

Symphony No. 4 in E-flat major, Romantic

Anton Bruckner

By the time he reached the period of his Fourth Symphony in 1874, Anton Bruckner had staked a firm place in Austrian musical life. He had distinguished himself especially as an organist, an almost peerless improviser on that instrument by all reports. In 1855 he had sought out the best harmony and counterpoint teacher he could find, Simon Sechter, to help him remedy what he perceived as his deficiencies in those areas, and after six years of what was largely a correspondence course (Sechter was in Vienna, Bruckner in Linz) he moved on to pursue similar enrichment in the fields of orchestration and musical form from another esteemed pedagogue, Otto Kitzler. Bruckner grew increasingly infatuated with the music of Wagner, and in 1865 he traveled to Munich (at the composer's invitation) to attend the premiere of *Tristan und Isolde*, the first of several Wagner premieres he would witness.

On a personal level, Bruckner was growing into a sort of eccentric personality, an odd mixture of naïveté and political awareness, an obviously gifted figure who alternated between absolute conviction and self-doubt, who was generally successful in his undertakings but who entered into unknown professional waters with the greatest reluctance.

The following year, Bruckner finally moved to the musical capital of Vienna, succeeding his teacher Sechter as professor of harmony and counterpoint at the Vienna Conservatory, where he also took on organ pupils. The University of Vienna welcomed him to its faculty, too, although the powerful music critic Eduard Hanslick, already on the University's staff, did what he could to prevent it. Hanslick would become a thorn in the composer's side, gleefully condemning practically every note Bruckner wrote — presumably the better to promote the music of

Johannes Brahms, the perceived Bruckner rival whom Hanslick adored.

Despite the lack of critical support, it was during his first few years in Vienna that Bruckner finally flowered into a dedicated composer of symphonies. He had, in fact, completed a “Study Symphony” in F minor and his Symphony No. 1 in C minor while still living in Linz, but the artistic stimulation of Vienna encouraged a flow of new works: the D-minor Symphony that he later withdrew (and which is occasionally revived under the curious rubric “Symphony No. 0”) in 1869 (plus a Symphony in B-flat major similarly retracted later that year); the Symphony No. 2 in C minor in 1871–72; Symphony No. 3 in D minor in 1872–73; Symphony No. 4 in E-flat major in 1874; and the Symphony No. 5 in B-flat major in 1875–76. Apart from the “Study Symphony” and the “No. 0,” each of these would undergo considerable revision.

In Short

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

Died: October 11, 1896, in Vienna

Work composed: January 2–November 22, 1874; score reworked January 18, 1878–June 5, 1880; further changes, effected in 1886, are not reflected in the edition used in this performance

World premiere: February 20, 1881, with Hans Richter conducting the Vienna Philharmonic in the original version of 1880

New York Philharmonic premiere: March 30, 1910, Gustav Mahler, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: December 12, 2009, Christoph von Dohnányi, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 67 minutes

Bruckner's Fourth Symphony is the only one of his nine to which he gave a subtitle. Although he was not essentially a Romantic composer — not, at least, in the sense that such figures as Weber, Schumann, Mendelssohn, and Wagner embodied the ideals — his *Romantic* Symphony does evoke Teutonic Romanticism in its allusions to the hunt and, by extension, to its brilliant spotlighting of the instruments most associated with that pursuit, the horns. Some years afterward, Bruckner penned a scenario that seems to have been crafted more to justify the subtitle rather than as a “plot” that inspired him during composition. Still, it remains interesting, coming from a bastion of “absolute music” at a time when “program music” was in full flower. Here's how he described the first movement:

Medieval city — dawn — morning calls
sound from the towers — the gates open
— on proud steeds the knights ride into
the open — woodland magic embraces

them — forest murmurs — bird songs —
and thus the Romantic picture unfolds.

He described the second movement as a “rustic love scene” in which “a peasant boy woos his sweetheart, but she scorns him.” The *Scherzo* became “The Hunting of the Hare,” with the *Trio* titled “Dance Melody During the Huntsmen's Meal,” and the *Finale*, a “Folk Festival.”

This performance includes the so-called “Hunt” *Scherzo*, replacing the scherzo Bruckner originally composed for this work, and even apart from that movement the horns are so often prominent as to practically define the sonic world of this piece.

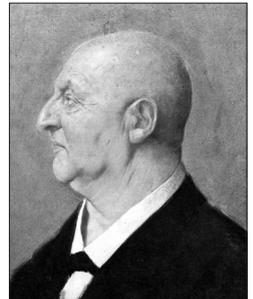
Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings.

Edition: by Leopold Nowak for the International Bruckner Society

About the Edition

The symphonies of Bruckner present more than the usual challenges to those who would present them due to a plethora of performing editions. The problem essentially derives from the bewilderment with which many listeners greeted Bruckner's scores when they were new. Hoping to make his music more palatable to listeners, three of his students — Josef Schalk, his brother Franz Schalk, and Ferdinand Löwe — came up with revisions, sometimes very extensive ones, that would “normalize” their teacher's symphonies, bringing them more in line with what audiences would recognize as “correct” music.

Around 1930 musicians began investigating what Bruckner had actually written, as opposed to what they found in the Schalk-Schalk-Löwe reworkings. New editions based on the composer's original manuscripts began to be issued, principally by the editors Robert Haas and, somewhat later, Leopold Nowak, and (most recently) Benjamin Korstvedt. At least seven versions of the score for the Fourth Symphony have been presented by editors as “authentic.” None is definitive; they track different states of the score, with the variations among them reflecting the credibility their editors give to the historical circumstances surrounding the piece. The edition used in this performance is a much-played version published by Leopold Nowak, under the auspices of the International Bruckner Society.



Bruckner, in a portrait by
Hermann von Kaulbach,
ca. 1895