

Symphony No. 4 in E-flat Major (Romantic)
Anton Bruckner (1824-1896)

Scored for: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and strings.

The music of Bruckner is massive and mighty. –Charles O’Connell

Anton Bruckner was born in a small village in northern Austria where his father was organist and schoolteacher. As a youth he showed talent for music, and by the age of 20 had written a number of choral works and had a reputation as an organist with great skills at improvisation. For a time he followed in his father's footsteps, working as a teacher while composing and playing the organ in his spare time. It was not until after his 30th birthday that Bruckner decided to pursue composition as a career, a rather late start compared to most, and he studied with Simon Sechter in Vienna for six years. In 1861 he completed his studies gaining brilliant testimonials and astounding his judges at his organ examination. A few years later he succeeded Sechter in a professorship at the Vienna conservatory. During the last 25 years of his life Bruckner's creativity bore fruit in the series of nine monumental symphonies for which he is most famous.

The study of Bruckner and his music is a study in opposites. When we look at the lives of some of the most famous and influential Austro-German composers of the past 200 years (Beethoven, Wagner, Clara Schuman, Mahler) we tend to see men and women who are somehow larger than life, shining in the spotlight, boldly and unapologetically pursuing and promoting their art. Despite the notion implied by the Bruckner quote above, the man who created “massive and mighty” symphonic works lived an isolated life in the shadows and was so filled with humility and naïve perceptions of the world that he had little idea of how to publically stand up for his talent. As a result, he was unduly influenced by the opinions of others, continually revising his works to please his critics. (The *Symphony No. 4* was reworked at least 4 times.) On numerous occasions poorly edited versions of Bruckner's music were published against his explicit wishes. He struggled to get a hearing, often paying an orchestra out of his own pocket and, even when his compositions were performed, the reception was rarely positive.

If the confidence issue was not enough, matters were made worse by Bruckner's appearance and personal interaction, which, at best, would easily classify him as a social misfit. He was a tall, awkward man with a head that seemed too large for his body, a severely cropped haircut, and a wardrobe that consisted of peasant style clothing that was generally misshapen and too large. His very appearance was the butt jokes and outright ridicule as those who saw him assumed he was as backwoods on the inside as he appeared on the surface.

Gratefully, despite constant and cruel rejection, and with the odds stacked against him, Bruckner never lost faith and continued to compose. Acknowledging his deeply religious nature, Bruckner once said “When God calls me to Him and asks me: ‘Where is the talent which I have given you?’ Then I shall hold out the rolled-up manuscript of my *Te Deum* and I know He will be a compassionate judge.” Fortunately for Bruckner, by the end of his earthly days, there was a sincere acknowledgement of his talents and his work was compassionately judged by many. Hugo Wolf, a perceptive critic and composer, declared that “the symphonies of Bruckner are the most important symphonic creations that have been written since Beethoven.” One of the most highly regarded

conductors of the late 19th century, Hans Richter confessed that he wept tears of joy on the first day that he conducted a Bruckner symphony in rehearsal.

Bruckner's music is, without exception, heroic in stature, a quality one would hardly predict from their author's personal demeanor. His works are imposing in their scale, foreshadowing the works of Gustav Mahler who was an ardent supporter of Bruckner, and his powerful orchestration creates a sense of grandeur and drama. As one critic describes it "In some ways Bruckner is like the anonymous medieval masons who designed and built the great Gothic cathedrals of Northern Europe. With infinite patience, humility and skill they created colossal works of great beauty, which speak to us of peace and calm, and of the awe and glory of God."

The *Symphony No. 4* begins with a typical Bruckner opening: a hushed string tremolo accompanying a brief theme sounded by the horn. This three-note theme will become the building block on which the entire symphony is built. The full orchestra enters with the main theme, which introduces a characteristic rhythmic figure of a duplet (two notes) followed by triplet (three notes). This rhythmic pattern was so favored by the composer that it is often referred to as the "Bruckner rhythm." In contrast to this heroic material, the second theme, heard first in the strings, is light and dance like in character. Bruckner explores both melodies at length, and the movement ends with a powerful statement of the main theme, again presented in the horns. The second movement is a tender romanza masquerading funeral march. It is based on three themes, the first presented by the cellos, the second by the violas and the third by the winds. As the music draws to a close the rumbling of the timpani fades into the distance. Phillip Huscher, program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra describes this movement as follows: "The slow movement of this symphony moves at a deliberate and relentless gait, but it's shrewdly paced and lovingly told, and there are moments of almost unimaginable beauty. The grand climax is truly impressive only if one has made the slow ascent."

The third movement is music of the forest and the hunt. The horns and trumpets sound the hunting scherzo theme in fast paced brass fanfares. The trio section, taken at a much more leisurely pace, is an Austrian peasant dance called a landler. In his copy of the score, Bruckner wrote that this was the "Dance tune during the hunters' meal." The finale opens, like the first movement, with a serene horn call over low rumblings that builds until the ultimate presentation of the main theme from the entire orchestra in unison. A second, calmer theme follows that is more in line with the music of the second movement. This explodes into a powerful passage for brass that leads to the development of all the ideas that have been stated. The music takes you to the mountain top and then drops you back down to the earth in barely audible whispers. Near the end of the movement, after a barrage from the full orchestra, there is a great, unexpected pause. Bruckner told the conductor Arthur Nikisch—in explanation of one of his most common idiosyncrasies—he liked to catch his breath before saying something significant. And the end is indeed significant. Building on the simple materials he has laid out, he builds once again a crescendo of magnificence and grandeur that brings the work to a triumphant close.