

In December 1950, George Szell led the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra of New York in three subscription performances at Carnegie Hall: Thursday evening, 14 December; Friday afternoon, 15 December; and Sunday afternoon, 17 December. The programme paired the New York premiere of Alfredo Casella's *Paganiniana* with Bruckner's Symphony No. 8 in C minor, given complete and without cuts.

The present performance derives from the Sunday concert of 17 December, the third and final performance of the run. By that afternoon the orchestra had already presented the symphony twice, and Szell's meticulously prepared conception had settled into its most concentrated form. The surviving timing of 71 minutes and 23 seconds confirms a reading of firm proportions and structural discipline.

In 1950, Bruckner's Eighth had not yet achieved the unquestioned centrality it would later enjoy. While admired, it was still regarded in some critical quarters as overextended. Reviewing the first of these concerts in *The New York Times*, Olin Downes wrote that "it might be said that the surest way to minimize Bruckner is not to cut him." The remark is pointed. Cuts to Bruckner's symphonies had long been common practice, justified as a means of tightening what were thought to be diffuse structures. Downes's argument, however, is the reverse: that playing the work complete exposes what he perceived as its discursiveness and repetitions. Fidelity to the text, in his view, did not solve the problem of length but intensified it.

Szell's timings suggest that he answered such reservations not by intervention but by proportion. The opening Allegro moderato, at just under fourteen minutes, moves with purpose. The tremolando undercurrent and rising horn call are integrated into a firmly directed sonata structure, avoiding rhetorical lingering. The Scherzo, proportioned closely to the first movement, maintains rhythmic grip without monumental heaviness.

The Adagio, lasting just over twenty-five minutes, observes Bruckner's marking "Feierlich langsam, doch nicht schleppend" with notable literalness. The movement unfolds with breadth but without slackness, sustaining harmonic direction across its long spans. Its climactic ascent emerges from cumulative tension rather than from elastic tempo. The Finale, kept to slightly over seventeen minutes, avoids episodic diffusion; its thematic recalls are articulated clearly and gathered toward a coda that crowns the symphony without inflation.

Such balance is characteristic of Szell's broader aesthetic. Unlike conductors who approached Bruckner through expansive tempo modification or metaphysical atmosphere, Szell emphasized structural coherence, clarity of texture, and fidelity to the printed score. Carnegie Hall, with its lucid acoustic, would have favoured this approach, allowing inner voices and contrapuntal strands to register with precision.

That the Eighth was presented uncut is itself significant. By mid-century, textual fidelity was increasingly regarded as a matter of principle, yet critical patience with Bruckner's vast paragraphs was not universal. Szell's solution was neither excision nor indulgence, but control: proportion as argument.

The Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra, soon to resume its historic name of the New York Philharmonic, was then in its 109th season. Szell, already transforming the Cleveland Orchestra into one of the most disciplined ensembles in the United States, brought the same standards of balance, articulation and ensemble control to his appearances in New York. These December 1950 performances demonstrate how naturally Bruckner's vast symphonic design responded to Szell's architectural intelligence.

More than seventy-five years later, this document captures both a distinguished conductor at the height of his authority and a moment in evolving American attitudes toward Bruckner. What one critic heard as length, Szell treated as structure. What seemed to some an accumulation of episodes becomes, under his direction, an ordered ascent — a symphonic argument rendered in sharply etched stone.

The recording derives from a contemporary broadcast transcription; no announcements or applause survive. The original sound carries the familiar constraints of early 1950s radio preservation, with some variability in tonal balance across the symphony. Pristine's XR remastering has brought welcome clarity and stability, restoring fullness to the orchestral image and allowing inner detail to emerge more naturally. While not modern high fidelity, the result presents a realistic and convincing perspective on this Carnegie Hall performance.



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BRUCKNER SYMPHONY NO. 8
SZELL, PHILHARMONIC-SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA OF NEW YORK

szell

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BRUCKNER SYMPHONY NO. 8
SZELL, PHILHARMONIC-SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA OF NEW YORK

XR Remastered by Andrew Rose

Recorded live at Carnegie Hall,
New York City, 17 December 1950

Total duration: 71:24

BRUCKNER Symphony No. 8 in C minor, WAB 108

1. 1st mvt. - Allegro moderato (13:57)
2. 2nd mvt. - Scherzo. Allegro moderato (Trio. Langsam) (15:05)
3. 3rd mvt. - Adagio. Feierlich langsam, doch nicht schleppend (25:08)
4. 4th mvt. - Finale. Feierlich, nicht schnell (17:14)

Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra of New York
conducted by George Szell

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