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## RECORDING OF THE MONTH

### **Anton BRUCKNER (1824–1896)**

Psalm 146 in A major, WAB 37 (1858 – 1860?) (30:03)

Mass No. 3 in F minor, Große Messe, WAB 28 (1868, 1883, 1893) (60:16)

Ania Vegry (soprano), Franziska Gottwald (contralto), Clemens Bieber (tenor), Timo Riihonen (bass)

Philharmonischer Chor München

Philharmonie Festiva Ebrach/Gerd Schaller

rec. in public concert in the Abbey Church, Ebrach, Germany, 6 September 2015

Improvisation Sketches “Bad Ischl” (1890) completed by Erwin Horn (8:35)

Andante in D minor, WAB 130 (1:49)

Nachspiel in D minor, WAB 126 (4:07)

Prelude and Fugue in C minor, WAB 131 (5:54)

Fugue in D minor, WAB 125 (3:58)

“Perger” Prelude in C minor, WAB 129 (2:06)

Gerd Schaller (organ)

rec. Eisenbarth Organ, Abbey Church, Ebrach, date not provided

**PROFIL PH16034** [2 CDs: 116:48]

The 2015 Ebracher Musik summer concert series concluded on 6 September 2015 with an extraordinary concert of Bruckner’s symphonic choral music in the Ebrach Abbey Church, located in the small Franconian village of the same name. Gerd Schaller, music director of the summer festival, assembled an excellent cast of musicians including his orchestra, the Philharmonie Festiva Ebrach (with whom he has recorded the complete 11 symphonies of Anton Bruckner for the Profil label).

I was fortunate to be at this concert, and I can attest to its special nature. Not one moment was less than superbly executed, and now Profil has released a two-CD set of the event as recorded by the Bavarian Radio, plus a bonus of assorted organ works of Bruckner performed by Gerd Schaller on the Abbey pipe organ.

The highlight of this CD set is Psalm 146 by Bruckner, an odd work by any measure. First and foremost, it does not sound anything like the usual Bruckner: it is unique among his works, with nothing quite like it before or after. The closest parallels are the Psalm cantatas by Mendelssohn. We have no idea of exactly when or why it was written, but most probably it dates from the late 1850s when Bruckner was in the process of moving from St Florian/Linz to Vienna and concluding his studies with the Viennese pedagogue Simon Sechter. It was never performed during Bruckner's lifetime, there is no date on the score, no dedication and no mention of the work in Bruckner's correspondence. Thus, the mystery!

I have my own theory: Psalm 146 is an explosion of pure, pent-up inspiration from Bruckner,

a work he must have felt compelled to write, from the heart. It is a substantial work lasting more than half an hour, with double chorus, orchestra and soloists. And most importantly, it is a masterpiece by any measure, far surpassing his Requiem in D minor (1849), often considered to be the most significant of Bruckner's early works. In Maestro Schaller's interpretation, one is convinced that there is not one wasted measure, not one un-inspired moment, and never a sense of routine note-spinning that does crop up from time to time in Bruckner's early works. It has numerous memorable melodies and ends in magnificent *joie de vivre* with a prolifically prodigious fugue!

I've known Psalm 146 from an early 1970s LP recording from the Nürnberg Symphony. I liked this piece very much from this beginning and was mystified as to why it seemed ignored or forgotten among Bruckner's compositions. After the Ebrach concert I think I understand this conundrum. Psalm 146 requires large forces for performance and is *extremely* demanding music for the singers when they must learn it from scratch, which is definitely the case with such a little known work. Had it been "discovered" and announced as a hitherto unknown work of Mendelssohn or Schumann, I think it would have been taken into the choral repertoire quickly. We know it is by Bruckner, but it doesn't *sound* like Bruckner, so it's stuck in a kind of musical no-man's-land. And like much of Bruckner's music, it takes an inspired and empathetic conductor to realize an inspired performance. Maestro Gerd Schaller is certainly such a conductor, in whose hands the music takes flight to spiritual realms far beyond the notes and words printed on the page.

