Bruckner

Symphony No. 8 in C minor op. 108 (version Robert Haas)

Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra
Bernard Haitink *cond*

RCO LIVE RCO 05003 (2 CDs: 86 minutes: DSD)
Recorded live at the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam, 18 and 20 February 2005.

Bruckner's Symphony No. 8 has an extensive but chequered recording history. Austro-German enthusiasm for the work after its first performance developed, in the early twentieth century, towards an association with political extremism, which still lingers around the wartime recordings of Furtwängler, Karajan and others. By contrast, the hostility with which the symphony's London premiere under Klemperer was greeted in 1929 is emblematic of the struggle for recognition that Bruckner's music has endured in the Anglophone world; perusal of the discography quickly reveals the relative novelty of sustained transatlantic interest. At the same time, textual problems, always an inconvenient supplement to performance, are especially severe in the case of the Eighth Symphony. Discrepancies between the first version of 1887, the 1890 revision, the first edition of 1892 and the two *Gesamtausgabe* editions of the 1890 version from Robert Haas and Leopold Nowak quickly undermine any ideal of authenticity to which conductors might aspire.

Bernard Haitink's significance in this history is considerable. His stature results from sustained productivity, from his championship of the symphonies at a time when they were hardly universally regarded as mainstream repertoire and from an approach that generally steers a sensible path between interpretative extremes. The present live recording is at least Haitink's tenth issue of the Eighth Symphony. There are already five releases available with the Concertgebouw, including one recorded in 1960 for the complete Philips set; he has also recorded the work with the Vienna Philharmonic, the Staatskapelle Dresden and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Such eminence notwithstanding, Haitink does not evade controversy. Like many conductors, he has been a consistent exponent of the Haas edition (supporters of Nowak include Jochum, Chailly, Maazel, Solti and Harnoncourt; a few, seminally Inbal, favour 1887); this disk continues that preference. This is a problem, because Haas's edition is increasingly regarded with musicological suspicion. Crucially, Haas mixed his sources; and, as numerous commentators have shown, his motivations are hard to separate from his involvement with National Socialist cultural politics.[1] Unfortunately, Haas's edition has not only gained credibility amongst performers, it has also accrued a patina of aesthetic integrity, based on the (usually analytically unsubstantiated) perception that it

[1] Much has been written on this matter; see, for instance, Morten Solvik, 'The International Bruckner Society and the N.S.D.A.P.: A Case Study of Robert Haas and the Critical Edition', *Musical Quarterly* 83 (1998): 362–82; Benjamin Korstvedt, 'Anton Bruckner in the Third Reich and After', *Musical Quarterly* 80 (1996): 132–60, and '"Return to the Pure Sources": The Ideology and Text-critical Legacy of the First Bruckner *Gesamtausgabe*', in *Bruckner Studies*, ed. Paul Hawkshaw and Timothy L. Jackson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997): 91–121.

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is somehow more formally successful than Nowak's edition, apostrophized in Deryck Cooke's off-hand dismissal of it as 'a piece of musicological pedantry which makes no structural sense at all'.[2] Such judgements may appeal to performers who condone the thoughtless criticism of musical scholarship, but they misrepresent the design of the unmixed 1890 version and downplay the problems to which Haas's edition gives rise. We have, in short, a rift between performing tradition and musicological good sense of a rare order of magnitude, which Haitink and others seem happy to perpetuate.

Taking due account of this, and allowing for some small ensemble problems, which are understandable given the live context, this recording is nevertheless a fine addition to Haitink's discography. Above all, it offers a considered response to the vital matter of whether Bruckner's style should be understood as dynamic and teleological or monumental and static. Questions of tempo, and of the relationship between pacing and structural articulation, are crucial in this respect. Conductors and critics alike have consistently regarded appropriate Brucknerian tempi as slow, irrespective of expressive indications or notated metre, and this has reinforced a critical perception that separates Bruckner from the 'classic-Romantic tradition' on the grounds that he sought to portray timeless religious verities rather than directed material processes.

To be sure, Haitink's Eighth has become markedly slower over the years: compare the 16 minutes 40 seconds he takes over the first movement here with the sprightly 13 minutes 57 seconds in his 1960 rendition. He also adds more than 2 minutes to the Scherzo and the Adagio, and the Finale expands by nearly 4 minutes. Yet, for the first movement at least, this brings him in line with a general average: recordings of the Haas edition's first movement are predominantly between 16 and 17 minutes' duration. Karajan habitually took between 16 and 17 minutes; Wand decelerated from just below 16 minutes in 1979 to a capacious 17 minutes 25 seconds in 2000; Boulez is relatively pithy at 15 minutes and 8 seconds. Recordings of the Nowak first movement, which is of identical bar length, supply both extremes of the spectrum: Jochum and the Berlin Philharmonic are refreshingly brisk at 13 minutes and 36 seconds; Celibidache and the Munich Philharmonic are geologically slow at 20 minutes and 6 seconds.

