

## Symphony No. 8 in C minor

### Anton Bruckner

It was not until 1864, when he was 40 years old, that Anton Bruckner composed a work he considered a fully mature product — his D-minor Mass. The first of his nine canonical symphonies followed in 1865–66.

The son of a schoolmaster in the village of Ansfelden, Anton Bruckner grew up surrounded by music, since Upper Austrian schoolmasters were expected to double as parish organists. When his father fell ill in the autumn of 1836, young Bruckner filled in as organist in the local church.

The elder Bruckner died the following June. That very day Bruckner's mother swept him off to the nearby abbey of St. Florian, where he continued his studies. He would never really break away from St. Florian. Following his student years there, he served for a decade on the school's music faculty. Even after he left to seek his fortune in nearby Linz, in 1856, and eventually Vienna, where he moved in 1868, Bruckner returned for regular visits. Today visitors will find his tomb in the abbey's crypt, directly beneath the organ loft in which he spent countless hours starting at age 13.

By the 1880s Bruckner had staked a firm place in Austrian musical life. He had distinguished himself especially as an organist (almost peerless as an improviser on that instrument) and had kept busy teaching harmony, counterpoint, and organ at the Vienna Conservatory. He had confirmed his sympathies with Wagnerian aesthetics, thereby earning a place on the blacklist of Vienna's most influential music critic, the virulent anti-Wagnerite Eduard Hanslick, who let flow a stream of malicious ink when each new Bruckner opus appeared. He was growing all the while into an eccentric personality, an odd mixture of naïveté and

political awareness, an obviously gifted figure who alternated between conviction and self-doubt, one who was generally successful in his undertakings but who entered into unknown professional waters with great reluctance.

The Seventh was the only one of Bruckner's symphonies to be greeted as an unquestionable triumph. It was successful at its 1884 premiere in Leipzig, conducted by Arthur Nikisch, and several months later in Munich, led by Hermann Levi. The latter was one of Bruckner's most sympathetic supporters, and the composer accordingly sent him the Eighth Symphony soon after finishing it, after three years' work, in September 1887. "At long last the Eighth is finished," he wrote, "and my artistic father must be the first to know about it. ... May it find grace!"

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### IN SHORT

**Born:** September 4, 1824, in Ansfelden, Upper Austria

**Died:** October 11, 1896, in Vienna, Austria

**Work composed:** 1884 through August 10, 1887; revised from April 1889 to March 1890; although no name is included in the score, correspondence reveals that Bruckner dedicated this symphony to Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria

**World premiere:** December 18, 1892, in Vienna, by the Vienna Philharmonic, Hans Richter, conductor

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** November 28, 1919, Josef Stransky, conductor

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** October 28, 2014, Alan Gilbert, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 80 minutes

But Levi demurred; the new piece baffled him. The stunned Bruckner sank into depression and busied himself for several years revising his existing symphonies — encouraged in this effort by several well-meaning students — rather than producing anything genuinely new. In 1890, assisted by his pupil Joseph Schalk, he produced a revision of the Eighth Symphony that was much altered in both structure and instrumentation. Al-

though Levi was not to introduce it, the piece did score considerable success when it was finally premiered, in 1892, under the baton of Hans Richter.

Levi's bewilderment was not implausible: this is one of Bruckner's two longest symphonies (along with the Fifth), it is in no hurry to make its points, and its powerful grandeur can seem intimidating. One might say that the Eighth Symphony finds

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## About the Edition

Bruckner's symphonies present unusual challenges due to a plethora of performing editions. The problem essentially derives from the bewilderment with which most audiences greeted Bruckner's scores when they were new. Hoping to make his music more palatable to listeners, three of his students — Joseph Schalk, his brother Franz Schalk, and Ferdinand Löwe — proposed revisions, sometimes very extensive ones, that might "normalize" their teacher's symphonies. As a rule, Bruckner placed his imprimatur on their alterations, if sometimes with misgivings.

The case of the Eighth Symphony is emblematic. Bruckner's original version, completed in August 1887, was not performed when it was new; it was not even published until 1973, when it was first heard in its entirety. Bruckner's 1890 revision, carried out with the assistance of Joseph Schalk, was the score heard at the work's premiere, in 1892. When the International Bruckner Society began preparing "official" Bruckner editions during the 1930s, editor Robert Haas made a startling decision vis-à-vis the Eighth. Rather than follow either version, he settled on a version that drew on aspects of both, maintaining what are widely considered improvements in the 1890 text while holding on to certain aspects of the original score and eliminating many changes that seemed to derive from Schalk rather than from Bruckner. Musically, it's an effective edition but its musicological basis is wobbly.

After World War II, Haas was succeeded at the International Bruckner Society by Leopold Nowak, who brought about a new "official" edition of the Eighth Symphony in 1955, hewing to the 1890 version and eliminating only a few Schalk touches that could be clearly identified. In 1994 the Nowak edition was reissued with corrections of various errors that had been discovered during the intervening four decades. There is no "right" version of Bruckner's Eighth Symphony, but Nowak's is at least unassailable on musicological grounds and it is the one used in this performance.

*Bruckner's first sketch of the finale from his Symphony No. 8*



Bruckner at his most extreme, inviting — and even demanding — a strong reaction; yet there is no overlooking the authenticity of his distinctive sort of expression.

**Instrumentation:** three flutes, three oboes, three clarinets, three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), eight horns (two doubling tenor Wagner tubas), two doubling bass

Wagner tubas), three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, three harps, and strings.

**Edition:** by Leopold Nowak, published in 1955 (with a corrected edition in 1994) by the International Bruckner Society, Vienna, following the text of the composer's revised score of 1890

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## Views and Reviews

Despite the success Bruckner's Seventh Symphony had scored in Leipzig and Munich, the composer was nervous about the premiere of his Eighth, which took place in Vienna on December 18, 1892, with Hans Richter on the podium. Sure enough, critic Eduard Hanslick let loose in predictable fashion, condemning not only the work and its composer but also the program notes (by Joseph Schalk) and the appreciative audience:

For Bruckner, the concert was certainly a huge success. Whether Hans Richter performed a similar favor for the subscribers by devoting an entire program to the Bruckner symphony is doubtful. The program seems to have been chosen only for the sake of a noisy minority.

However, others found much to admire. Five days after the premiere, composer Hugo Wolf wrote to another composer, Emil Kauffmann:



Bruckner and his critics, illustration by Otto Böehler (1847–1913)

This Symphony is the creation of a Titan, and in spiritual vastness, fertility of ideas, and grandeur even surpasses his other symphonies. Notwithstanding the usual Cassandra prophecies of woe, even from those in the know, its success was almost without precedent. It was the absolute victory of light over darkness, and the storm of applause at the end of each movement was like some elemental manifestation of Nature. In short, even a Roman Emperor could not have wished for a more superb triumph.