Daniel Barenboim conducts the Bruckner symphony cycle in New York

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The first performance ever in the US of the entire cycle of nine symphonies by the late 19th century Austrian composer Anton Bruckner (1824-1896) took place at New York City's Carnegie Hall between January 19 and 29 of this year. Daniel Barenboim led his Berlin Staatskapelle, the resident orchestra of the Berlin State Opera, where he has been the music director for the past 25 years.

A performance of the Bruckner symphony cycle is noteworthy in part because the composer has sometimes been held in lesser regard, compared to some of his contemporaries, including Brahms, Dvorak and Tchaikovsky, as well as a later generation of symphonic masters, including Gustav Mahler.

In recent decades Bruckner has, however, enjoyed growing popularity, especially in Europe, where his symphonic cycle has been performed on several occasions, including by Christian Thielemann at the Dresden Staatskapelle and Mariss Jansons at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw.

Live performances of the composer's First, Fifth and Seventh Symphonies at the recent Carnegie Hall series certainly demonstrated that Bruckner deserves a significant place in the history of classical music of his era, and that his influence is felt in music of a later period as well.

Bruckner has had his detractors ever since he emerged as a composer in the 1870s, comparatively late in life. He was born in Upper Austria, and came from a peasant background. The provincial musician, trained as an organist, did not move to Vienna until he was 43 years old. His First Symphony was not completed until 1868, when he was 44, and did not receive its first performance in Vienna until 1891, when Bruckner was 67.

Famously lacking in self-confidence and sophistication, Bruckner was never satisfied with his work and was often prevailed upon to revise his compositions, in some cases repeatedly. Bruckner revised the Fifth Symphony in 1890, for instance, but Barenboim and the Staatskapelle performed it in the original version from the 1860s.

In Vienna Bruckner was sometimes mocked for his lack of refinement. He was savagely attacked by Eduard Hanslick, the Viennese critic and close friend of Johannes Brahms. Hanslick was known for his conservative musical tastes and his extreme hostility to the music of Richard Wagner. These last decades of the 19th century became known in musical circles as the "war of the Romantics," with Hanslick and others pitting Brahms against Wagner, in an atmosphere of musical factionalism encouraged by partisans of both composers.

Many artists, including Bruckner, did not join in this conflict. Although he was known for his worshipful attitude toward Wagner and his music, Bruckner's absolute music also differed in important respects from the programmatic approach of the man who reinvented opera as music drama through his theory of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Another obstacle facing Bruckner's music, for decades after his death, was the fact that the Nazi dictatorship elevated him, along with Wagner, to the status of a revered cultural icon. Bruckner was one of Hitler's favorite composers, and for decades after the Second World War his music was often avoided amid accusations of anti-Semitism and the taint of association with Nazism.

In fact, while Wagner was a notorious anti-Semite, there is no evidence that Bruckner harbored such views, although anti-Semitism was widespread in Vienna during this period. On the contrary, Bruckner had a high opinion of Jewish colleagues. Mahler, who studied briefly with the older composer, was one of Bruckner's strongest advocates from the 1880s, when the younger composer began his own career. He later called Bruckner his "forerunner."

Even if Bruckner had shared Wagner's anti-Semitism, however, that would not be a reason, as Barenboim has shown in relation to Wagner, to dismiss his music. It is necessary to come to grips with the genius that found expression in Wagner's operas, without ignoring the anti-Semitism that had its impact in his life and on his career.

Bruckner's critics, both in the 1880s and today, have accused him of long-windedness, of needless repetition and extended development sections that sometimes seem to go nowhere in particular. His orchestration has been deemed boring and at times bombastic.

Barenboim does not agree with those who come down on the minus side when it comes to Bruckner's work. As he put it in a recent interview, "If music is only a question of entertainment and the pleasure of a pastime, then obviously Bruckner is not the composer for you. If music is an expression of what can be expressed that cannot be expressed in any other way—namely with words—then Bruckner is of extreme importance."

Patient listening in fact reveals much that is fascinating and impressive. There is Bruckner's wonderful melodic facility, especially his lyrical slow movements, as in the Fifth and Seventh Symphonies. He is also justly esteemed for his use of counterpoint, the combination of independent musical lines. Ideas presented independently, and developed over a lengthy period, are revealed as essentially unified at the conclusion. Many of his symphonies, notably the Fifth again, have a cyclical character, with the return of early thematic material at the conclusion.

The composer is also known for his orchestration, which often presents the music in massive blocks of sound. While some find this pompous, the percussion and the brass choir can provide a moving and even thrilling experience, especially in live performance.

Bruckner was known for his devout Catholicism, and even dedicated his Ninth Symphony, for which the Finale remained unfinished at his

death, “to my dear God.” It is of course not necessary to share the composer’s religious beliefs to appreciate the musical achievement in his symphonies. As the composer Russell Platt observed in an article on the Bruckner cycle, the music “combines formidable complexity with utter simplicity.” The complexity in these works, which range in length from nearly an hour to nearly an hour and a half, is undeniable. Careful listening also reveals their simplicity.

