

# EARLY BRUCKNER AND LATE



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By WINTHROP SARGEANT

**F**OR SOME odd reason, doubtless connected with the peculiar characteristics of his music, the people who concern themselves with Anton Bruckner seem to constitute a group of specialists somewhat similar to those who devote themselves to Elizabethan madrigals or the novels of Anthony Trollope. For them, Bruckner's music is a world in itself, subject to slightly different laws from those that apply to the work of other composers, and few of them will admit that he has an exact equal anywhere else in the symphonic art. This tendency toward specialization is also to be found among those who conduct his symphonies. Some of the greatest conductors—Toscanini was an example—have no feeling whatever for the Bruckner style, and some lesser ones seem to shine magnificently as Bruckner interpreters. The problem of Bruckner interpretation depends, of course, to a great extent on personal sympathy. It also depends on a knack of seizing the proper tempos and integrating them into the complex fabric of a Bruckner score so that what otherwise might appear to be a diffuse and rambling structure becomes a logical whole. The recent crop of European Bruckner recordings contains a number of fine examples of this knack, and one or two of them are of the sort that the Bruckner enthusiast will treasure as definitive re-creations of the Austrian master's work.

Lovro von Matačić's recording of the Fourth Symphony with the Philharmonia Orchestra of London (followed by the Scherzo from Bruckner's Symphony No. "0" and his Overture in G Minor; Angel Records, 3548-B) is, in its way, one of the most extraordinary Bruckner recordings that I have ever heard. Mr. von Matačić is, I understand, a Yugoslav. He has a very delicate sense of phrase-

ological elegance and a feeling for sensuous tone that is not often found among Germanic conductors. In the Philharmonia Orchestra he has one of the world's most brilliant and sensitive ensembles to work with, and the result of this combination of temperamental and technical virtues is that Bruckner comes out sounding almost like Chopin at the hands of some Slavic virtuoso. The effect is, to say the least, arresting. The entire performance is wonderfully smooth and silken, and should be liked even by those who do not ordinarily like Bruckner. Speaking as a specialist, I have some fault to find with the slow movement which is a bit too sentimentalized for my taste, and lacks the stately ruggedness that a more sustained tempo would have given it. But the remaining movements are done with amazing eloquence, and, on the whole, the recording seems to me the most ingratiating one currently available of this relatively popular and much-recorded symphony. In the Scherzo from the little Symphony No. "0" and the Overture in G Minor Mr. von Matačić has dipped into an area of Bruckner's work which is virtually unknown in American concert halls, that of the very early Bruckner, who composed in a light style somewhat resembling those of Mendelssohn and Schumann. Both works are agreeably lyric and uncomplicated, and the performances are as deft as could be desired.

Hans Knappertsbusch's version of the Fifth Symphony (followed by the "Dawn," "Siegfried's Rhine Journey," and "Siegfried's Funeral Music" from Wagner's "Götterdämmerung": Vienna Philharmonic; London) is a very welcome one, since it is an authoritative reading with generally crisp tempos and beautifully paced climaxes. The Vienna Philharmonic's playing in the difficult three-against-two passages of the slow movement is not always absolutely accurate rhyth-

mically, but this is a small fault when balanced against the warmth of the orchestra's tone, the dignity of Knappertsbusch's general conception of the work, and the fine clarity of the fugal voices and lacy interludes of the last movement. Altogether this is a distinguished achievement.

Eduard van Beinum's recording of the Eighth Symphony (followed by Schubert's Symphony No. 3 in D Major; Amsterdam Concertgebouw; Epic) represents, to my mind, the definitive interpretation of what is perhaps the greatest—or at least the most perfectly formed and dramatically well-knit—of all Bruckner's symphonies, and it stands as a worthy companion piece to Mr. van Beinum's magnificent previous recording of the Seventh. It is a superb performance from every point of view, and undoubtedly supersedes all earlier ones on records. Its long, serene slow movement, in particular, is done with great perception as to tempo, so that it emerges with much greater coherence than it has in the terribly dragged version of it that appears in the old recording by Eugen Jochum.

