

Like a stone that fell from the moon

He was born on the fourth of September, 1824, in the village of Ansfelden in Upper Austria and he died in 1896 beating his hands to the music he was still composing in his head. Like his father before him he grew up destined to become a schoolmaster but his dream was to write music; motets, masses, and above all else symphonies. One after another they poured out of him, driven forth by a mind convinced that only music could capture the immensity of man's relationship with his creator.

Eccentrically provincial in his unfashionable suits, hair cropped close to the skull, his heart repeatedly broken, he was dismissed as a 'perpetual bumpkin' yet his music is astonishingly complex, evocative, absorbing. Rigorously schooled in orthodox music theory he nevertheless wrote music that the conductor Nicolaus Harnoncourt described as being "like a stone that fell from the moon". And his name was Anton Bruckner.

He first learned music from his father. Instruments of course, the cornet, the fiddle, but also the power of music. At high Mass in the village church, Bruckner sat beside his father at the organ, casting his glance backwards across the parishioners kneeling with hushed reverence, muttering their prayers, contemplating while his father used his hands and feet, stops and chords to fill the church with his music. The old Catholic Mass demanded quiet reverence from the congregation, only the organist was able to conjure out of pure music the authority of a voice crying out not only to the priest before the altar but even to God himself.

By the time he's reached his thirteenth year he had lost six of his siblings and then his father. Death came quicker then, carved its way across families – consumption, malnutrition, alcoholism, euphemistic doctors' reports, a family suddenly rendered broken and penniless. Young Anton would have been expected to bring his studies to an end, to find some form of wage labour, to support his family, but his mother, determined to lead her son to greater things, instead moved the family to the city of Linz, took work as a servant, and sent her son to the nearby monastery of St. Florian, one of the greatest of Austria's monasteries, renowned both for its spiritual piety and the glory of its music. He never forgot his mother's sacrifice and, typical of his

humility, in later life sought to repay her financially. Nor too would he ever forget St. Florian's.

Baroque architecture may not be to a modern architect's taste, too flowery, too frumpy; but Baroque churches have at least one great quality – they were built to hear and play music. At the great church of St. Florian's, brilliant white, splashed with gold and colour, emblazoned with frescoes glorifying Austria's victory over the Turk, Catholicism's victory over the heirs of Luther, Bruckner blended an adoration for music with an adoration for the faith of the monastery. He was as obsessive in his Catholicism, beginning a daily schedule of prayers that would last till the end of his life, as he was obsessive in his studies. Rising at 4am, he mastered not only the full repertoire of music for the liturgical year but also the art of improvisation, for it was the tradition that before each Mass began the organist would demonstrate his virtuosity for the spiritual edification of the assembling monks and laymen. At the age of 27 he was sufficiently accomplished to be offered the position of chief organist at St. Florian's but he turned it down to become a schoolmaster.

How very strange. He adored playing the organ and he adored St. Florian's. For the rest of life he returned over and over again to the monastery, and in his final will and testament insisted that he should be buried within a stone's throw of the mighty organ. We should note, however, by way of explanation that Bruckner was always absurdly impulsive, painfully modest and self-abasing. Possibly, he convinced himself that he was fit only to be a schoolteacher like his father. Possibly, he was unable to take the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to the Abbot, that would have been required for him to become a fully-fledged monk of the monastery. Nevertheless, at his first posting as a schoolmaster he was desperately unhappy, overworked, reduced to manual labour to supplement his miserly income. Thankfully, the Abbot of St. Florian's intervened and dispatched him to an altogether more welcoming village on the edge of Linz.

There, something remarkable happened. At the end of the school day with time on his hands, cut off from great distractions, he began to compose music. Not great music I should note, much of it lost, what survived unremarkable, but he had at least begun and the more he composed the more music formed in his mind. He equipped himself

with a notebook and for the rest of his life always carried one with him so that at any moment, as a theme came to him, he could jot it down and begin to mould it into music. And when he had an evening to spare he walked into Linz to hear the great concerts, the music of Bach and Haydn, Liszt and finally Wagner.

