Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2016-2017 Mellon Grand Classics Season

April 30, 2017

MANFRED MARIA HONECK, CONDUCTOR

ANTON BRUCKNER — Symphony No. 8 in C minor (1890 revised version)

I. Allegro moderato
II. Scherzo: Allegro moderato — Trio: Langsam
III. Adagio: Feierlich langsam, doch nicht schleppend
IV. Finale: Feierlich, nicht schnell

This concert will be performed without intermission.

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

ANTON BRUCKNER
Symphony No. 8 in C minor (1884-1887)

Anton Bruckner was born September 4, 1824 in Ansfelden, near Linz, Austria, and died in Vienna on October 11, 1896. His Symphony No. 8 was written over a period of four years from 1884-87 and was premiered five years later by the Vienna Philharmonic on December 18, 1892, led by Hans Richter. The version performed today was revised by the composer in 1890. The Pittsburgh Symphony first played Bruckner's Symphony No. 8 on February 1, 1957, at Syria Mosque with music director William Steinberg. Most recently, the Pittsburgh Symphony performed the symphony with Manfred Honeck on January 23, 2010. The score calls for triple woodwinds plus contrabassoon, four horns, four tenor (Wagner) tubas, three trumpets, three trombones, bass tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, and strings. **Performance time: approximately 75 minutes**.

Anton Bruckner was an unlikely figure to be at the center of 19th-century music's fiercest feud. He was a country bumpkin — with his shabby peasant clothes, his rural dialect, his painful shyness with women, his naive view of life — in one of the world's most sophisticated cities, Vienna. Bruckner had the glory (and the curse) to have included himself among the ardent disciples of Richard Wagner, and his fate was indissolubly bound up with that of his idol from the time he dedicated his Third Symphony to him in 1877.

While "Bayreuth Fever" was infecting most of Western civilization during the last quarter of the 19th century, there was a strong anti-Wagner clique in Vienna headed by the critic Eduard Hanslick. Hanslick, a virulent spokesman against emotional and programmatic display in music, championed the cause of Brahms and never missed a chance to fire a blazing journalistic barb at the Wagner camp. Bruckner, teaching and composing in Vienna within easy range of Hanslick's vitriolic pen, was one of his favorite targets. He called Bruckner's music "unnatural," "sickly," "inflated" and "decayed," and intrigued to stop the performance of his works whenever possible. Bruckner felt that much of the rejection his early symphonies suffered could be attributed to Hanslick's scathing reviews. When honor and renown finally came to the composer late in his life, Austrian Emperor Franz Josef asked the old man what he would like more than anything else. Bruckner requested that the Emperor make Hanslick stop saying nasty things about his music. It is little wonder that Bruckner sent an unusual request to the Vienna Philharmonic Society after they had scheduled his Seventh Symphony for its Viennese premiere in the wake of the work's success in Germany. He thanked the Society for its kind consideration but asked them to withdraw the performance "because of the influential critics who would be likely to damage my dawning success in Germany." Though the work received the expected critical battering when it reached Vienna, the public was finally willing to grant the patient Bruckner his due, and he was recalled to the stage three or four times after each movement by the applause. Among the audience on that occasion was Johann Strauss the Younger, the King of the Waltz, who desperately wanted to write a successful grand opera and be recognized as a "serious composer." Strauss sent a telegram to Bruckner with the terse, but meaningful, message, "Am much moved — it was the greatest impression of my life."

The success of the Seventh Symphony after its 1884 premiere marked the beginning of Bruckner's wide recognition and gave a long-overdue boost to his self-esteem. He worked with enthusiasm and confidence on the next symphony in the series, begun in September of that year, though not completed until 1887. When the piece was finished, he sent it to Hermann Levi, the first conductor of Wagner's *Parsifal*, who had given a triumphant performance of the Seventh Symphony in Munich and whom the composer respected enough to address as "my artistic father." Levi, however, though he was an ardent admirer of Bruckner, claimed he could make neither head nor tail of the new work. When Bruckner was informed that Levi had rejected the score for performance, he was shattered. He considered the Eighth Symphony to be his greatest composition, and fully expected that it would follow its predecessor in making the rounds of the world's music capitals. The rejection plunged him into such a depressed state that he even considered suicide, but his staunch Catholicism prevented such an extreme action. All his self-confidence of the preceding three years vanished instantly, and he went through a period when he lost faith not only in the quality of the Eighth Symphony, but in the earlier symphonies as well.

