

# BRUCKNER'S Symphonies

*To mark the composer's 200th anniversary we talked to ten of today's leading conductors of his music about one symphony each. The result is a fascinating insight into one of the most significant of all symphonic cycles*

To get to the heart of what Anton Bruckner's symphonies mean, we've turned for insight to those most immersed in their scale and spirituality – we've spoken to one of today's leading Bruckner conductors about one symphony each.

The criteria for choosing conductors to interview was that they had made admired recordings of the symphony concerned – and it's worth nothing that, while each interview is about one particular work, many of them have recorded, or are recording, complete cycles, an overarching experience that permeates their specific focus. What we have thus ended up with is a collection of highly personal reflections on what Bruckner's music means to those closest to it.

Between them, our writers Christian Hoskins, Henry Kennedy and Michael McManus have spoken to a range of conductors spanning approach and age. In the order of work addressed, starting with a joint article about symphonies 0 and 00, they are: Marcus Bosch, Gerd Schaller,

Riccardo Muti, Markus Poschner, François-Xavier Roth, Christian Thielemann, Simone Young, Lahav Shani, Herbert Blomstedt and Andris Nelsons. We've listed these conductors' recordings below, and we urge you to listen to their interpretations as a companion to reading their interviews, hearing how their thoughts and theories translate into performance.

Key themes come through: the philosophical nature of Bruckner's work, the religious roots, how innovative he was, but also just how difficult it can be to fully understand and appreciate his achievement, let alone perform it. With Bruckner, versions and editions are invariably part of any discussion of his music, and where relevant to the way we should think about his music, this aspect too is discussed.

'Every one of the Bruckner symphonies has its own cosmos' says Gerd Schaller in his discussion of Symphony No 1. We believe the following pages are a valuable beginning to Bruckner's anniversary year, a catalyst to listening in a more informed and inspired way.

## THE SYMPHONIES EXPLORED

Our Bruckner interviewees on record



**Symphonies Nos 0, 'Nullte'; No 00, 'Study Symphony'**  
Aachen Symphony Orchestra / Marcus Bosch  
Coviello COV31315 (4/14)



**Symphony No 1 (Vienna version, 1891)**  
Philharmonie Festiva / Gerd Schaller  
Profil PHI9084 (4/20)



**Symphony No 2 (1877 version, ed Nowak)**  
Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra / Riccardo Muti  
DG 479 8180GH2 (3/18)



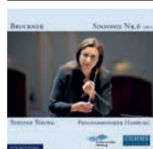
**Symphony No 3 (1873 version, ed Nowak)**  
ORF Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra / Markus Poschner  
Capriccio C8086 (A/22)



**Symphony No 4, 'Romantic' (1874 version, ed Nowak)**  
Cologne Gürzenich Orchestra / François-Xavier Roth  
Myrios MYR032 (5/23)



**Symphony No 5**  
Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra / Christian Thielemann  
Sony Classical 19658 70614-2 (10/22)



**Symphony No 6**  
Hamburg Philharmonic Orchestra / Simone Young  
Oehms OC687



**Symphony No 7 (ed Nowak)**  
Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra / Lahav Shani  
Warner Classics 5419 76196-6 (8/23)



**Symphony No 8**  
Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra / Herbert Blomstedt  
Accentus ACC80575 (11/13)



**Symphony No 9 (1894 version, ed Nowak)**  
Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra / Andris Nelsons  
DG 483 6659GH2 (8/19)

# BRUCKNER

## Symphony No 3

INTERVIEW BY CHRISTIAN HOSKINS

### MARKUS POSCHNER *seeks the truth behind this early symphony*

To approach the early symphonies of Bruckner is always an extraordinary challenge. From early on, these works have been associated with cathedrals of sound and sacred gestures, but I always had the feeling that there must be a different truth to be found in these early scores. Even today, there are still many clichéd ideas and misunderstandings in terms of tempo, sound, articulation, dynamics and phrasing. It seems to me that everyone automatically switches into 'Bruckner mode', consisting of *sostenuto* playing, rough dynamics and a pseudo-religious monumental approach. To understand his music better, it's important to remember that the polyphonic works of Bach, the Masses and symphonies of Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, and the operas of Wagner and Berlioz were Bruckner's most important inspirations during his period of self-discovery. We should also never underestimate the influence on his music of the Upper Austrian folk tradition of Ländler, polkas and waltzes. The opposing aspects of polka and chorale, both symbols of this world and hereafter, are particularly formative in the Third Symphony. Our task is therefore to understand the scope of what Bruckner tried to say, to understand what's beneath his music, and to accept that this might be completely different from symphony to symphony.

It's nothing short of astonishing that between 1863 and 1875 Bruckner composed six symphonies, all of which were neglected for many years. During this time, his idea of sound gradually shifted from the acoustic of the church interior, with its long reverberation time, to that of the concert hall. At the same time, the stylistic influence of the organ was replaced by the more varied influence of the symphony orchestra, notably the large-scale ensemble of more than 20 first violins and double woodwinds which he heard in Vienna. In this context, the Third Symphony, especially the first version of 1873, stands as being one of the most experimental of his entire output. Bruckner proved himself to be frighteningly modern, his use of collage techniques, sound composition and minimalist-style rhythms already pointing to the 20th century. Unfortunately, few interpreters to date have dared execute the symphony at the right tempo, in neither the first movement nor the finale, where the technical limits of the orchestra are quickly reached.

It was none other than Mahler who declared Bruckner's changes unnecessary and persuaded him to return to the earlier version after the composer edited the symphony twice, in 1877 and 1889, owing to its ongoing lack of success. Eduard Hanslick wrote uncomprehendingly about the symphony in 1885: 'It remains a psychological mystery how this gentlest and most peaceful of all people – he is no longer one of the youngest – becomes an anarchist at the moment of composing.' From our point of view today, the Third could be described as his symphony of destiny. On the one hand, he experienced his greatest public defeat and humiliation in 1877 during its first performance in Vienna; but on the other hand, he paved



Markus Poschner: for him, it's important to approach each symphony discretely

compositional paths with it which made his unique symphonic development possible. His intensive engagement with the music of his great role models Beethoven and Wagner allowed him to find an approach to symphonic tradition that gave us the later great symphonies. To the listeners of the time, however, this symphony was a failure. It seemed long, complicated, confusing, unmelodic, and full of constant interruptions and endless quotations. And this translates to the challenges for a conductor today: how to deal with its length; how to manage its many interruptions; how to create an arc; and how to maintain tension.

*His works are full of puzzles and mystery, which is probably why we're so fascinated by them in today's brightly lit world*

Even Bruckner's early symphonies are for me a kind of window to another world, a world beneath the surface. His works are full of musical puzzles, mystery and depth, which is probably why we are so fascinated by them in today's brightly lit world. It is music of incredible natural beauty and songfulness, of great warmth and humanity, ultimately incomparable with anything else in his era. An eternal mystery remains: how could someone from such a humble rural background – who throughout his life only experienced rejection for his compositions – create music of such emotional foresight and insight, of such astonishing greatness? However, Bruckner's view of things is fundamentally different from that of other composers. It seems to me that he looks directly upwards and therefore inwards. Beethoven's gaze goes straight ahead, straight into the eyes of those in power. Wagner's gaze descends far into the depths of the human soul and subconscious. Bruckner's looks into the infinite, and yet is still deeply connected to Upper Austrian folk music traditions, something which is unique in the history of music. **G**