Whenever and wherever Wagner was played his music elicited strong reactions. It was vast in its scope, absolute in its ambition. In England there was scepticism, in France protests, and in Austria adoration clashed with condemnation. Some critics saw Wagner as the herald of a new epoch in music; others dismissed it as overblown nonsense. Bruckner was spellbound, adoring not only the rampant mythmaking but above all the sheer power of Wagner's music, its reach, its ambition. What the organ did in a church Wagner's orchestra did in a concert hall. Bruckner's skill earned him the post of chief organist at Linz Cathedral but his dream was not to play other people's music but to compose his own works, to realize what Wagner had realized.

But before he could write music he decided that he had to study it. Throwing himself under the tutelage of one of Austria's masters of music theory, the frankly tyrannical Simon Sechter, a man whose own personal form of relaxation was to wake up every morning and promptly compose an entirely new fugue! In spite of his eccentricities, Sechter knew the inner workings of music, how chords resolved, how an entire orchestra could be made to work in harmony and concord. The price of having Sechter as his tutor was that Bruckner was required to forsake any further composing. Instead he had to learn how the great composers of the past had made music work for them, beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with Palestrina, a particular focus on Haydn, and then, above all others, Bach. His studies lasted almost 14 years, during which time Bruckner wrote nothing, but Sechter gave Bruckner confidence in the same way that Wagner had given him ambition.

Then in 1868 to Vienna! Sechter died and the student was persuaded to apply for the post of his master. Bruckner, as always absurdly modest, could barely imagine himself assuming the role but his friends intervened, cajoled and persuaded the visibly nervous applicant to turn up for the final round of interviews. The interview itself took the form of an audition in front of four of Vienna's leading organists. In silence they handed Bruckner eight bars of music and asked him to improvise. More silence,

Bruckner pondering the music, a single, short, unremarkable, musical theme, his examiners already sensing that this awkward rustic had already crumbled under the pressure. And then – one of the great moments in music! Bruckner stepped over to the organ and began to play. First the eight bars written down for him, then again but with slight variations, then again but with counterpoint added, then again but with stops employed and Bruckner's hands and feet moving together, complexly, exploiting the full range of the organ. And so it went on - for hours. The four examiners rose, went outside and still Bruckner kept on playing. The wonders of his mind ceaselessly finding new possibilities, new inspiration in those eight jotted down bars. As one of the examiners declared later, "he should have examined us!"

Others in Vienna were less welcoming. Bruckner's style of dress, his clothes still ordered from a tailor he had met at St. Florian's, were utterly out of style with the fashions of the imperial capital. Too loose. Too grey. His accent betrayed his provincial background, his tastes – beer, meat and dumplings – clashed with the fashion for haute cuisine. In a city carefully delineated on class lines, suffused with a cosmopolitan character, brimming over with liberal sentiment and cultural experimentation, Bruckner's rural conservatism and intense Catholicism were an affront to the cultured Burgers of the coffee houses and concert halls. And rather than relenting, adapting, blending in – he added his own stylistic oddities, shaving his hair close to the head, growing a walrus of a moustache and frequently wearing a large, floppy black hat. Liszt was certainly embarrassed to be in his company, Wagner possibly likewise.

Initially, submerged in work, Bruckner could ignore the cutting snobbery and incomprehension of his peers. His appointment required a grueling schedule of lectures in musical theory at the University of Vienna. In addition Bruckner, who had always been terrified of ending up in poverty (he had taken out his first pension at the age of 21), obtained the post of chief organist at the imperial palace to supplement his income, and eagerly recruited additional students for private tuition. Mahler, Schmidt and Schoenberg were among his more notable students. Moreover, he had also begun to compose again and what compositions they were. As well as several masses, a Te Deum, and thirty religious motets he embarked on a series of ten remarkable symphonies that would become the crowning achievement of his career.

