
Perspective: Carnegie Hall Bruckner Cycle
Daniel Barenboim / Staatskapelle Berlin

[Op-Ed: one reader's take on the highly acclaimed event, Ed.]

The following report describes my experience attending each of the nine Bruckner concerts at Carnegie Hall from 19-29 Jan 2017. Being a youthful newcomer to Bruckner, I am not particularly well informed about the different versions of Bruckner's symphonies, so I have not commented on that here. As with any review, objectivity is not the main focus, but I have striven to be understandable and accessible in my writing such that my takeaways may be productively insightful to others.

Bruckner 1 - 19 Jan 2017

Compared to familiar recordings such as those of Sawallisch or Jochum, the opening C minor chords, not dissimilar in style to the opening of Mahler 6, were a bit slow but nonetheless clean and together. The first theme group followed without drawbacks, and the 'Tannhäuser' section with the cascading strings in the second theme group was executed equally well. Beyond the occasional climax and impassioned playing, particularly the admirable ferocity of the coda, the performance was not particularly memorable however.

The Adagio was pleasant enough, but for me Bruckner is often very difficult to appreciate on initial listening, similar to the denser Mahler symphonies (e.g., 3, 7, 8, maybe others as well). In this performance, I found the themes not particularly memorable, but the tutti ending of the movement was remarkable.

The Scherzo of the First (and Bruckner scherzi in general) is always a delight, and in my opinion fortunately more familiar and indelible than the other movements. Three adjectives came to mind for this particular performance: fiery, energetic, and rousing. It is full of vibrant and quick rhythms in the strings punctuated with sharp brass, and the orchestra executed it all very well. Certainly, the composition of the movement almost takes care of itself.

The fourth movement, Bruckner's only Finale to start *fortissimo* besides the Eighth, was lost in a whirlwind similar to the first movement, and oddly enough the coda was not as compelling here, though it was probably not a fault of the performance. I felt that the coda to the first movement was stronger than the coda to the Finale, but others might disagree. Overall, a fine albeit unexceptional performance.

Bruckner 2 – 20 Jan 2017

Although the triplets at the very beginning of the first movement were somewhat muddled, the rest of the performance went well. The orchestra played with virtuosity, and the placement of the contrabasses in the back center was very effective in creating a well-balanced sound. Nothing further in the first movement seemed noteworthy, perhaps due to my lack of prior exposure to the Second.

The Adagio was arguably more enjoyable than that in the First symphony, and hints of Bruckner's later style (e.g., the Sixth) started to become perceptible here. The Romantic harmony seemed ever more pleasant in juxtaposition with the preceding Mozart with its endless root-position major triads.

The performance of the Scherzo made it seem less stodgy than it perhaps actually is. Although it does not tick like clockwork as in the Eighth Symphony or burst with youth like that of the First Symphony, it nonetheless carries the trademarks of a Bruckner scherzo: rugged vigor, sharp rhythm, and sprightly orchestration.

The Finale was rather unremarkable, excepting the coda, which was immensely enjoyable. The highly idiosyncratic manner in which Bruckner shifts harmonies with slightly differing registral spans from bar to bar provides a very exciting sense of anticipation, especially in a coda. In neo-Riemannian theoretical terms, the voice leading is highly "parsimonious" in that the similarity between any two adjacent harmonic sonorities is maximized (e.g., between two adjacent triads, only one note is changed). The first violins ascended and ascended, ending in a glorious peroration that instantly brought on a standing ovation.

Barenboim gave a speech after the concert stressing the importance of the arts, specifically on this historic Presidential Inauguration Day in the US. The audience burst into applause when he concluded with "...and we can make the WORLD great."

Bruckner 3 - 21 Jan 2017

In a series of performances that spans an entire symphonic cycle, it becomes possible for a listener to discern even minute differences between the composer's style in many different areas when returning to the concert hall every night. And indeed, minute differences across the symphonies that are difficult to articulate started to become manifest in this performance. In broad terms, the first movement of the Third Symphony, and noteworthy in this performance, felt more *compelling* than the first movements of the First or Second Symphonies in the basic sense that the surface level of the music was more cogent. The first theme group is certainly captivating, and the brassier orchestration (a nod to Wagner) is more daring than the orchestration choices of the previous two symphonies. As my experience and fondness is of late Romantic music, this symphony, even if only in terms of orchestration choices, carries a more Romantic ethos than the earlier symphonies, including *Die Nullte*.

