

On 6 April 1962, London heard Herbert von Karajan conduct the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra in Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony and Bruckner's Seventh at the Royal Festival Hall, in a concert broadcast by the BBC and remembered at once as an occasion of uncommon weight. What survives on this recording is not simply a performance of Bruckner's Seventh, but the sound of a major musical encounter: Karajan, already one of Europe's defining conductors, leading an orchestra whose authority in Austro-German repertoire seemed almost hereditary.

The atmosphere in the hall was vividly caught by Neville Cardus in *The Guardian*, who described "a packed raving audience" assembled for Karajan and the Viennese. Cardus saw Karajan as an imposing, almost immovable presence before the massed players, commanding total attention. Yet the anticipation in the hall extended beyond the conductor himself. The Vienna Philharmonic was heard in London not merely as a great visiting orchestra, but as a living bearer of tradition and a unique sound-world in itself.

That sound made an immediate impression. In *The Observer*, Peter Heyworth called the orchestra "once more incomparable among the great orchestras of the world", praising above all its ability not "to glitter but to blend", and the rounded sonority that gave the performance its special character. Donald Mitchell in *The Daily Telegraph* marvelled at the "warmth of the lower strings" and the thrilling vibrancy of the brass, while Richard Last in the *Daily Herald* wrote of the brass section's "Day of Judgment sound". Contemporary responses return repeatedly to the same qualities: colour, blend, weight and grandeur.

If the Mozart drew more qualified admiration, Bruckner carried the evening to another plane. The "Jupiter" was widely respected for its beauty of line, yet several critics found it too soft-grained, lacking classical tension and vitality. In Bruckner, however, conductor and orchestra seemed to meet on native ground. Here the long line, breadth of phrasing and patient accumulation of sonority all became virtues of the highest order.

Mitchell's verdict was unequivocal: this was "a consistently brilliant and often noble performance", and "London has not heard a Bruckner performance of this quality for years." He singled out Karajan as "a master of the long phrase", able to shape Bruckner's huge spans with continuity and purpose, and described the great Adagio as "the crown of the interpretation". Heyworth was equally struck, writing that in the Seventh "the orchestra covered itself with glory", and that "the splendour of its playing in the Bruckner was prodigious". Most tellingly, he judged Karajan "a master not merely of sound but of architecture", a phrase that goes to the heart of what this performance still communicates.

Cardus, characteristically, heard both splendour and a hint of artifice. He admired the way Karajan could make phrases seem to levitate, calling the Adagio "truly *feierlich*", with its lament for Wagner rendered with particular eloquence, while also wondering whether the performance was "a little self-consciously presented". Such reservations are revealing. They remind us that this was no neutral traversal, but a distinctly profiled interpretation: grand, moulded, richly expressive, and unmistakably Karajan.

That, finally, is what gives this 1962 performance its enduring fascination. Here is Karajan before a London audience, leading the Vienna Philharmonic in music central to its identity, with a command of line, texture and climax that contemporary critics immediately recognised as exceptional. If there were occasional qualms about polish or self-awareness, they were voiced in the presence of something larger: a reading of Bruckner's Seventh that struck London as a major event, and which still speaks in a voice of noble breadth and immense authority.



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BRUCKNER SYMPHONY NO. 7 IN E MAJOR
KARAJAN, VIENNA PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

karajan

conducts bruckner

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BRUCKNER SYMPHONY NO. 7 IN E MAJOR
KARAJAN, VIENNA PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

1. RADIO Introduction (1:22)

BRUCKNER Symphony No. 7 in E major, WAB 107

2. 1st mvt. - Allegro moderato (18:54)

3. 2nd mvt. - Adagio: Sehr feierlich und sehr langsam (22:15)

4. 3rd mvt. - Scherzo: Sehr schnell - Trio: Etwas langsamer (10:01)

5. 4th mvt. - Finale: Bewegt, doch nicht schnell (11:43)

Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra
conducted by Herbert von Karajan

XR Remastered by
Andrew Rose

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6 April 1962

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