

Bruckner Symphony No.9

London Symphony Orchestra

Bernard Haitink



alto

Anton Bruckner (1824-96)
Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, WAB 109

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| ❑ 1 | I. Feierlich, misterioso | 27:31 |
| ❑ 2 | II. Scherzo. Bewegt, lebhaft -
Trio. Schnell – Scherzo | 11:52 |
| ❑ 3 | III. Adagio langsam, feierlich | 27:38 |

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Anton Bruckner (1824-96) began work on his *Ninth Symphony* in August 1887. He was still working on it on the day he died, nine years later. Why did it take him so long? For one thing, his physical health was failing; worse still, there was a marked increase in the nervous, obsessive behaviour that had worried his friends in the past. He had also loaded himself with professional distractions: extensive revisions of the *First*, *Second*, *Third* and *Eighth symphonies* and the *Masses in E minor* and *F minor*, and the composition of two substantial choral works: the 150th Psalm and the cantata *Helgoland*.

Then there was the sheer magnitude of the task in hand. Bruckner meant the *Ninth Symphony* to be a summing up of his life's achievements (including quotations from some of his most successful works). There was also an implied tribute to one of his musical gods. In one of his lectures at the Vienna University, Bruckner told the class: 'I'll write my last symphony in D minor, just like Beethoven's Ninth. Beethoven won't object.' Friends and colleagues remembered similar remarks. So, where most composers would have shied away from inviting comparison with Beethoven's mighty *Ninth* (the 'Choral' Symphony), Bruckner actively encouraged it! But there was more to this than arrogance. The dedication of the symphony 'dem lieben Gott' ('to dear God') shows that Bruckner saw the *Ninth* as a special expression of his life-long Roman Catholic faith – perhaps not as unquestioning as some have claimed, but certainly a potent guiding force. Richard Heller, Bruckner's doctor during his last 18 months, felt sure that Bruckner 'had drawn up a contract with his "dear God"'. If He willed that the symphony, which was indeed to be a hymn of praise to God, should be finished, He should give Bruckner the time he needed for his task; if he died too soon and his musical offering was left incomplete, God had only himself to blame.'

Tragically, Bruckner failed to complete the *Ninth Symphony*. The immense finale, nearly complete in sketch-score, seems to tail off not long before the end. This has led some writers to suggest that Bruckner didn't know how to end the symphony – that the triumphant coda he intended couldn't be made to work, and that

the world is probably better off with the symphony as it stands: a magnificent three-movement torso. That may be a comforting belief, but it's almost certainly groundless. Dr Heller describes how Bruckner 'went over to the piano and played me parts of the symphony with shaking hands, but with undiminished accuracy and strength. I have often regretted the fact that I cannot play or write down music after one hearing, because then I might be able to give some idea of the end of the *Ninth Symphony*'.

Heller's testimony isn't unique. Bruckner's biographer Max Auer claimed that he saw a page of the score – at or near the end of the finale – in which all the main themes appear 'piled on top of each other, as in the finale of the *Eighth Symphony*'. Alas, this crucial page has vanished, and we can only guess as to what its effect might have been. Nevertheless, the three fully orchestrated movements Bruckner did complete form a remarkably satisfying musical experience – like the two surviving movements of Schubert's famous '*Unfinished*' Symphony.

The structure of this symphonic torso – two long, slow-paced movements framing a shorter, faster *Scherzo* – is well balanced. The climax of the *Adagio* is powerful enough to form the high-point of an hour-long symphony, and its calmly resigned coda, with its fleeting references to earlier works, can be seen as a kind of answer to the agonised probing of the first movement and the nightmare visions of the *Scherzo*. When Bruckner's pupil Gustav Mahler ended his *Ninth Symphony* with an intensely striving, ultimately resigned *Adagio*, he may well have had the example of Bruckner's *Ninth* in mind.

Agonised probing, nightmare visions – this is not the kind of language one readily associates with 'a hymn of praise to God'. But the spiritual journey of the *Ninth Symphony* in its three-movement form is a very dark one. It is hard to resist the impression that thoughts of death left a deep imprint on the character of this symphony. Nowhere else in Bruckner's output does one encounter such disturbingly ambiguous harmonies and tortured melodic lines – the opening theme of the *Adagio*, with its upward 'missed octave' leap, is as pained as anything in Mahler. And yet the musical

architecture still has that grand, spacious feeling one finds in the earlier symphonies – the quality that has led to Bruckner's symphonies being described as 'cathedrals in sound'.

In the two big outer movements, the underlying current is slow, however animated the musical surface may appear. To newcomers, the first movement's structure may seem baffling: there are so many themes, so many sudden changes of direction that the comforting outlines of what textbooks call 'sonata form' (a musical form central to European music in the 18th and 19th centuries) can be difficult to make out. On top of that, there are alarming moments when the tonal foundations seem to shake under our feet – all this seems closer to the later Mahler, or even to Berg. The pounding rhythms and grinding dissonances of the central Scherzo have invited comparison with Bartók, Prokofiev or Shostakovich.

The Adagio brings music of true Brucknerian nobility –especially the hymn-like elegy for the four so-called 'Wagner tubas' (more like tenor and bass horns than tubas) after the first climax. There are moments of radiance amid the anguished crescendos and long wintry melodies. But the final climax contains the most anguished music in the whole symphony, with trombones, tuba and the other bass instruments bellowing out the Adagio's opening 'missed octave' violin theme, *fff*. The culminating discord is left hanging in the air, unresolved. But then comes the coda, bringing at last a sense of peace and tonal stability. This may be a long way from the triumphant hymn with which Bruckner apparently intended to close his *Ninth* and last Symphony; it may only be the end by default – yet it remains one of the most moving endings in symphonic literature.

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During a lengthy career **Bernard Haitink** (born 1929 in Amsterdam) became universally recognised as one of the greatest conductors of all time. He began his musical career studying violin and conducting (including lessons with Ferdinand Leitner in 1954-55) and made his conducting debut in 1954 with the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra. Two years later he stepped in for Giulini in front of the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam (later the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra), becoming their first conductor following the sudden death of Eduard van Beinum in 1959 and then, after a brief period working jointly with Eugen Jochum, he was appointed Principal Conductor until 1988.

Haitink was also Chief or Principal Conductor of several other orchestras including the London Philharmonic (1967-79), Boston Symphony (1995-2004) and the Staatskapelle Dresden (2002- 4) and held positions with many other leading orchestras including the London Symphony, Berlin Philharmonic and Chicago Symphony Orchestras. A highly-regarded operatic conductor, Haitink was Musical Director of Glyndebourne Festival Opera and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden.

Haitink's considerable discography includes symphonic cycles including those by Bruckner, Mahler, Brahms, Beethoven, Vaughan Williams, Shostakovich and Tchaikovsky whilst other orchestral highlights include works by Debussy and Richard Strauss. Amongst his operatic discography is an acclaimed *Ring* and a suitably dark *Don Giovanni* that perfectly complements Peter Hall's memorable production at Glyndebourne.

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