

Symphony No. 9 in D minor

ANTON BRUCKNER

B. September 4, 1824, Ansfelden, Austria

D. October 11, 1896, Vienna

Premiered on February 11, 1903 in Vienna by the Wiener Concertvereinsorchester under Ferdinand Löwe with his revisions.

Scored for three flutes, three oboes, three clarinets, three bassoons, eight horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings (approx. 59 minutes).

During the last seven years of his life, Bruckner occupied himself primarily with composing his Ninth Symphony. He finished sketching the first two movements of the work in 1889, but criticism of his Eighth Symphony caused him to revise it. This project stalled, however, and it wasn't until 1891 that he returned to the Ninth Symphony, completing the first three movements in 1894. During the final two years of his life, Bruckner devoted himself completely to composing the finale, which he managed to complete up through the beginning of the coda before his death in 1896.

A characteristic of Bruckner's later compositions is that the first movement departs from conventional symphonies by combining the development and the recapitulation sections. It is easiest to understand the first movement by dividing it into three large sections: a statement, a counterstatement, and a coda. The beginning of the first movement is essentially a 62-measure crescendo that introduces several thematic ideas. The horns begin with soft, ominous calls that rise and fall and continue with louder, more dissonant cries. New ideas enter in the woodwinds and strings, and the music leads into a climax of massive proportions that introduces the main theme. Pizzicato descending string lines form a transition between the climax and a new lyrical passage which provides a brief respite from the dark minor-mode hues of the preceding music. This lyrical music grows more expansive but ultimately decays into string tremolos at a hushed dynamic which point a new theme in minor obliterates the major-mode relief.

The counterstatement combines and reorchestrates the main thematic elements presented so far. The flutes, followed by the rest of the woodwinds, begin this section by restating the horn calls from the opening of the piece. The idea is then taken by the brass, after which the music comes to a halt followed by fragments of the lyrical melody heard earlier. Other themes are recombined, and return to the major key brings forth a minor-mode response. Descending lines in the woodwinds followed by the brass form a transition to the coda, which begins with eerie falling chromatic figures in the strings and horn call imitations in the winds. The piece finally returns to the main theme of the movement before ending with powerful chords in D minor.

The second movement *Scherzo* is a terrifying and diabolical section of the piece. The music actually begins with nearly two measures of silence and the oboes and clarinets enter at the end of the second measure creating a chord that is sustained for almost twenty measures. Pizzicato strings enter in the third measure, continuously

plucking dissonant sonorities over which the first violins play a fiendish melody, which ultimately comes to a screeching halt, followed by relentless double forte chords in the strings and brasses. A slithering, chromatic tune is then heard amid this frightening atmosphere and it is only with an oboe solo in the major key is played that we experience a brief relief from the harshness of this movement, which ends in minor. The ensuing trio is unusual in that it is faster than the scherzo. The first theme is staccato with chromatic inflections and the second is expansive and lyrical. The end of the trio is followed by an uncomfortably long pause and then a return to the devilish scherzo.

The third movement *Adagio* is profound and personal, but also tortuous, as the music seems to be searching for a way out of the horrors it experienced in the previous movements. The first theme moans in agony and is played by the first violins alone. As additional instruments enter, the sound intensifies and the trumpets begin to play mysterious fanfares. The horns follow this with a dark chorale. The texture eventually thins to include only the strings, and the minor-mode music of the opening is transformed into major. A flute solo closes this section, and the agonized violin theme from the opening returns again. The music eventually reaches another climax, characterized by dirge-like scalar motion in the lower strings, syncopated rhythms in the violins, and horn-call imitations in the winds. Upward chromatic motion in the strings and woodwinds with interjections in the brass usher in a new, calmer section characterized by pizzicato strings and arching chromatic lines in the upper woodwinds. This feeling of calm is sustained and continuous motion in the strings and fragments of thematic material in the winds ultimately bring the music to a solemn close.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Bruckner's Symphony No. 9 Feb. 3-5, 2000 with Jerzy Semkow conducting.

DSO SHOP @ THE MAX RECOMMENDS:

Bruckner, Symphony No. 9, Günter Wand conducting the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, RCA 62323.

Program notes by Emily Weingarten, a senior at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance.