

The Search for the Ideal

The last three symphonies of Bruckner form a triptych where each work represents a different road to explore and develop. The Seventh is the search of an ideal as if a hand were trying to touch something that is just out of reach. The Eighth is the heroic struggle of man, with all its tragedy and affirmation. The Ninth develops this heroic struggle at a cosmic level.

The Seventh Symphony begins with an expansive theme that is noble and stunning in its beauty. It comes from within and looks to fulfill its destiny in lofty heights. The noble man knows that he does not live for happiness alone. Our emotions are not transcendent, and are important only for ourselves. We know that we have a mission to accomplish in this world. We are here to change the world. But how do we do this? Which way should we go? Common men look around them to see what others are doing. Free men look inside themselves, and it is inside that they see what direction to take. We are reminded of Nietzsche's dictum: Become who you are!

Whatever our destiny is, it will be difficult to attain. If it isn't, then it isn't worthy of us. We will have to fight for it, and it is probable that we will not fulfill it all. We throw ourselves at it without any guarantee of success, but with confidence in our strength. The main theme of the Seventh expresses yearning and affirmation as we seek our destiny. The first movement expresses our struggle, always guided by the radiance within. At the end of the movement we achieve a glorious affirmation of our vision.

The search continues in the second movement, now in a more reflexive manner, which gives it greater strength and tenacity. The climax in this Adagio, which is also the climax of the symphony as a whole, is achieved at the end of a long crescendo, with the main theme repeated time and again in the brass, while obsessive figurations in the violins support it and push it forward. The calm after the climax was interrupted by the news of the death of his beloved Richard Wagner. The pain he felt is expressed by the horns, after which the movement will end in a calm that is more an ideal than a reality.

This points out a problem with this symphony as a whole. The climax is achieved too early. Bruckner always uses the Scherzo to incorporate the elemental or demonic forces in his nature, much the same way that Beethoven does. These forces not only drive the process, but also give the climax a basis in reality, grounding the process. This lack of grounding is what makes this second movement a climax that is more an expression of an ideal than a real triumph. Certainly, it is consistent with the opening of the symphony, again an expression of reaching for an ideal. However, what do we do now?

In the third movement Scherzo, these elemental forces are unleashed, but the ideal has already been defined in the Adagio. This results in a duality that is

inconsistent with the heroic ethic expressed in the music of Beethoven and Wagner, who were Bruckner's two guides. We will never know if Bruckner was aware of this conflict, but we doubt it. We know that he never made any effort to restructure this work and we also know that he was quite willing and able to embark on profound revisions of his symphonies. In the following two symphonies, the Scherzo becomes the second movement. The Adagio, now the third movement, will no longer be a transition within the process, as it is in the typical Beethoven symphony, and becomes the movement where the process is defined. It is interesting to remember that Beethoven also moves the Adagio to the third movement in his Ninth Symphony, perhaps for the same reasons. In Bruckner's Ninth, the Adagio is such a definitive statement, that one does not feel the need for anything more.

We still have the problem of what to do with the last movement of the Seventh. Bruckner was always an artist searching for origins, clearly indicated by the opening tremolo of most of his symphonies. As a result, his endings are weaker than his beginnings. In this case, the Scherzo gives us the strength to spring into action. However, the duality, created by the separation of the ideal and the elemental, results in action without a clear purpose. Only in the Coda, with the return of the opening theme of the symphony, is a certain unity achieved. We will have to wait until the next symphony for the ideal to become reality.