

Friday, April 06, 2012

Brucknerphobia

It's kind of ironic that this piece is out today, because a week ago, listening to Bernard Haitink coaching young conductors in Lucerne on Bruckner's Seventh, I ended up with the thing on the brain for 36 hours solid. It was the first time - and I mean the first *ever* - that I started thinking that there might be something more under the hot air after all... Anyway, [short version is in the paper now](#), but in case it is not quite outrageous enough for you, here is my original.

BRUCKNERPHOBIA

I don't like Bruckner. I may be a classical music journalist, a trained musician and so on, but I remain deeply, pathologically allergic to the Lumbering Loony of Linz. I've lost count of the well-meaning friends, relations and colleagues who have made it their personal mission to "convert" me. Alas, each attempt has been counter-productive. (*Right, a photo on a postcard of the LLL. Pretty, isn't he?*)

Know that feeling when you meet somebody at a party and you realise at once that the chemistry is all wrong between you? Everyone else is sucking up to him like crazy, so you're aware that either you are missing the point, or this person is Fearfully Important, or perhaps there's some instance of the Emperor's New Clothes going on. But one thing's certain: it's not going to work. That's me and Anton Bruckner.

An old music exam question helps to articulate the problem: "Brahms termed Bruckner's masterpieces 'symphonic boa constrictors'. Discuss." So, here goes. Bruckner's symphonies are stiflingly, crushingly oppressive. Once you're in one, you can't get out again. Spend too long in their grip and you lose the will to live. They are cold-blooded and exceedingly long, and they go round and round in circles. They swallow you whole, and you may need to go to sleep for three days afterwards because of the indigestion. The ratio of hot air to brain is heavily skewed towards the former. And though there may be a heart in there somewhere, it's hidden under a lot of very slithery scales.

A vast amount of Bruckner is in the concert schedules this season, and it's all Mahler's fault. Gustav Mahler had two anniversary years on the trot, with the result that orchestras have been playing his magnificent but limited output of symphonies continually since 2010. Now nobody wants to hear them again for the proverbial month of Sundays. Most full-scale symphony orchestras have been scared off Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert by "historically informed" ensembles; Schumann, Mendelssohn and Brahms knew the value of concision; Tchaikovsky is over-worn and Shostakovich sometimes requires extra spending on extra players for

unusual instruments. All that somewhat limits alternative Big Symphony choices to the efforts of Herr Anton.

People keep telling me to try again with Bruckner. But I have, time and again. Memories flood back. My first Bruckner symphony, No.4, which I attended with my parents, aged 14: even my father, who was a *Gramophone* subscriber and did like Bruckner, slipped into a gentle slumber. Or standing through the same symphony (giving it another chance, you see) at the Proms in a sweaty gallery amid a busload of very puzzled Italian teenage tourists. Or the time I sought refuge with a pal after some boyfriend trouble, and she put on the slow movement of the Symphony No.7 to console me, and I fear I rather distressed her by saying it sounded like 'Three Blind Mice' upside-down. This movement, by the way, was the music played on German radio when they announced the death of Hitler.

Reflections of composers' personalities usually emerge, in one way or another, in their music, and Bruckner (1824-1896) is no exception. He was obsessive compulsive. He had a counting mania – to the point that he would stand under a tree and count its leaves. It's not excessive to say that he was a deeply repressed and dysfunctional individual. He had little or no personal life – occasionally he tried to propose to teenage girls – and he's thought to have died a virgin. Legend suggests that he slept in protective clothing because he suffered "nocturnal emissions".

Now, the thing about good composers – and I don't doubt that Bruckner was one, even if I personally don't like the results – is that the better their techniques, the more their music is connected to their inner landscape, whether directly or metaphorically. What does Bruckner do when approaching a climax? He builds up and up, with frantically scrubbing strings and blaring brass, and repeats a phrase, again and again and again. He tries, tries and *tries* and then – he stops. He gives up and does something completely different instead. Make what you like of that.

He was profoundly religious, inspired by God, inspired also by nature. "That's the sound of the Alps! Can't you see them?" an enthusiast might exhort. But actually all I can see is the conductor's bald patch and a lot of tremolandi-playing musicians risking RSI. Monolithic and magisterial, cry the fans – though I'm still puzzling over why these qualities should be deemed attractive. On the contrary: devoid of affection, sensuality, humour, empathy, irony, indeed most qualities that usually add up to an intelligent, well-rounded human and humane personality, Bruckner sounds like the sad, emotionally stunted bloke in the anorak who lurks in the corner of the library reading sci-fi. Pitying a composer is fine, but you don't have to like his music just because you feel sorry for him.

When I was asked to choose my top "most boring masterpiece" for a round-up in *BBC Music Magazine* last year, I picked the Symphony No.7. It is the most frustrating of the lot, because in the opening minute and a half or so, good old Anton presents one of the most glorious inspirations ever to hit a composer and his audience between the eyebrows – only to fail quite spectacularly to follow it through. All that opening's sunrise-like, mystical beauty dissipates into plinky-plonky, counting-the-notes, closing-passage twiddles. And then you have to sit through the remaining 68 minutes.

One preternaturally brilliant colleague once listened with some sympathy when I confessed my Brucknerphobia. It's not you, he said; it's the conductors. It's the legacy of the Nazi era's preferred style – Hitler adored the works of Bruckner, who evinced plenty of 19th-century, church-supported, anti-Semitic leanings and came from state-approved Austrian "peasant stock". But, my friend went on, this style does

him a disservice. If today's maestri were not still possessed by the misconceived notion that Bruckner must sound monolithic and magisterial, they might slim down the sound, move on the pace, bring out the counterpoint – and Bruckner would be transformed. Go and hear Claudio Abbado, he said.

He may be right. But frankly, there'd be no point sitting in an Abbado concert, for which tickets are habitually like gold-dust, wishing I'd stayed home to do the ironing instead. I've been trying to like Bruckner for 30 years. I have not once succeeded. Life is just too short. Off to set up the ironing board now.