

Anton Bruckner: Symphony No. 6 in A Major WAB 106

[Bruckner, Complete Works, Leopold Nowak, 1952]

The Sixth Symphony is among the least played symphonies by Bruckner, for it is one of his most daring and most difficult. He is said to have called it his "Keckste" ("sassiest" – a pun on the German word for "sixth" ("Sechste")). The first sheet of the score is dated September 24, 1879; the Finale was concluded in St. Florian on September 3, 1881, one day before his 57th birthday. At the premiere on February 11, 1883 under Court Opera Director Wilhelm Jahn, however, only the two middle movements were played – for this was quite a political event: no symphony by Bruckner had ever been heard in a regular concert of the Vienna Philharmonic. Thus taken out of context and presented as character pieces, the effect of the Adagio and Scherzo could only be diminished. Hence Ludwig Benedikt Hahn wrote in the Presse on March 2, "It was possible to follow the Adagio with interest and even, in places, enjoyment, its oddities notwithstanding; the Scherzo, with its cloddish joking around gleaned from the spirit of the Stone and Bronze Ages, could but alienate the listener." Bruckner was never to hear his sixth symphony completely. The first complete performance was on February 26, 1899 under Gustav Mahler in the Seventh Concert of the Vienna Philharmonic.

Following the fifth symphony, Bruckner in his sixth struck out on new paths, seeking fresh forms which can with perfect justification be said to be in the Phrygian mode rather than in the key of A major. In hardly any other work do the ecclesiastical modes play so formative a part. Only the ninth symphony, with its Doric portions and the unfinished final movement, carries this approach further yet. It is no wonder, therefore, that this final movement and the sixth symphony are among the least understood of Bruckner's works. They follow the "sinfonia caratteristica" model used so often by Bruckner – a dramatic sequence of scenes and images with high and low points, augmentations and diminutions, supported by themes and motifs which gain significance through their formation. The first movement begins with a buoyancy reminiscent of the "Italian" by Mendelssohn (in the same key). The first thematic group supplies all the basic elements: the Phrygian scale, the triplets, the syncopated motif (bar 15), which will later be the oboe's lament motif in the Adagio, and the syncopated rhythms which reappear in the Finale.

If the first movement can be said to radiate yearning and a lust for life, then the Adagio is pervaded by mourning and lamentation. The theme, which starts with the leap of a sixth taken from the beginning of the first movement, is in F Phrygian, whose dissonances made it the most spine-chilling key in the Baroque period before the advent of well-tempered tunings. Of particular importance is the mournful counter-theme in the oboe, whose rhythms recall a funeral march and from which the themes of the Scherzo and Finale are later derived. It is followed by a comforting contrast consisting of a Gesangsperiode ("song period" – Bruckner's term) in E major, seeking support from a pedal point in the basses, above which new counterpoints unfold over and over again. However, after an anthem-like upsurge, the music sinks down into the grave. There follows a concluding period in the form of a somber funeral march of Baroque stringency in C minor. This is the

only time that Bruckner has an Adagio keep to sonata form with a proper elaboration of the main theme.

The Scherzo toddles along in measured E Phrygian steps. This shadowy piece of night music is reminiscent of Schubert, Mendelssohn or Schumann; perhaps it provides a glimpse of the resounding worlds of a Gustav Mahler. Could he perhaps have purposely created a counterpart to Bruckner's Sixth in his own Symphony No. 6 in A Minor? A clue is to be found in Bruckner's Trio, which starts with the same (!) harmonic constellation as the Finale of Mahler's Sixth. At the beginning of the bright Trio in C major, the clangorous fanfare of the three horns recalls the Trio in Beethoven's Sinfonia Eroica, followed immediately by another "hero" – the main theme of Bruckner's Symphony No. 5 in the woodwinds. This again harbors the non confundar from the Te Deum. The hero idea thus obviously plays a part in the sixth symphony.

The Finale starts with a low-lying melody in the church mode of E Phrygian, which is derived directly from the Scherzo theme. Terrifying fanfares strike up, the hero appears in A major, quoting the non confundar of the Te Deum. Further elements are a simmering threat consisting of half-tone shifts and a unison passage shaped like a sword; to this is added the string figure from the Resurrexit of Bruckner's Mass in F Minor. The Gesangsperiode is a polka, as in the Finale of the Third and the first movement of the Second Symphony – expressing a rustic joie de vivre. Woven into this is the Liebestod (love-death) motif from Wagner's Tristan. The hero thus seems to be fighting for the joys of life. The final period takes up the simmering from the main theme. Here the oboe's death lament from the beginning of the Adagio emerges, now in a harsh parody, almost like the Finale of Berlioz' Symphonie Fantastique, where the idée fixe turns into a witches' dance. Following violent thunderclaps, this motif intensifies to utter hysteria before it becomes exhausted. Hence the opponent is obviously the "old evil foe" who has to take a great deal of rebuke in the elaboration. At the beginning of the coda, the dragon is laid low and gasping his last in F Phrygian, the key of the Adagio; at the end of the coda, the hero celebrates his victory in A major, with the aid of the good powers (theme of the first movement) and God ("non confundar").

For the performance heard on this CD, the printed score was compared to the manuscript; in the process, various minor errors were corrected. The complicated, often misunderstood tempo relationships received particular attention. The main theme of the first movement has its own tempo; it only appears at the beginning (bars 1 – 48), in the reprise (bars 195 – 244) and in the last fourteen measures of the coda, marked "tempo as at the beginning". The main tempo is therefore that of the Gesangsperiode ("significantly slower"), not the starting tempo. Wolfgang Grandjean has proved that its quarter triplets correspond to the former quarter notes of the first theme. Bruckner's confidant, Cyrill Hynais, bequeathed metronome markings on this point, namely, half note = 72 for the maestoso at the beginning, half note = 50 for the second theme. Tellingly, these markings are lacking in Schalk's first printing, which conveys those misrepresentations, tempo modifications and protractions which are prevalent still today. Similar considerations are behind the quick tempo of the Finale, which may surprise many listeners, but which found a prominent supporter in Wilhelm Furtwängler as early as 1943.

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