To witness his symphonies performed nowadays in concert halls is to witness an audience rapt with attention caught up in the wonder of Bruckner's compositions. Not so when they were first premiered. The most noted critics in Vienna, channeled their dislike of the country-bumpkin into savage criticism of his symphonies that set the audience on edge and drove them out of the auditoriums. Bruckner's symphonies were denounced as 'tiresome', 'barely understandable', 'empty and dull', 'Wagner without the lyrics', a persistent attitude that has unfortunately managed to trickle down even to some orchestral musicians in our own time. Matters were made worse by Bruckner's visible adoration of Wagner, making pilgrimages to Bayreuth, rushing to the train station to greet the master on a visit to Vienna, and humbly, tremblingly, dedicating his third symphony "To the eminent Excellency Richard Wagner the Unattainable, World-Famous, and Exalted Master of Poetry and Music, in Deepest Reverence". The leading critics of the time despised Wagner and thus by association they despised Bruckner.

It mattered little to the critics that Bruckner was equally humble and almost as slavish whenever he met any composer of renown - in the Vienna of the nineteenth century the music critics were king. It was the critics who encouraged concert goers to attend this or that performance, who explained the music or denounced it, who made a composers reputation or broke it. And they came awfully close to breaking Bruckner's.

At the premier in Vienna of his third symphony, the one he had proudly dedicated to Wagner, the critics staged their ambush. Putting the audience on edge with articles in the days running up to the concert that expressed doubts about Bruckner's abilities, as the actual concert progressed, the critics, their friends and their associates began to ostentatiously head for the exits, followed by almost the entirety of the audience and when Bruckner brought down his baton for the last time even the orchestra made a dash for the exits to the building. Bruckner, meanwhile, remained standing at the podium, alone - . One acquires a taste for the critics' savagery, when we look at Eduard Hanslick's review of the concert. Bruckner, he reported "was greeted with cheering and was consoled with lively applause at the close - by the fraction of the audience that stayed to the end...the Finale, which exceeded all its predecessors in

oddities, was only experienced to the last extreme by a little host of hardy adventurers.”

Out of the darkness, however, light! One of the few people who made up that ‘little host of hardy adventures’ was a music publisher who promptly offered to pay the costs of engraving, printing and publishing all Bruckner’s future output. Moreover, there were conductors in Vienna who were struck by the special genius of Bruckner’s playing. Arthur Nikish, Franz Schalk and Hans Richter, all stars of the Vienna concert halls, began to champion his music. Unfortunately, they also felt compelled to revise Bruckner’s works to suit their own tastes and ensure a more positive reception. His first symphony, for example, was so thoroughly abused that Bruckner felt compelled to cross it out from his numbering system – it is known as *Die Nullte*, (symphony number zero), and his tenth and final symphony is, therefore, confusingly known as ‘the ninth’. Not a single person of renown in Vienna was prepared to conduct the first drafts of Bruckner’s symphonies apart, of course, from Bruckner himself and his own nerves prevented him from ever again ascending the podium to conduct an orchestra. Thus, he was cursed to watch helplessly from the balcony as conductor after conductor changed a section here, dropped a section there. What else could he do?

In his desire to at least have his music played, Bruckner therefore adjusted his compositions to satisfy the tastes of his conductors and his friends. But it is a testament to his faith in his music that he also deposited an unchanged copy of his compositions with the National Library in Vienna before he showed it to anyone else. Thus, many of Bruckner’s symphonies exist in at least three versions. The version Bruckner originally composed, the version that was adjusted to suit the tastes of his associates, and a third version revised after the initial performances often on the advice of a particular conductor or critic. The variety of options available to any conductor, and the uncertainty about which versions should be regarded as definitive, is referred to by contemporary scholars as the ‘Bruckner probleme’ that remains ‘persistently alive’.

Take for example Bruckner’s eighth symphony, which he completed in 1887. Bruckner immediately deposited a completed version with the National Library, then on the advice of friends revised the symphony and produced a new version in 1890. It

was premiered, once again revised on the basis of the conductor's criticisms, and published anew in 1892. Then, extraordinarily enough, in 1939 the musicologist Joseph Haas had the temerity to declare that he had produced a fourth, and superior, version of the eighth symphony contrived by taking the best bits of the previous three editions and adding in the fruits of his own researches. What cheek... although until recently notable conductors around the globe were happy to proclaim that the Haas version was the definitive Bruckner eighth! Even, however, if we reject the Haas version we are still confronted with three sharply differing versions of the same symphony and the choice is not easy. If we choose the later versions then we allow Bruckner's genius to be diluted by the uncomprehending foibles of contemporary Vienna, but if we choose the version Bruckner deposited in the library we are denying Bruckner the ability to revise and improve his symphonies. Presently the first and rawest versions of Bruckner's symphonies are favored by younger conductors but among Brucknerians debate still rages.