Mr. Jochum, as I have implied above, is something of a problem as a Bruckner interpreter, and his recording of the Ninth Symphony with the Berlin Philharmonic (followed by Beethoven's "Fantasia in C minor for Piano, Chorus and Orchestra," Op. 80, with Andor Foldes, pianist, the RIAS Chamber Choir, the Berlin Motet Choir, and the Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Fritz Lehmann; Decca, 4 sides) again brings me to the question of tempo. Mr. Jochum conducts Bruckner's faster movements with an excellent feeling for style and momentum, but he is apparently under the impression that music of deep spiritual content should be performed at an extraordinarily funereal pace, and when he gets to an Adagio he has an invariable habit of slowing things to the point where even the most confirmed Bruckner enthusiast is apt to lose track of his moorings. The Adagio of this particular recording is no exception to this rule. It is so slow, in fact, that the movement takes up a side and a half, and thus has the disadvantage, not only of making Bruckner's musical thought difficult to grasp, but of breaking the continuity for a change of records. This is a pity, for the remaining movements are beautifully done—so beautifully that the recording as a whole is far superior to the rather metro-nomic one by Jascha Horenstein, which is the last one that I remember hearing. The Berlin Philharmonic plays magnificently, and the work of the woodwinds and horns, especially in the Scherzo, is flawless.



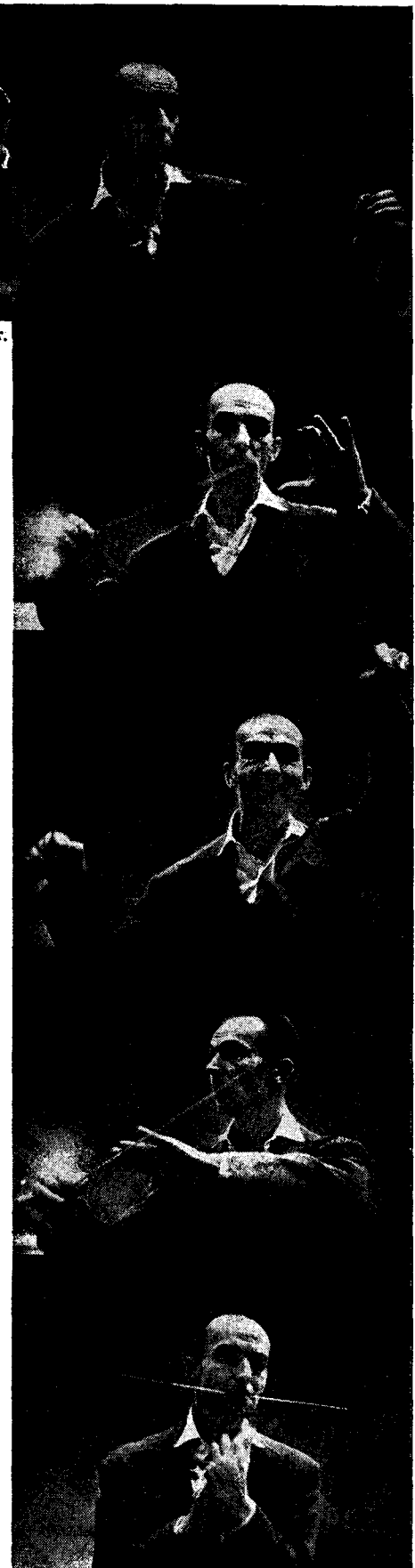
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# THE KARAJAN EXPERIMENT (CONT.)

By JOSEPH WECHSBERG

VIENNA.