The second movement seemed to drag, and frankly I was quite bored. However, the shortcoming may lie in the music rather than the performance. For me, Bruckner's adagios do not get properly interesting until the Sixth Symphony (except for that one lovely C major passage in the Adagio of the Fifth). Almost immediately after the Adagio ended, I hardly remembered any of it within measures of the following movement.

The Scherzo was excellent as usual; very tight clockwork indeed. The bass pizzicati were delightful both in sound and in sight. The Trio, however, felt anticlimactic, even disappointing, and again perhaps because of the music itself rather than the performance. Bruckner trios are generally not quite as vigorous and exciting as the scherzi, except for perhaps in the last two symphonies. At any rate, they are very economical and formally rigid, so the music retains its accessibility.

The Finale, like the Adagio, also felt long, but the frequent climaxes made the experience less dreary. When the coda finally arrived, the music was so exciting that all tedium from the previous several minutes was forgotten, and the audience was on their feet as soon as the final triumphant D major chord sounded.

Bruckner 4 – 23 Jan 2017

A performance of the first movement of Bruckner 4 can be butchered in several key places, but one primary one is the climax of the development, a wonderful orchestral dialogue with various permutations of the Bruckner rhythm (a 2+3 or 3+2 rhythm) being tossed around by the brass. And indeed it was performed excellently in this performance. The coda to the first movement was also very well executed. So the first movement receives full marks.

The Andante often feels like the weak point of this symphony. Some may consider the Finale to be disjoint and stodgy (and I don't disagree), but as was noted earlier, the early Bruckner adagios are not quite as economical as the later ones, almost as if in deliberate contrast with the very economical scherzi. Anyway, the performance was agreeable but not relatively lethargic.

The Scherzo was as fiery and angular as ever. In the first brass statement, the insistent Bruckner rhythm provides an important motivic link across the movements while the added anacrusis aid in depicting the

“hunting dance” program of the movement. The Trio reminds one faintly of the Scherzo of Mahler 2 [*composed 1893, Ed.*], though the link is likely unintentional. Overall, the movement is charming and delightful for its evocative nature: pastoral Austrian life and hunting is easily conjured in the mind with this music, and the imagistic perception here is stronger than in any other Bruckner scherzo (perhaps excepting that of the Eighth). Maybe this is apropos, given that the Fourth was the only symphony that Bruckner gave a (quasi)-programmatic subtitle to: “Romantic.”

The first *forte* statement of the Finale was well reserved in that it did not feel overly loud. The rest of the movement proceeded like clockwork; the Staatskapelle Berlin played like a first-rate orchestra with brilliant virtuosity across all the instruments. The famous coda finally came along, and curiously enough, Barenboim treated the string tremolos as staccato-esque units much like Celibidache did in his highly acclaimed interpretations. As for achieving the tonal goals of the coda, a phenomenon too complicated to describe here, the performance scored a B-. Some tempo mismatches were present, and the final note of the symphony was held a tad too long given the tempo of the rest of the performance. Nonetheless a very enjoyable performance of the Fourth.

Bruckner 5 – 24 Jan 2017

The compositional complexity of the Fifth Symphony challenges many listeners; one’s patience is often put to test. Benjamin Zander’s 80-minute analysis and commentary on Bruckner 5 (released on Telarc alongside a performance of the symphony) is very helpful in parsing the various threads of the symphony to make sense of the cohesive whole. Zander likens themes in the first movement to a question and a prayer, and in this context, some of the tonal ambiguities are contextualized and justified. The performance was sharp and polished with no room to make any complaints.