With the poor advice of well-meaning friends and students who were trying to bring about more frequent performances of their master's music, Bruckner undertook a series of extensive revisions of most of his symphonies which resulted in some gross distortions of his original intentions. So time-consuming were these efforts that they prevented him from completing his Ninth Symphony, which was begun in 1887 and taken up many times during the last decade of his life, but left unfinished at his death in 1896. The revisions of the Eighth Symphony were many: extensive rescoring, a completely new trio section, much recomposing, and the deletion of a total of some 150 measures. Thus arose the confusion of the various Bruckner editions, since this Symphony exists in the original version of 1887 and the later, revised one of 1890, both of which have their virtues and supporters. Leopold Nowak issued editions of both versions, and Robert Haas made a composite edition containing what he considered the best parts of each.

"In this work is unfolded in full tonal grandeur the sublime Christian epic of human suffering, humility and transfiguration through faith that had been Bruckner's message from the outset. [No other work] had pierced so deeply into his soul for its roots," wrote Gabriel Engel. The emotional progression from the somber, mystical beginning, through the galvanic *Scherzo* and the visionary *Adagio*, to the exultation of the finale reflects Bruckner's belief in the movement of the Christian soul through the vale of tears into eternal delight. This musico-philosophical journey is descended from the great symphonies of Beethoven, especially the Ninth, and these two titanic masterworks share a similar conceptual framework.

The opening movement of the Eighth Symphony is filled with a sense of tragic struggle and somber acceptance. Next comes not the expected slow movement but rather a scherzo, since Bruckner realized, as had Beethoven in the "Choral" Symphony, that the massive first movement needed to be balanced and answered by music of lighter weight. There follows perhaps Bruckner's most moving and noble *Adagio*, a transcendent view in which the composer's inspiration seems to have captured a glimpse of the most exalted celestial regions. The finale is a sublime edifice of musical architecture and a ringing, life-affirming paean which closes with the blazing simultaneous restatement of the principal themes of all four movements.

"The essence of Bruckner's symphonies," wrote Deryck Cooke, "is that they express the most fundamental human impulses, unalloyed by civilized conditioning, with an extraordinary purity and grandeur of expression ... on a monumental scale." Bruckner, the simple peasant with his country dialect and his old-fashioned clothes, had seen heaven.

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The music of Bruckner is unique in the history of the art. He has been called the "Wagner of the Symphony," after the mortal whom he revered above all others, but this appellation implies that his work is more derivative than can be substantiated by the musical scores or by his life. Bruckner, scion of generations of Catholic peasants, passed his life in a sort of unending religious ecstasy and fervent humility that held him aloof from the exigencies of everyday life. Even Wagner, who was as mean and self-serving as any musician who ever lived, could not resist the guileless simplicity and utter sincerity of this extraordinary man. Bruckner's early works were mostly service music, plainly intended to praise God. When he turned to orchestral music later in life — his First Symphony did not appear until he was 42 — the intent and philosophy of his sacred compositions were transferred to the newly adopted genre. Bruckner feared constantly that his work would not please his Maker, that God would catch him lazing about rather than utilizing his time and talent to their fullest capacity. His unsuccessful race against death to finish the sublime Ninth Symphony, which he dedicated simply and appropriately "To God," is one of the most pitiable episodes in 19th-century music. On many days, he forced himself to take pen in hand when he hardly had strength enough to lift a spoon. Still, he felt he had not completely disappointed the Deity in everything. Bruckner often said (and probably constantly thought), "I will present to God the score of my *Te Deum*, and he will judge me mercifully."

The music created by such a visionary as Bruckner needs special care from the listener. His symphonies have often been called "cathedrals in sound," and the phrase is appropriate both in the mood that it conveys and in its implication of grandeur. Such works by their very nature must be large in sonority and temporal duration if the vision is to be realized — a twenty-minute Bruckner symphony would be as ludicrous as the massive baldachino of St. Peter's dropped onto the altar of the neighborhood parish church. It is this very striving toward the infinite, toward the transcendent, that raises Bruckner's best works to a plane achieved by few others in the history of music. Those willing to meet Bruckner on his own terms, to partake of the special hour that he grants the listener in each of his

symphonies, find an experience as fulfilling and deeply satisfying as any that the art has to offer. Wrote Lawrence Gilman, “He was and is a seer and prophet — one who knew the secret of a strangely exalted discourse, grazing the sublime, though his speech was both halting and prolix. He stammered, and he knew not when to stop. But sometimes, rapt and transfigured, he saw visions and dreamed dreams as colossal, as grandiose, as aweful in lonely splendor, as those of William Blake. We know that for Bruckner, too, some ineffable beauty flamed and sank and flamed again across the night.”