And what of his music? It is impossible to talk about Bruckner without saying something about his music and yet... how can one describe masses, requiems, a corpus of symphonies with mere words? Critics steeped in music theory explain the striking power of Bruckner's music by pointing to the un-orthodox musical forms one finds in his music. Immersed in the conventions of music theory by his tutor Sechter, when Bruckner began his compositions in Vienna he promptly overturned everything that Sechter had taught him. A familiar tale. Great artists have to absorb the conventions of their discipline to know precisely how to break those very conventions. For myself, however, a painstaking deconstruction of Bruckner's innovative chord progressions does little to explain the power of his music.

Let me also suggest that we should discount Bruckner's own depictions of his music. They were geared for a contemporary cosmopolitan audience that would have found blatant religiosity yet another reason to dismiss the rustic's compositions. I would insist that his music must be seen as a series of profound religious compositions. Only the form, therefore, the structure of the music truly separates his symphonies from his masses and motets. It is appropriate that his unfinished ninth symphony is often coupled with a conclusionary Te Deum. There is no divide between the ecclesiastical and the secular in Bruckner's canon.

That is not to say that his symphonies are ‘masses in disguise’ or his masses are especially symphonic, but rather that the line between his secular and his ecclesiastical compositions is blurred by the sense that all Bruckner’s music is devoted to exploring the turmoil of man’s relationship with his creator, the depths of his forsakenness, the raptures of his redemption. At times the music ambles as we amble, at times it rages as we too rage. The clash of discordant chords resolves into pastoral themes then builds in intensity and falls away into nothing before rising again in wave after pounding wave. This is music as Bruckner felt it. It is his faith that is reflected, made real, in his music.

Sensitive critics have suggested that we should approach Bruckner’s symphonies the way we would approach a tour of a cathedral. The structure is vast, we need time to explore all that is on offer. Indeed as the conductor Werner Torkanowsky has suggested, ‘for Bruckner we must make time’! Moving around the edges of the cathedral we stop before frescoes, paintings, statues and altars, each of which evokes in us episodes, places, memories, echoes. We begin to notice common themes, an architectural motif that runs through the entire cathedrals construction. Yes, the building is vast but also in places intimate, suffused with grandeur but occasionally strikingly plain and away from the crowds almost silent. We pause in contemplation, and then continue our journey. And then, finding our way to the very centre of the cathedral we move up the nave, aware that there on the great altar lies the very purpose of the building – the place where the quality of the art, the lavishness of the ornamentation, reaches its zenith. Yet there too, studying the altar, we are struck by the simplicity of the bare stone table upon which the sacrifice of the mass will be re-enacted on a tapestry at once both grand and yet ineffably simple. Of course each may understand Bruckner in his own way but for me the phrase ‘cathedral of sound’ as never been more apt than as a depiction of one of Bruckner’s symphonies.

Gradually the wonder of Bruckner’s music won him the affection of a global audience although the good \burgers of Vienna continued to regard him as more of an eccentric than a genius. I find it remarkable that it was Cincinnati that provided the world premier of his eighth symphony, an indication perhaps that this mid-western American city proved to be more open to new music at that time than the world’s

greatest metropolises. Cincinnati also attracted Bruckner's attention when a conman suggested that, for a fee, the university here would provide the great composer with an honorary doctorate. Desperate for any award that would enhance his reputation among the Viennese snobs Bruckner eagerly handed over the money only to realize that he had been hoodwinked.

Late in his life he was bestowed with the Order of Franz Jozef by the Austrian Emperor, but by then it was too late. By 1894 he was already so sick that he had to be physically carried to concerts, and whatever admiration he had earned from his contemporaries in the Viennese coffee houses would have to be conveyed to him by his last few students who still came to Bruckner's bedside to watch him, with his eyes closed, desperately trying to complete the final movement of his final symphony – the unfinished ninth!