The Adagio is remembered primarily for its celestial second theme, which was wonderful, but the oboe theme at the beginning was equally appreciable. As Zander says, it imitates the falling motion of the opening *pizzicati* of the symphony but fails to rise back up to the starting tone, instead being pushed back down. This explanation was insightful in seeing how it deliberately created a solemn mood.

The Scherzo feels like the weak link in the Fifth Symphony. The brass climax after just a few seconds, and from the onset the proportions seem strange and somehow incorrect. Even the Trio has a peculiar otherworldly feel about it, replete with melodic dissonances, albeit deliberate, of course. Nonetheless, at least Bruckner scherzi are highly formulaic and predictable, so following along the formal structures is not a problem.

For me, the Finale is remembered primarily for its final peroration, and it was in anticipation of this that the rest of the music seemed to flow, not feeling particularly important on its own. The doubled brass came in at last in the chorale, and the harmonics (i.e., brass players’ ears for intonation and overtones) were excellent here. The fugal part was brilliant enough to make Bach smile; such contrapuntal writing is very difficult to do and quite admirable when pulled off successfully. Bruckner’s decades of intensive study certainly paid off here. And the final peroration was everything expected and more: the double brass nearly lifted the ceiling off the hall with their raw power. The harmonies of the brass iterations of the fugal subject leading up to the coda were especially refreshing; the excursions into the minor mode were delightfully unexpected and added a layer of harmonic complexity that made up for the stodgy formal structure of the movement. The audience was unanimous in their approval of the final peroration, and a standing ovation immediately followed the final B-flat.

Bruckner 6 – 25 Jan 2017

As in the Fourth Symphony, the climax of the development, a *fortissimo* statement of the “Phrygian” theme in the brass atop shimmering ostinati in the strings, is a crucial make-or-break point of this movement. And again, as in the performance of the Fourth Symphony, the execution in this performance was excellent. The other moment of transcendence in the first movement comes in the coda, which was also executed cleanly and effectively.

The second movement is Bruckner’s first Adagio that does not feel overly long or non-economical. Apart from the second theme group of the Adagio of the Seventh (which seems to me lackluster), all the slow movements from here on are excellent. The “Gershwin” chord in the recapitulation of the third theme group (the funeral march) was as surprising and satisfying as expected, and overall the movement flowed very well.

The Scherzo of the Sixth was strong, but the Trio remains unmemorable and disjoint. Nonetheless, the Scherzo was played with the same vigor as the previous scherzi and was a pleasure to follow. One aspect of the rhythm that could have been enunciated better was the cross-rhythmic polymetricity between the high brass and low brass in the final bars of the movement, although this is a minor quibble.

The Finale is indeed perhaps less tightly constructed as the other movements of the Sixth, as Benjamin Korstvedt suggested to me earlier in the week. Though the introduction with the melodic dissonance in the violins is exciting and mysterious, the music loses some of its momentum with the subsequent theme groups. As in several other swathes of Bruckner's music, attention spans are tested here, but rapt alertness is invoked again at the coda, which is perhaps not as harmonically interesting as the coda to the first movement but nonetheless carries typical Brucknerian finality achieved through ingenious manipulation of the tonal hierarchy. The tempo in the coda was rather standard, though the long-awaited recapitulation of the triplet ostinato in the brass in the final few bars of the symphony was faster than typically performed in recordings such as Jochum's or Kubelik's. The unwritten *ritardando* in the final bar was not necessarily an unwelcome addition, especially given that many other conductors perform the last bar that way as well. The last note was met with great applause as in the previous two symphonies, but the audience was not as quick to rise to their feet as they were for the Fourth and Fifth.

Bruckner 7 – 27 Jan 2017

The Seventh has several great moments but in comparison with the other late symphonies of Bruckner, I consider it an overall weak symphony both structurally and thematically. The statement that Rossini made about Wagner having great moments but poor expanses is especially relevant here. The opening melody is wonderful, as is the coda to the first movement and the first theme group of the second movement. But then it seems that Bruckner ran out of good ideas for thematic invention, in my opinion; for example the Scherzo's primary motif is based on a rooster call.

