

Amazon review By Ken Ward 4 May 2015

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Very fine performance - but a problematic finale

WHAT impressed me immediately about this performance was the 'leanness' of the sound: the orchestra displays a remarkable precision, articulating the frequent semi-quavers (sixteenth notes) in the double-dotted rhythms with real crispness. Together with this clarity of articulation you get a sense of clarity of conception on the part of the conductor, the series of motives that make up the first theme group laid out with a firm, inexorable pulse. And this impression of clarity is enhanced by the clarity of the recorded sound. This is all very fine and contrasts with Sir Simon Rattle's much-acclaimed performance with the Berlin Philharmonic, where the orchestral sound is much 'thicker' and the conductor's conception is, to my mind, less focused.

Come the second theme, Gesangsperiode, John Gibbons and the Aarhus Symphony Orchestra, rather like Gerd Schaller's approach with the Philharmonie Festiva, avoid the extremes of Mahlerian emotional display that I hear in Rattle and Nicolas Couton's performances. That is not to say that it lacks expressive power, but that its emotional content is less febrile, a sadder, more 'inward' lyricism. As with all such descriptions, this is a very subjective, personal response, and others may not hear it like this, but I was moved enough to think **this is a performance worthy of comparison with the best.**

I was particularly taken with the first violins' pizzicatos in the Scherzo, quite forwardly recorded, and with a crescendo to the top of the phrase, which gives added eloquence. The hammering fortissimo tutti are transparent enough to be able to hear the inner parts. The Trio is fleet-footed, without a trace of sentimentality - no slowing down in the second section, which is how I feel it should be. Couton is even faster in the Scherzo and the sheer riskiness of it is very impressive, but maybe because the MÁV Budapest orchestra is at the limit of its virtuosity, the rhythm a bit skimmed, power in his performance isn't fully achieved.

For similar reasons as with the first movement - clarity, leanness, inexorable pulse - **I find this Aarhus SO performance of the Adagio amongst the best I know, and refreshing to hear after the relentless thick sostenuto playing of the Berlin Philharmonic.** The Aarhus strings have a much thinner and, to me, more eloquent sound, the woodwind and brass less smoothly blended. Whereas the Berliners' is an outward facing music, a magnificent performance where the sheer sound is to be admired, and Schaller's Adagio is a performance of great and moving nobility, **with John Gibbons the music seems to speak of inner vulnerability, the lonely grief of isolation that mounts as Bruckner makes his farewell to life.**

The reason I have made reference to performances conducted by maestros Couton, Schaller and Rattle is that in common with those performances this Ninth comes with a completed fourth movement. I have written before that performances with a fourth movement will alter how the previous movements are interpreted, the Adagio especially not being subject to a long drawn out ending. It seemed obvious when I wrote it, but I begin to wonder if it is quite as self-evident as it seemed - even with a Finale it might be possible to perform the Adagio as though it were the last word, so that the pianissimo drum roll and the emergence of the Finale is even more of a miracle. Gibbons, however, refuses to linger over those last pages of the Adagio.

So far so good - in fact very good - but with Nors Josephson's finale things become problematic. It's

well enough performed, and does in the first part achieve the feeling that it's fashioned out of the same stuff that the first three movements are made of, which is something you don't always feel with the other performances of other finale completions, and it maintains a sense of momentum that eludes Couton, whose performance of Letocart's finale becomes somehow directionless through the second part. But in comparison to those completions that have some pretensions to scholarly integrity - as opposed to that by Peter Jan Marthé who could dispense with philology because he was aware of Bruckner's presence dictating the finale to him - Josephson's is perhaps the least convincing. It's not merely that Josephson seems wilfully to ignore the information about the actual size of the gaps he is to fill, so altering the internal dimensions of the movement as Bruckner had laid it out, but the quality of the music that fills those gaps seems to my ears often inadequate - I think especially of the fugue, where SPCM found enough material stemming from Bruckner's sketches but which doesn't sound contrapuntally quite busy enough, and where Carragan manages a very effective sense of continuing contrapuntal purpose and complexity, Josephson's sounds particularly trite. Another miscalculation seems to me to be withholding the full dynamic power of the chorale theme until its repetition; maybe it's just because I'm so used to its triple forte entry in other versions that this seems disappointing. There are other decisions of Josephson that seem to wilfully ignore the findings scholarship, and to try and synthesise aspects of Bruckner's manuscripts that can hardly be seen to belong together.

But, as in all completions, the crunch comes with the coda. There's precious little from Bruckner, and what little there is Josephson ignores. Not everyone thinks that the most recent, and final, incarnation of the SPCM finale as recorded by Rattle, is their best attempt at the coda, but it's pretty powerful and I like the use of the rising trumpet motive from the Adagio in the final paragraph. I think the great Carragan moment, the augmented Adagio theme rising up above all on the trumpet is an inspired solution, and has the great quality of taking on the suffering of the Adagio and transfiguring it. Josephson starts by facing in many directions, and seems to coalesce around a quotation of the first movement coda and then you end up - like everyone else - in triple forte D major with plenty of triplets and fanfares. Obviously, in common with other completers, Josephson must be convinced his creation sounds like something Bruckner might have done, or at the very least is an appropriate close to this symphony - I find it unconvincing, which only goes to show we all have a different Bruckner in each of our heads.

In the insert booklet, Dominic Nudd repeats the outdated information that Levi was so afraid to tell Bruckner of his rejection of the 8th symphony that he had to ask Josef Schalk to break the news. Levi's letter to Bruckner has long been available. The notes, even the brief paragraphs from Nors Josephson, also refrain from mentioning John Phillips' work on and publication of the unfinished finale, as though those involved in this venture were determined to remain ignorant of the contributions of scholars to the study and publication of the sources after Orel in 1934, nor is there any commentary to explain why Josephson has taken the particular decisions that lead to the creation of his finale in the way that it is.

So I would heartily recommend this recording for the first three movements, a refreshing and deeply moving take on the music, but have considerable doubts about the finale. What is interesting about listening to a variety of different completions is that, through slowly identifying the music they all have in common, you begin to hear what must categorically be Bruckner's own, and from that you can begin to evaluate the music that has been supplied to supplement what wasn't available from the manuscripts. Another way, of course, is to follow John Phillip's score of the unfinished Finale - but that can be challenging, especially when completers like Josephson do not

always respect the number of missing bars that Bruckner's numbering dictates should be there. And then, as you listen to the various codas, maybe you begin to see the wisdom of Jacques Roelands' approach which attempts to fill in the gaps, but refuses to supply a coda on the grounds that on the basis of the information we have, it can't be done.*

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* Roelands' reconstruction hasn't been publicly performed, but a computer generated performance is available on www.abruckner.com, search 'Discography Documents' for 'Roelands'.