THE Karajan Experiment (SR Aug. 11) was tested for the first time early in April when Herbert von Karajan made his debut as chief conductor and chief producer of the Vienna State Opera, of which he has been artistic director, mostly in *absentia*, since last September. It has become known even beyond the Vienna Woods that the august Staatsoper has fallen on evil days since the brief glory of its Reopening Festival in November 1955. Gustav Mahler, as director of this house, said that one perfect performance every week would justify the existence of an expensive, state-subsidized opera house. By Mahler's standards, the current Staatsoper should long be out of business. Perfect evenings have become as rare as true-blue diamonds. Poor-to-middling repertory performances with spiritless conducting, second-rate singing, and no pretense of staging are the rule. Inexperienced singers are hired, often after a brief, inconclusive performance. Rehearsals are unpopular; the orchestra is often studded with substitutes; artists must appear at shortest notice, with little chance to find out what is going on. The Fourth Gallery, traditional hang-out of opera lovers and trained enthusiasts, now publishes a monthly newsletter, *Der Merker*, which, despite some rather Beckmesserish griping, contains a great many justified complaints and furnishes eloquent proof of the Fourth Gallery's deep concern about the latent malaise of its beloved Staatsoper. Things reached a sad climax a few months ago when, after the premiere of "Tannhäuser," the artist singing the title role was booed out and later chased around the opera house by irate opera-lovers with a taste for something that ought to be, but isn't quite, forgotten in Vienna.

Karajan's local admirers are confident that he will bring back quality and dignity to the State Opera and finish with the *Schlamperei* that deteriorates many repertory evenings. Others are afraid that he will look only after the performances which he conducts him-

self and show little interest in productions which he inherited from his predecessor, Karl Böhm. After several false, long-distance starts, Karajan has made an energetic beginning. (Knowing that the Vienna Philharmonic is the Staatsoper's greatest asset, he made peace with the august orchestra which he hasn't conducted for almost ten years, and will lead it in a performance of Bruckner's Eighth Symphony.) For his operatic debut he chose Wagner's "Die Walküre." Karajan clearly considers himself one of the greatest conductors and producers of our time, but he isn't always able to convey this impression to others. As a first-rate producer, he hasn't arrived yet. His new "Walküre" is reminiscent of early, postwar Bayreuth (where Karajan made a brief appearance) when the Wagner brothers hadn't worked things out yet. Karajan is obsessed with dimness which he confuses with "mood." Despite twenty-five lighting rehearsals, the listener is often painfully aware of insufficient or incorrect lighting when he shouldn't be aware of any lighting at all. There is a hodgepodge of styles from the moderate abstract to the semi-stylized romantic. The singers are told to avoid excess movement, which makes sense, but they often move in a dream-like, papier-mâché way which makes no sense

at all. In present-day Bayreuth there is always an inherent link between word and gesture, movement and music; in Karajan's production there is none as yet. Stylized scenes are followed by frankly naturalistic moments (the silhouetted duel of Siegmund and Hunding). The Feuerzauber is magnificent; even M-G-M couldn't do it better. The sets which were painted by Emil Preetorius are dramatic and effective, the costumes are timeless and blend well into the sets. At the end of the first act, Spring doesn't come through the door. Instead the back wall of Hunding's house flies off by magic and reveals the sky-blue cyclorama. Very interesting, but maybe Karajan ought to stick to conducting, of which he knows a lot more.

As conductor he was always interesting and often exhilarating. He has a genuine regard for the limits of the human larynx and never demands the Wagnerian-impossible from his singers. Instead of making them shout over the din of the 100-men orchestra, he keeps the orchestra down and lets the singers use their voices freely and naturally. There were almost chamber-musical moments in this "Walküre." The score was shown in a transparent texture; the *Leitmotifs* were audible; even the brass fortissimi were never brassy.

Karajan let Suthaus (Siegmund) sing out his Marathon "Walsung" as long as the tenor was able to hold it. I watched Karajan; his arms were lowered and he waited for Suthaus to end, and only then did he let the orchestra come in. Wotan's interminable second-act monologue, in which a lot of ugly family gossip is brought up, began in an intimate whispered *parlando* and slowly gained momentum, intensity, and drama as the story unfolded. The love duet between Siegmund and Sieglinde and Wotan's farewell song were moments of sheer poetry and rare beauty. Naturally, Karajan's slow, lyrical, almost impressionist interpretation misses some of the dramatic aspects, and during the second act the conductor seemed to lose interest in the proceedings for a while, but can you blame him for that? After a hard