The performance of the first movement was satisfying enough to hear the melody in the introduction (which echoes the opening of *Das Rheingold*), but the rest of the movement was fairly uninteresting until the coda. Celibidache's recording tends to spoil people and make them accustomed to glacial tempi, but even then, a faster tempo would have worked for this coda. But not only was the tempo faster, the brass was underplaying, and in a coda dominated by dialogues between the brass, the brass cannot afford to underplay. Overall, the execution was not particularly impressive.

The Adagio is perhaps Bruckner's most popular movement, and as is the general consensus, I find that the first theme group is beautiful. But for me, the second one is so shockingly uninspired that the larger appeal of the movement falls. It almost sounds as if Tchaikovsky wrote it! Perhaps the dryness of this theme is a deliberate effort to strengthen the effect of the recapitulation of the first theme group.

By the end of the Adagio, my expectations were very low. And indeed, delivery was very low. The performance was decent, but the music was simply not very moving. And the only cymbal crash in the entire symphony was botched! It was a hair off in time, and it was certainly not as loud as it could have been. For me, that ruined the Adagio; typically, minor errors do not make or break a performance (of a movement), but it IS the only cymbal crash in the entire symphony!

The rooster call in the Scherzo sounded as trite as ever; though to be fair, the Scherzo does exhibit the typical flair of a Bruckner scherzo. And the first theme group of the Finale was (or rather, is) too heavy with double-dotted rhythms. It is also my opinion that the coda is also quite weak compared to the coda of the first movement. My complaints could go on and on, but would be irrespective of the performance.

Needless to say, this was the most disappointing night. Even though Bruckner 1, 2, and 3 were not so memorable, this symphony was familiar and therefore there was a benchmark, i.e., some expectations going in. So perhaps this suggests that expectation is indeed the mother of disappointment.

Bruckner 8 – 28 Jan 2017

A truly spiritual experience. Fortunately, this concert was not paired with anything else, so the entire evening could be devoted to losing oneself in this otherworldly work.

Bruckner 8 has no weak points. In all the other symphonies (perhaps excepting the Ninth), there is that one movement or part of a movement is typically lacking in comparison to the rest. But in the Eighth, every part fits together like a perfect clock. It seems that Bruckner (and the people in his milieu, unfortunately) didn't think so because of his revisions, but that does not change the listener's perception of the music. At any rate, the listening was as pleasurable and even more than I had hoped for.

The first movement was executed brilliantly. The entire movement is a dark struggle for tonal closure, with an opening in F minor and a subsequent theme in G major implicitly adumbrating the overarching tonality of C minor. The hushed coda (Bruckner's first for a first movement of a symphony) completes the effect. The climax of the movement, with the trumpets screaming out the death motif, was as thrilling and even more than expected.

The Scherzo provides a brief respite from the tumult of the first movement, but it moves with an urgency unforeseen in previous scherzi. The tuba has a prominent role, and the tubist of the Staatskapelle Berlin was

topnotch. The performance was perhaps not superlative, but it was certainly satisfactory. With the exception of the 1872 version of the Second, the Eighth is the first symphony where Bruckner places the Scherzo before the Adagio, and fortunately he was certain about this (unlike Mahler with his Sixth). The change is perhaps justified by the grave ethos of the first movement, but whatever the reasoning was, it is highly effective.

The Adagio is easily Bruckner's greatest, and perhaps even the greatest adagio in the symphonic literature (the Adagio of Mahler 9 is another contender). The opening stutters in the lower strings give a feeling of a great chasm, and the violins that enter shortly afterward with the chromatic step convey a feeling of malaise and instability, which is juxtaposed well with the stable bass foundation below them. The second and third theme groups are amongst Bruckner's finest, and the entire movement flows as if divinely inspired. The performance again was not superlative (e.g., more depth in the basses or more intensity in certain places could have been achieved), but overall it was excellent. And this time the cymbal crash was perfect—perhaps the percussionist learnt from his climacteric mistake in the Seventh!