All of the symphonies adhere closely to the traditional form as it had emerged a century before Bruckner. While Liszt, Cesar Franck, and later Richard Strauss developed single movement symphonic tone poems, and 20th century composers introduced other innovations, Bruckner remained faithful to the four-movement form. His middle two movements, as is usually the case in symphonic composition, consisted of a slow movement and a dance-like scherzo, usually but not always in that order.

The humble and timid Bruckner, so unsure of himself in public and so uncertain of his achievements, nevertheless found a way to develop a new content within the old forms. This included increased use of dissonances, pronounced harmonic shifts which saw the music traveling through many different key signatures, and also the use of polyphony, as discussed above.

On this most recent occasion, Daniel Barenboim made a strong case for Bruckner, one of his favorite composers—he has recorded the entire cycle of Bruckner symphonies three times. The nine concerts each paired a lengthy Bruckner symphony with a Mozart concerto, with Barenboim conducting from the piano in the case of the piano concerti. The soloists were drawn from the Staatskapelle itself in some of the programs, notably in the Mozart Sinfonia Concertante for Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, Horn and Orchestra, and also the Sinfonia Concertante for Violin, Viola and Orchestra.

One does not usually associate the music of Mozart with that of Bruckner, but in fact only 70 years separates the years of their birth. The symphonies of Bruckner and the mature work of Mozart are only a century apart, but much happened during this period. The music shows both a continuity as well as the enormous changes that had taken place—the movement from mature classicism to late Romanticism. The role of Beethoven, who figured so strongly in the work of Bruckner as of most of his contemporaries, must be mentioned, as the crucial revolutionary transition between classicism and romanticism.

The performances of the First, Fifth and Seventh Symphonies under Barenboim last month all made a strong impression. The First, which is the least performed among the nine, has its own charms, while anticipating the more ambitious composer of later years. Unlike most of the other symphonies, it opens energetically. The final movement begins even more forcefully, with a fortissimo theme.

The Fifth was Bruckner’s most ambitious symphony when it appeared, and it is sometimes depicted as messy and almost incoherent. The Berlin Staatskapelle performance showed otherwise. The adagio movement was particularly moving, with its alternating themes, a melody begun by the solo oboe, contrasted with a majestic subject for the entire string choir.

The final movement of the Fifth harks back to Beethoven’s illustrious Ninth. Bruckner briefly revisits the main themes of earlier movements, just as Beethoven did. Whereas Beethoven then began the Ode to Joy, perhaps the most famous of all final movements, Bruckner introduces new themes and subjects them to fugal treatment before finally combining the two main themes of the movement in a triumphant conclusion. Especially interesting is the role of the “reinforcement” trumpets and trombones. Three of each of these two instruments sit silent for much of the symphony. When they join together in the final movement with an equal number of trumpets and trombones who have been actively engaged for the entire work, the effect is electric.

The Seventh Symphony is among Bruckner’s most popular, and was his one immediate success when it appeared in 1884. It is certainly one of the composer’s most tuneful works. Noteworthy is the exciting return of the principal theme of the opening movement at the conclusion of the work. It is also the first time that Bruckner used Wagner tubas, so named because it was Wagner who commissioned their use in some of the Ring operas. Wagner tubas are essentially modified French horns. A cross between the horn and the tuba, they were used by Wagner to provide a deeper tone color than typical for horns, something more like trombones. Bruckner used these instruments in the adagio movement of the Seventh, in what is generally understood as a memorial tribute to Wagner, who had died a few months before it was completed.

Barenboim is one of relatively few contemporary conductors devoted to this music and insistent about its relevance to contemporary audiences. He is known for his high musical standards and wide knowledge. His seriousness calls to mind that of several other pianist-intellectuals, particularly Alfred Brendel and the late Charles Rosen.

In his efforts to connect with his audience, both to educate and to remain politically engaged, he also bears comparison, despite some obvious differences in personality, to another pianist and conductor, Leonard Bernstein. Barenboim is well known as the founder, nearly 20 years ago, along with Palestinian writer and intellectual Edward Said, of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, which brings together young Arab and Israeli musicians.

The second of the concerts in the Bruckner cycle took place at Carnegie Hall on January 20. This happened to mark 60 years to the day since Barenboim had made his Carnegie Hall debut as a 14-year-old pianist. It was also the day of the inauguration of Donald Trump. Without mentioning the name of the new US president, Barenboim spoke eloquently on the importance of music, against what he termed the unwarranted stigma of elitism, and of how music connects audience and musicians as “one community” in “human communication.” In an obvious allusion to Trump’s extreme nationalism and jingoism, the conductor said that America had the “possibility” to “make the *world* great.”

All the Bruckner concerts were nearly sold out, and the audiences included many younger people. There is something mysterious and private in his music, but also much that is blunt, imposing, even optimistic. He deserves his place in musical history.