Anton Bruckner - Symphony No. 9 in D Minor

*Born September 4, 1824, Ansfelden, near Linz, Austria.*

*Died October 11, 1896, Vienna, Austria.*

**Symphony No. 9 in D Minor**

Bruckner was at work on his ninth symphony the day he died. He spent the morning at his Bösendorfer piano going over sketches for the finale. He skipped lunch, saying he had no appetite, and gave up his afternoon walk because of the wind. He later complained of feeling suddenly cold, and, just before he died, he asked his housekeeper for some tea.

“It will be my last symphony,” he had told a guest several years before. At the time of his death, three movements were complete, but Bruckner had been struggling with the finale for many months. In the nearly two hundred sketches he left for that movement, we can see that his hands had grown weak—persistent trembling made writing difficult—and we can tell, from the nature of the fragments themselves, that he was having trouble pulling his thoughts together and completing the work. When he first realized that he might not have the strength to finish it, he recommended the *Te Deum*, which he had finished in 1884, as a possible finale. But when he began to write the transition necessary to take us from the serenity of E major, with which the third movement of the symphony ends, to the brilliant C major of the *Te Deum*, he realized the futility of the plan and simply left us three magnificent movements and a pile of sketches.

Sadly, had Bruckner not been sidetracked by the endless revision of his earlier symphonies that was suggested by his students, he would have had time to finish his ninth symphony. (He might even have begun a tenth.) Bruckner regularly fell victim to the criticism and recommendations of others, even though the criticism was often pointless and the recommendations were sometimes absurd—and contrary to the composer’s own wishes. Throughout his life, Bruckner was crippled by a fearful and indecisive nature that led him to accept a job as schoolmaster (his duties included farm labor and spreading manure) when he really wanted a career in music, and later kept him from applying for the post of cathedral organist at Linz, even though he coveted the job. As a result, he reached the age of forty before writing a single great piece.

Shortly after completing his Eighth Symphony in 1887, Bruckner began to have renewed doubts about his work. He needlessly recomposed his First Symphony and, at the insistence of Franz Schalk, one of his most ambitious students, he also redid the Third. He agreed that the Second Symphony, as well as the F minor mass, would benefit from a touch up.
Because of all these unnecessary distractions, his weakening health, and a new wave of insecurity, Bruckner found that he couldn’t complete his Ninth Symphony, even though he had been at it for nine years. (He once told a visitor, “The Ninth will be my masterpiece. I just ask God that he’ll let me live until it's done.”)

Bruckner didn’t easily stand up to others, but he took comfort from his belief that posterity would prove him right. In 1892, while he was struggling with the Ninth Symphony, he had the manuscripts for his earlier symphonies bound together and stored in a sealed parcel. The will he wrote in 1894 dictated that they should go to the Vienna State Library for safekeeping. If Bruckner feared that his death would remove the only obstacle between his music and the eager hands of unsympathetic editors, he was right. The manuscript of the Ninth Symphony passed directly to Ferdinand Löwe—another “devoted” student—who published it in 1903 (seven years after the composer’s death), mutilated almost beyond recognition. Of all Bruckner’s symphonies, the Ninth suffered the worst fate. It was the newly published Löwe edition that Theodore Thomas used when he led the Chicago Symphony in the American premiere of the work in February 1904, and the truncated symphony was so compact that it was played on the first half of the concert between a Mozart aria and a Schubert song performed by the great diva of the era, Madame Ernestine Schumann-Heink.

Perhaps only a man who specifically dictated that his body should be embalmed, as Bruckner did in his will, would also take pains to seal away his life’s work, hoping to preserve it, safe from decay, for eternity. Bruckner was a man of unshakable religious conviction (he once knelt during the middle of counterpoint class when he heard the church choir next door) and deep-seated faith. All his life he was fascinated by the idea of death, and he eventually developed an obsession with viewing dead bodies. In 1888, when the remains of Beethoven and Schubert were removed to Vienna’s Central Cemetery, Bruckner went to see for himself what was left of his two heroes. He knew for certain that their music would endure and he wanted to ensure that his would, too. But it was only in 1927, with the formation of the International Bruckner Society, which began to issue definitive editions based on a critical study of his manuscripts, that the composer was vindicated.

Bruckner begins his last symphony in the depths of D minor (and there’s little doubt that, like Beethoven in his Ninth, he planned to conclude some three movements later in the brilliance of D major). Only a minute into the piece, we are in D-flat major and quickly move on to E major—this is going to be an exciting and frequently surprising harmonic adventure. The beginning of this symphony, as with most of Bruckner’s, is one continuous unfolding. We can’t accurately judge the size or scope of Bruckner’s territory until we reach the first climax—a ferocious fff unison theme from the entire orchestra; only then do we begin to sense the vastness of the space yet to come. Analysts often have stumbled in trying to relate this extraordinary first movement to traditional sonata form, for, although it does develop and restate material, Bruckner’s methods are very much his own. He makes a number of slow ascents to great fff peaks, but each time, although the approach seems familiar, the view from the top is slightly different. And each time the summit reveals further peaks ahead. The last climax is deafeningly final, and yet it refuses to choose between D major and D minor, so that, even as the movement comes to an end, Bruckner prepares to go on.

The scherzo settles for D minor, but only after considerable stalling—the odd opening chord, sustained by the winds while the violins spell out the notes it is made of, remains wonderfully ambiguous. The full orchestra, fortissimo and very
insistent, finally establishes D minor. The mood is sinister throughout, and when the oboe tries to inject a note of cheerfulness, the rest of the orchestra is intolerant. The trio, quiet and more delicately scored, is a perfect companion in mood and spirit.

The Adagio was the last movement Bruckner completed, and it carries us very near the crisis of tonality from which Schoenberg eventually would not retreat. The very first phrase, one of the most arresting in all music, is extraordinarily rich harmonically. Although we are destined to reach E major in just seven measures, Bruckner seems to explore the universe on the way. The opening unaccompanied violin theme contains, in its first four notes, two (C-natural and A-sharp) that have no place in E major. The first harmony is, unbelievably, a C major triad (against an A-sharp in the melody!).

Bruckner took Wagner's chromaticism to heights so unexpected that Löwe had his work cut out for him when he set out to clean up Bruckner's language. One of Bruckner's boldest strokes, a chord containing all seven pitches of the harmonic minor scale, was reduced to a mere diminished seventh chord—a commonplace in the music of Bach, writing some two hundred years before. Bruckner's chord, coming at the final, wrenching climax, conveys such utter terror that, for one moment, we glimpse the abyss. A horrible moment of silence follows. Bruckner approaches E major, returning not only to harmonic stability, but to reassuring snatches of familiar music—the serene violin arpeggios from the Adagio of his Eighth Symphony and the horn call that opened his Seventh. The sense of closure and finality is great, and one wonders if Bruckner unconsciously knew that this was the last music he would write.

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