



ORCHID CLASSICS

BRUCKNER 9

Norrköping Symphony Orchestra

Karl-Heinz Steffens, conductor



ORC100371

Anton Bruckner (1824-1896)

Symphony No.9 in D minor, WAB 109

1 I	Feierlich, misterioso	24.29
2 II	Scherzo. Bewegt, lebhaft – Trio: Schnell	11.24
3 III	Adagio. Langsam, feierlich	24.57

Total time **60.50**

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By the middle of the 1880s, Anton Bruckner was finally beginning to enjoy considerable popular and critical success after decades of uphill struggle. After several decades working as an organist and choral director in St Florian and Linz, he had relocated to Vienna in 1868 to take up a professorship at the city's Conservatory and dedicated his energies almost exclusively to the composition of symphonic music. But his symphonies were baffling to his audiences: epic in length, shot through with the influence of his musical idol, Richard Wagner, and quite different in their construction and impact from those works by the city's other emerging symphonist, Johannes Brahms. Brahms's supporters in the press frequently ridiculed Bruckner's efforts (and, in private, Brahms was far from generous about the older man's works); and although he refused to give up, it is clear that Bruckner had come to expect only negative criticism from the majority of the musical establishment.

But from around 1884, performances of Bruckner's Third and Seventh Symphonies in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands and America brought him new admirers and international recognition. With a growing number of young musicians in the Austrian capital voicing admiration for the music of Wagner and his acolytes, Bruckner found himself not only surrounded by new students and advocates, but also galvanised by their enthusiasm. He completed the first version of his Eighth Symphony on 10 August 1887 (this work, like so many others, was revised several times before reaching its definitive version in 1890) – and two days later he began sketching a Ninth Symphony in D minor.

D minor was a key in which Bruckner had composed two symphonies before: the Third, now newly successful across Europe and the US, and the so-called 'Nullte' (0th) Symphony of 1869, which he later withdrew. Crucially, it is also the key of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, and Bruckner made no secret of his tremendous admiration for that work. On at least one occasion he complained rather wryly that the main theme of the first movement had come to him in that

key: 'It annoys me now that the theme for my new symphony came to me in D minor, for people will say: naturally, Bruckner's Ninth must be in the same key as Beethoven's. But I am not going to transpose it...'

The tremolo opening of bare octaves, with only small gestures bringing in other notes for the first minute or so of the piece, immediately conjures the murky opening of Beethoven's earlier work. But quickly this illusion is dispelled as Bruckner pushes the music away in new directions. Even a thunderous restatement of the opening theme is not enough to hold the music in the home key, and we set off from here on a journey around twenty minutes in the making as a host of themes are unspooled before us. We are wafted through passages of gentle lyricism, presented with grandly optimistic fanfares, and thrown into moments of profound turmoil – before returning to the mighty gestures of that opening theme, still awaiting a sense of true resolution.

The Scherzo was described by one early reviewer as a glimpse of 'the master's final smile' in an 'orchestral shower of sparks'. There are moments of light airiness, to be sure – but they arrive between crashing emphases from brass and timpani, and some surprisingly forceful discords and unexpected changes of direction. A featherlight Trio provides contrast at the movement's heart. Several versions survive of this section, as Bruckner tinkered to get the Trio, and its crucial join back to the opening material, to flow to his satisfaction.

Igor Stravinsky described the Adagio as 'one of the most truly inspired works in symphonic form,' and many commentators writing in the years immediately after Bruckner's death framed it as the composer's farewell to the world. In its rich, achingly beautiful string writing, there is more than a little to remind us of Gustav Mahler, who was so admiring of Professor Bruckner when Mahler himself was still a student at the Vienna Conservatoire. But alongside these singing, almost Schubertian melodies, there are dramatically grating dissonances too; and a sense of striving ever upwards and onwards to a place not yet –

quite – reached. Even as the glowing brass chords fade away in the final bars of the movement, we are left with a sense of expectation: anticipation for the movement that will resolve all. But that movement was left unfinished at Bruckner's death on 11 October 1896.

This is not the end of Bruckner's surviving manuscript: indeed he seems to have made quite considerable progress on the finale. But he had been ill for so many years by the time he finally died that 'mourners' descended upon his apartment with astonishing speed, and many collected souvenirs from his bedside. Among these were pages taken directly from the end of the Ninth's manuscript, and many of these remain missing. This leaves would-be performers with three options: to put together a completion from the scraps that remain; to bring the piece to a close at the end of the Adagio; or to supplement another piece of Bruckner's as a conclusion. It seems the composer suggested that his *Te Deum*, completed back in 1884, could be used for the purpose – but the fit is an awkward one, and scholars have suggested that he may have offered this option only as it became clear to him that his health would most likely never recover enough to allow him to finish the symphonic project as he had hoped. After all, in the better days of the 1880s, he had replied to the suggestion that he might close – as Beethoven had done – with a choral finale by insisting, 'No, Bruckner is not as stupid as that.'

The Ninth Symphony lay unperformed for seven years after its composer's death. Finally, in February 1903, his old pupil Ferdinand Löwe made parts from the original manuscript and announced a premiere by the combined forces of the Academic Wagner Society and the Vienna Konzertverein. Unfortunately, Löwe seems to have felt that he knew better than his former teacher, and made numerous alterations to the work as he rehearsed the orchestra for that performance on 11 February. The score was published later that same year in Löwe's version, an 'anomaly of history' as one Bruckner scholar puts it, which has subsequently been



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superseded by newer editions that return to Bruckner's original. And, despite not having the chance to see the work through to completion himself, the composer had already decided upon the dedication that it should bear: 'My Ninth belongs to the good Lord – that is, if he will accept it!'

Katy Hamilton

The Norrköping Symphony Orchestra

The Norrköping Symphony Orchestra has the reputation of being one of the most exciting orchestras in Scandinavia. The orchestra was founded in 1912 and has a long and rich history. It also has an important place in the region's cultural life. Among the orchestra's principal conductors you can find distinguished names like Herbert Blomstedt 1954-62, Okku Kamu, 1972-79, Franz Welsch- Möst, 1986-91 and Alan Buribayev 2007-11.

The orchestra's main repertoire reaches from Mozart to Mahler but 20th and 21st century music is a very vital part in its programming.

The orchestra tours regularly in Sweden and abroad. In August 2024 it visited the Concertgebouw for the first time and in 2025 the orchestra has been invited to perform at the Berlin Philharmonie during Musikfest Berlin.



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Karl-Heinz Steffens

Conductor

Karl-Heinz Steffens has been Chief Conductor and Artistic Advisor of the Norrköping Symphony Orchestra since the season 2020-2021.

He is recognised as a conductor of great distinction in both the symphonic and operatic worlds. Karl-Heinz Steffens has worked with ensembles such as the Bavarian Radio Symphony, Berlin Philharmonic, Helsinki Philharmonic, Israel Philharmonic, Munich Philharmonic, Orchestre National de Lyon, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Toronto Symphony Orchestra and the Tonhalle Orchestra in Zurich as well as the Radio Symphony Orchestras of Berlin, Cologne, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Hannover, Leipzig and Stuttgart. Until 2022 he served as Music Director at the Prague State Opera.

Prior to his conducting career, Steffens was a highly respected solo clarinetist who also held several orchestral positions culminating in the successive posts of Principal Clarinet with the Bavarian Radio and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestras.

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Producer & engineer: Roland Kistner

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