And there were other tragedies in Bruckner's life and in his legacy. Although he fell in love on innumerable occasions right up into his seventies, each of the adolescent peasant girls who attracted his attention rebuffed his attention save one who was protestant and thus un-marriable. Bruckner also suffered from a mania for counting things. He numbered every bar of music he ever wrote and occasionally would be overwhelmed with a determination to count the number of windows in a particular street, the number of four storied buildings in a particular town, or worse the number of leaves on a tree, the number of stars in the sky. Occasionally, the obsession with counting grew so intense that his friends could not bear to be around him and, combined with onslaughts of nervous exhaustion and abject depression led, on at least one occasion, to a complete nervous breakdown. That obsession with counting things that could not be counted matches his desire to capture with music those things that cannot be captured, and that alone is a quiet tragedy.

There is also tragedy in the way his music was exploited after his death. Although Bruckner had always studiously avoided political comment, he paid no heed to the great questions of the day, but his links with Wagner, and his parochial un-Viennese conservatism, appealed to subsequent generations of German nationalists who claimed him as their own. Nationalist and anti-Semitic newspapers in Vienna were the first to laud his work; his first biographer, August Gollerich, was an out-spoken anti-Semite; Hitler who came from the same region of upper Austria and felt as

uncomfortable as Bruckner among the Viennese saw in Bruckner a kindred spirit and venerated him. A special orchestra devoted to Bruckner's repertoire was established in Linz at the Führer's orders, a bust of Bruckner was placed in the Walhalla created by the Nazi's to commemorate Germany's greatest heroes, and following the 1938 Anschluss of Germany with Austria, one of Hitler's first acts was to pay a private visit to the monastery of St. Florian to stand before Bruckner's tomb. It should not, therefore, be a surprise that Hitler instructed German Army Radio to follow the announcement of his death in April 1945 with a performance of the second movement of Bruckner's seventh symphony, the most achingly beautiful of all Bruckner's adagions. Is it not, therefore, a tragedy that Bruckner, who dedicated every piece of music he wrote 'omni majorem dei gloria' should provide Adolf Hitler's requiem music?

Moreover, Bruckner's music was now indelibly bounded up with the Nazi regime, an off-putting feature for audiences in post-war Europe. Worse, the conductors who had championed him under the Nazis were now constrained by the slow process of de-Nazification. Not all of course. Herbert von Karajan, who joined the Nazi party twice, was spared the attention of the occupying forces and swiftly became a star of the concert circuit but Karajan's obsession was with Beethoven. Bruckner's greatest propagator had been Wilhelm von Furtwangler who was subsequently banned from conducting in the first post war years and was permanently prevented from taking up any international appointments. While Furtwangler was both sensitive and perceptive in his approach to Bruckner's music, the few recordings he has left for us are cursed by poor sound quality, after all one recording took place during a tour of Egypt and another took place during an air raid!

It was left to another relic of the Nazi era, Eugen Jochum, to assume the mantle as Bruckner's preeminent advocate. He persisted in recording every one of Bruckner's symphonies for Decca records and has even monopolized the performances of Bruckner available on YouTube. This is a pity for under Jochum's ponderous direction, the overriding feeling of the listener is that both conductor and orchestra have been trapped rather than liberated by the power of Bruckner's music.

Happily, over the past two decades, however, a renaissance has taken place. The impressive Anton Bruckner Institute Linz has re-thought and re-researched his life

and work, detaching Bruckner from both Wagner and German nationalism; Their scholarship has convincingly demonstrated that Bruckner was...well... Bruckner. Moreover, in rediscovering and reconstructing Bruckner's original scores, the unaltered, unadulterated versions of his symphonies, new conductors have been able to finally allow Bruckner to speak for himself rather than through the alterations of his contemporaries. To listen to the performances of Nicolas Harnoncourt, Yakov Kreizberg, Simone Young, or Marcus Bosch is a revelation. In their conducting they bring forth the full extremes of Bruckner's compositions. Truly, it is like nothing else you will have heard, I promise you. Choose a CD of his latter symphonies, make time, close your eyes to the music, allow the mind to wander, and listen to the stone that fell from the moon.