

The last three symphonies of Bruckner form a triptych, where each represents a different road to explore and develop. The Seventh is the search for an ideal, as if a hand were trying to get a hold of something that is out of its reach. The Eighth is the heroic struggle of man, both tragically and affirmatively. The Ninth takes this heroic struggle to the cosmic level. The first two define the battlefield at the human level, and this offers the possibility of some kind of triumph. In the Seventh, ecstasy brings us closer to what cannot be reached in any other way. In the Eighth, the conquest of our own integrity gives us the conviction to face life affirmatively. Both achievements are based on the heroic ethic, also the ethic of the free man. In the Ninth, that same ethic will lead us to a very different result.

What can man do when facing a Cosmos that is immense and implacable? It depends on the quality of the man. Common men will try to project their own ethic to this Cosmos, creating their own gods. Once these gods are created in their own image, they will proceed to negotiate or “trade” with them. These common men will ask for eternal life, a paradise, or maybe a certain number of virgins to enjoy in the “afterlife”. With this we can feel secure, or as secure as we can be as long as the doubts of Hamlet do not creep into our minds.

A free man will know that this negotiation is useless. He knows that he can only give his life without asking for anything in return. He will, of course, give a life of integrity and nobility. A life that is surprisingly close to what is elemental and implacable in the Cosmos. It is a life owned by him alone and that only he can give. It is said that Bruckner was an ignorant peasant and that he was devoutly Catholic. The Ninth, once again, casts doubts on both premises. Bruckner was, indeed, a simple and even elemental man. But he was also wise. His wisdom, with this simplicity as its foundation, gives us a vision of the Cosmos without “arabesques” or “philosophy”. His Cosmos is at the same time terrible and kind, wild and beautiful, destructive and magnificently creative. While Bruckner definitely considered himself a Catholic, it is difficult to reconcile this position with a vision of the Cosmos where there seems to be no redemption, just action and entropy.

Like his great guide Beethoven before him, Bruckner did not realize that his Cosmic Symphony had to end in the third movement, the Adagio. Fortunately, unlike Beethoven, Bruckner not only left his fourth movement unfinished, but he also composed the end of the Adagio in a way that allows the symphony to end there, without sounding “unfinished”. This is not the case of Schubert’s “Unfinished” or Beethoven’s Ninth if we only play the first three movements. Listening to the “reconstructions” of the Finale of Bruckner’s Ninth, one cannot escape the sense that something is forced. It could be that one is used to feel the completeness of the three finished movements after more than forty years listening to the work without feeling the need for something more. But actually, one doesn’t feel that a triumphant Finale makes any sense after this Adagio. Lets explain, step by step, how we arrive at this terrible and marvelous conclusion.

In his final symphonic triptych, Bruckner uses three themes in his first movements, instead of the two themes used in the classical symphony. The dialectic implied in the two-theme structure is as natural as Darwinian evolution. It forms the foundation of a

dramatic struggle that is the basis of Sonata Form. What then is the purpose of this third theme in these first movements? In the Seventh and Eighth symphonies, with the struggle developing at the human level, the first theme is noble and heroic, presenting the road to explore in the work. The second theme, consistent with the classical symphonic tradition, is lyrical: a contrast to the strong, heroic character of the first. In both symphonies, the third theme is impersonal, implacable, telluric and wild, all cosmic qualities. Having such a different character, it does not participate in the development of the movement. It always appears with great impact, but “in parenthesis”. In the Ninth, it is the first theme that has these cosmic qualities, changing completely the balance of the movement and the work as a whole. The second theme is still lyrical, while the third theme, in spite of a relentless rhythm that can feel telluric, behaves more like a hero: human, noble and decided. The cosmic theme, this time placed as the main theme, cannot be relegated to a parenthesis.

It is useless to fight against an implacable theme. Bruckner does not even try a normal development. In this movement, the traditional sections called Development and Recapitulation are collapsed into one. The first theme is developed exhaustively before the return of the second and third themes. In the Coda, the first theme is unstoppable, recalling the end of the coda of the first movement of Beethoven’s Ninth. It is quite clear, even in the d minor tonality, that Bruckner’s Ninth is the sibling of Beethoven’s corresponding symphony.

Not even the unstoppable force that ends the first movement prepares us for this wild Scherzo. Up to this time in the history of music, no scherzo had been this savagely titanic. Bruckner shows us, more convincingly than ever before, that if one is not afraid of one’s demons, they can be of tremendous creative value. Before, Bruckner had contrasted his Scherzos with lyrical, ländler-like Trios. But not in his Cosmic Symphony: the tempo is now even faster, and the demons can fly. There is no time for relaxation in this movement.

In the Adagio, we are back in the world of the first movement. Soon after it begins, there is a great explosion of sound from the orchestra. It is a moment of revelation that recalls, in atmosphere, the section of the Funeral March of Beethoven’s Eroica Symphony that comes after the fugue. The immenseness of the Cosmos becomes evident. And, as it becomes evident, it dissolves into nothing. The theme falls to pieces and disappears into silence. After a long journey, including a repetition of the just mentioned section; the movement reaches its climax with this same theme, now more ominous than ever. The silence will now come suddenly. We are in the presence of the abyss, where we will offer our life without fear and without hope, not expecting anything in return. In the rest of the movement the themes will again fall to pieces. The symphony, in the magnificent “incomplete” form that we know, will end the way a clash between a free man and the Cosmos must end. We live to act. Our destiny begins inside of us but it must be fulfilled out there. The only thing that counts is what we do.