The Finale is also one of Bruckner's finest movements. The brass played with superb precision and the timpani, while perhaps not matching the white-hot intensity of the timpanist in Tennstedt's live BPO recording from 1981, played with admirable virtuosity. The recapitulation of this movement is beyond words: the tonal schemata employed to place all the keys strategically makes the effect of hearing the first theme group in the home key incredibly satisfying and visceral. The coda is another moment of transcendent ecstasy, and the performance, while markedly different from Celibidache's, was not "worse." This is a coda that is equally effective fast or slow (unlike the coda of the Fourth). The blazing C major at the end felt like coming face to face with God himself. What a concert.

Bruckner 9 – 29 Jan 2017

It is very unfortunate that the Finale is so rarely played in performances of Bruckner's Ninth, as was the case at this concert. Bruckner wrote the vast majority of the movement, and only small bits are missing (including the coda, very tragically). But it is in my opinion irresponsible to capitalize on the pleasant-sounding E major chords of the Adagio to pass them off as "implying finality," because Bruckner clearly did not intend to finish the symphony there. At any rate, the first three movements are still enjoyable.

The first movement of the Ninth is full of thematic material that is very grave and serious. It is a strong movement, easily Bruckner's most solemn, but it requires some intensity in conducting to pull off successfully. There were moments of lethargy in various places, but overall it was a fairly strong execution. The coda is a sublime moment, and it was done quite well, although Jochum's rendering of it with the Staatskapelle Dresden remains unmatched in terms of sheer intensity.

The Scherzo is difficult to blunder. It has fast swirling rhythms and acerbic dissonances, but as long as a capable orchestra is playing it, it is difficult to make a real mess of. What takes much more effort is successfully capturing the hellish agony of the music. This is perhaps difficult to do because of the limitations imposed by the performance directions, specifically, the consecutive downbows and upbows. Nevertheless, it can be done. The effect was semi-present here, but it could certainly have been more present. The Trio is slightly more difficult to pull off because of the very quick triplets at the beginning that must be cleanly articulated, but it was executed with flair and precision as expected.

The Adagio wanders into the twentieth century with its extremely daring dissonances, especially for a composer as ascetic as Bruckner. For those who are accustomed to hearing a great deal of music that follows sonata form, comprehension of the highly dissonant thematic material is not as straightforward in traditional sonata form. One aspect of this, evident in this performance, that I found brilliant was the section of dissonant *piano* chords in the woodwinds just a few minutes in (measure 25 in the Kalmus score). They are dissonant enough to be unstable but nevertheless embody a different kind of consonance, like that of the Tristan chord in context, perhaps warranting a new term, e.g. quasi-dissonant. Looking at the score, the chords are F-C-G-Eb and F-C-Gb-Eb: a C minor to C diminished progression over an F pedal. There are indeed technical dissonances in both chords, but the spacing and orchestration is controlled meticulously as to retain a consonant feeling. No doubt Bruckner was assiduous with his compositional choices in carefully controlling these effects. The climax of the movement, with the terrifying cluster chord, was as satisfying as expected, with an appropriately long pause after it. The remainder of the movement conveyed silent resignation and peace as E major finally established itself firmly. The final chords of the movement in the Wagner tubas and pizzicato strings provided a strong finish, although this closure is not strong enough to close the symphony. Alas, perhaps someday conductors will adopt the Finale more readily.

As good a performance as this was, it was difficult to digest it fully in part because of the celestial experience of the Eighth the day before as well as the lack of inclusion of the Finale. Nonetheless, it was an excellent Bruckner 9 and certainly one of the top three concerts of this cycle.

Reflecting back on the last eleven days, one gets a sense of the enormous magnitude of the music experienced. It is not unreasonable to expect some sort of an aftershock in the coming days, whether it be through withdrawal symptoms or a more subtle effect. In the span of eleven short days, a man's entire lifetime of thought had been conveyed to hundreds of eager and patient listeners. And even beyond that, Bruckner's music, as Barenboim points out in his interview, really spans several centuries in its amalgamation of Classical rhythms, medieval tunes, Romantic harmonies, and other disparate elements. If one had a language (other than music itself) with which to *transcribe* and elucidate the experience of listening to music, the experience of this cycle would no doubt fill many books. Truly a life-changing experience.

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