverted main theme material that Bruckner sketched for the coda is used, a build up to a loud dissonant climax, silence, and then the symphony's opening theme embarks, with quotations from earlier symphonies, on the final climb to the D major breakthrough - the triumphant ending gloriously vanquishing dissonance, fear, anger and despair that had permeated the earlier movements.

I have been to many performances of the Ninth in a four movement version, and I have found them more dependent for their success upon the approach of the interpreters and performers than on the precise qualities of the completion of the Finale - they all sound generally like 'the finale of Bruckner's Ninth'. Philologists and musicologists may, and most certainly will, argue about the propriety and legitimacy of the particular use made of the sources available, and some will always dispute whether the attempt should even be made. I have always thought it worthwhile to be able to hear the symphony in the proportions which Bruckner conceived it, and to hear the surviving music that he struggled so hard to create for it in the context of a performing version of a whole movement. Gerd Schaller's completion and performance gained long applause, the conductor repeatedly called back to take a further bow, and to my ears succeeded wonderfully in its aim of presenting a completed Ninth as a great musical event and a shattering, revelatory spiritual journey.

Ken Ward

* Programme booklet available as PDF here:

http://www.gerd-schaller.com/images/aktuell/Programmheft_Dem_Lieben_Gott_185x265_Web.pdf

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