Psalm 146 has six movements. The first, Alleluja, lobet den Herrn, is for chorus and soprano solo, lyrical and comforting, even as the somewhat florid soprano line, sung with fluid grace by soprano Ania Vegry, prefigures the similar solo in the much later Psalm 150. A brief recitative follows, Der Herr bauet Jerusalem, which leads without pause into Movement 3. This is where Bruckner takes off the metaphorical gloves to demonstrate his mastery of counterpoint in the double chorus, Gross is unser Herr und gross seine Macht. This is the kind and quality of choral writing found in Handel's Israel in Egypt or Mendelssohn's Elijah, for example. The music seems to fly off the page with great dramatic impact, and here we *really* experience the discipline and fervor of the Philharmonischer Chor München. Movement 4, Der Herr nimmt auf die Sanften, is, in my opinion, the centerpiece of this work, serene, rather than dramatic: a double Arioso for soloists with choir of some 213 measures and lasting a little over 10 minutes. Bruckner's writing in particular for the soprano and tenor is gorgeous, featuring a lyrical cantilena that spins one heavenly melody after another, as do the solo oboe and solo violin, in an ensemble worthy of the opera Bruckner never wrote. Ms. Vegry's soubrette-like lyricism and energy, along with Mr. Bieber's lyric tenor, made a strong impression in their extensive duet. The central Chorale features the choir over a bouncy accompaniment of plucked strings. All soloists participate as the Arioso continues, unbroken, into Movement 5, Der Herr hat Wohlgefallen. Amazing music, and even more amazing when one realizes that this is a one-off masterstroke of style and technique that Bruckner would never return to. Bruckner has saved his *piece de resistance* for the end, Movement 6, Alleluja, lobet den Herrn, 238 measures of contrapuntal mastery in one of Bruckner's largest and longest examples of prelude and double fugue. It is fiendishly difficult for the singers, and very much in the spirit of the big choral fugues of Handel, Mozart and Bach. I see this is a deliberate – I would say conscious – testimonial from a master composer confident in his skill ["Look what I can do!"], as it brings Psalm 146 to a triumphal conclusion. The Philharmonischer Chor München, trained to an inch of its collective life by its director, Andreas Herrmann, sing as if possessed; and perhaps they were, by the spirit of Anton Bruckner. Equally, I have nothing but the highest praise for the excellent contribution of the Philharmonie Festiva under the inspired leadership of Gerd Schaller.

I have deliberately focused my detailed comments on the unfamiliar Psalm, leaving the Mass No 3 in F minor for some general observations. Again, Gerd Schaller and his Ebrach forces do themselves proud. It is important to note that he views this Mass, correctly in my opinion, as a prime example of High Romantic, Roman Catholic musical expression, consumed with the passionate depiction of the central tenets of the Christian faith. There are no pious platitudes or calming lullabies here, and no pernicious straight-jacket from the historical performance crowd, but rather vivid, ecstatic, awe-inspiring, mystical drama of the highest order, with brilliant music depicting the Crucifixion and Agony of Christ, his Glorious Ascension and the terror of the Final Judgment. This, by the way, falls roughly at the midpoint of the Mass and is in many ways the emotional climax of the piece: "He will come, with glory, to judge the living and the dead!" set to some of the most harrowing music imaginable. The Gloria and Credo are presented attacca on the CD, unlike the live performance where Schaller provided a brief pause for everyone to collect his or her breath after the substantial demands of the Gloria. The attacca segue, which I first encountered on the DG LP of the Mass as conducted by Eugen Jochum, seems both musically and dramatically appropriate and is indeed a bit of coup de théâtre. Thus with the Gloria/Credo under Schaller we have a unified half-hour of mainly *forte-fortissimo* choral singing, exhilarating to hear as it is physically taxing for the musicians to sing. Both Gloria and Credo conclude with jubilant, major-key fugues, crowned with trumpets and timpani, which the Ebrach musicians execute with blazing affirmation.

In the course of Bruckner's Mass, the listener senses the heritage of Beethoven's Missa Solemnis, Schubert's two late Masses, and Berlioz's Requiem (all of which Bruckner knew). Beyond that, the high drama and musical tone-painting spring from an ethos common to the roughly contemporary Verdi Requiem and Brahms German Requiem: emotions deeply personal to the composer translated into music both uninhibited and public in its expression. In the midst of all the high drama, two moments of serenity and repose should be mentioned: the tenor solo *Et incarnatus est*, sung with sensitivity by Clemens Bieber, and the lovely *Benedictus*, one of the most Romantic movements from any of Bruckner's works, the main theme of which would be reused a few years later in the Adagio of Symphony 2. Special kudos here to the strings of the Philharmonie Festiva for producing their glorious wash of sound.

CD 2 is filled out with a selection of Bruckner's original organ works, plus a reconstruction by Erwin Horn from three pages of Bruckner's sketches outlining an improvisation he gave in July 1890 at the wedding of Austrian nobility. Bruckner was internationally famous for improvisation on the pipe organ and was publically acclaimed for this during tours to Britain and France. However, for whatever reason he was not inspired to any substantial composition for the instrument. Most of Bruckner's original organ works are occasional pieces of little significance within his body of works. Gerd Schaller performs them on the Eisenbarth Organ of the Abbey Church of Ebrach.

I am grateful to Profil for releasing this CD set as a major footnote to Schaller's complete symphony cycle. Sound is first-class, with a wide and deep sound stage that accurately reproduces the acoustics of the Abbey Church while keeping a clear focus on the musicians. Bavarian Radio achieved a good balance between chorus and orchestra, with the chorus appropriately forward in the sound picture, and all words can be clearly understood. This set is unique in presenting Psalm 146 and is thus self-recommending. There are many recordings of the Mass, but this new CD from Gerd Schaller goes right to the top of the list with my strongest possible recommendation.

***John Proffitt***

Member, Board of Directors, Bruckner Society of America