The vogue for slowness is questionable on both practical and interpretative grounds. In the outer movements, it undermines Bruckner's alla-breve time signature: even allowing for expressive fluctuations, maintenance of the two-beat tactus becomes difficult at slower speeds; performances of relative brevity are still manifestly conducted in four for significant stretches of music (listen, for instance, to Boulez's first-theme group at the start of the first movement). At the outer limits, the alla-breve tactus is simply ignored: Celibidache and Wand prefer at the most a moderate crotchet pulse. But the music's sense is changed entirely by observing a two-beat tactus: the melodic groupings, and especially the dotted and double-dotted motives of the first movement, emerge as single units in an alla-breve context, but are detrimentally broken up by a crotchet pulse. And because Bruckner frequently takes these half-bar units as the building blocks for long-range intensification processes, the cumulative effect they generate is compromised by failure to observe the notated time signature. At its worst, such neglect impacts detrimentally on the articulation of structural downbeats and so

[2] See Deryck Cooke, 'The Bruckner Problem Simplified', in *Vindications: Essays on Romantic Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1982): 43–71; 68.

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undermines the perception of form. Juxtaposition of Jochum and Celibidache exposes this graphically: the 2/2 pulse is tangible in Jochum's Dresden recording especially, and the performance drives satisfyingly through its major climaxes; Celibidache replaces articulation with rumination, and the relationship between structure and intensification evaporates, to be replaced by a kind of grandiose stasis.

Happily, Haitink never loses sight of the affiliation of metre, tempo and structural momentum. There are admittedly some difficult moments, notably in the first movement. The problematic climactic passage of the development, bars 225–249, is perhaps the most pressing case. This functions thematically as a kind of extended recapitulation, but is tonally developmental. Because the first theme does not begin in the tonic, its reprise cannot support a tonal return; this is instead transferred to the end of the section. The music consequently pulls between stabilization and intensification in a way that thwarts easy realization. Responding to Bruckner's repeated designations 'Feierlich breit' and 'breit', Haitink opts for a kind of giant ritenuto here, so that the music labours towards its tonal goal with mounting difficulty. In one respect, the sense of struggle is palpable and expressively compelling. On the other hand, Haitink risks dissolution of the forward momentum generated by the preceding intensification (bars 216–225). And here he confronts directly a dialectic that is central to the symphony's identity, but also impossible to render completely in performance: its gestures point in antithetical expressive directions; to emphasize one is invariably to neglect the other. In pulling back as the return to C minor approaches at bar 249, the sense that the tonic might be a goal at all is undermined; it appears rather as an appendix to the massive preceding first-theme restatement.

Haitink's strategy is comprehensible in relation to the way he characterizes the first theme in the exposition. In each of its statements, a slight ritenuto is placed on the dotted crotchet at the melodic apex (bar 4, beat 2 and bar 8, beat 2 respectively). As the theme falls onto its final pitch at the start of the next bar, it also regains momentum, the metre being recovered on the downbeat. This phrasing is maintained throughout the group, and it lends the material a convincing shape and purpose. In effect, the ritenuto at the climax of the development attempts the same articulation on a much larger scale; however, its expressive consequence is entirely different, arresting the music's momentum rather than propelling it forwards.

The Scherzo's purposeful tempo similarly promises a drive that several aspects of the performance unfortunately constrain. First, the phrasing of the *Hauptmotiv* is drawn out and quite deliberate. Although the motif is infrequently marked staccato, various aspects of the score compel a more incisive articulation, chiefly the relentless tremolandi in the upper strings, which can become diffuse if not underpinned by cleanly profiled motivic presentation. Second, critical harmonic events in the A section and its reprise are not as forcefully articulated as they could be. The descent onto iv^{9} of III in bars 48–49, transposed in the tonic at bars 183–184, is surprisingly matter-of-fact, and the sustained tonic chord of resolution that follows becomes amorphous for want of clear hypermetrical articulation: Chailly, for one, has rather more shape and clarity at this point.

The Trio, in contrast, is handled beautifully: the pace is slow but not laboured, the phrasing is transparent and major structural downbeats are marked sensitively and without overstatement. The Adagio is also consistently impressive. Its cumulative variation process imparts fresh urgency to the matter of how to balance Brucknerian climaxes: A, A^{1} and A^{2} sections comprise successively more protracted intensifications, leading to concomitantly

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substantial high points. Haitink handles all of this expertly, achieving a large-scale rubato that subtly stretches and compresses the tempo, whilst grading the dynamics towards the titanic E♭ 6-4 chord and subsequent flat VI interruption in bars 249–253 (compare again with Chailly, whose otherwise admirable and finely blended performance with the same orchestra powers through this climax with metronomic inflexibility). There is also some beautiful orchestral playing, for example the perfectly sustained tenor-tuba passage comprising the B theme's middle section, or the richly expressive lower strings at the melodic peaks of the B theme itself. There are two small, puzzling curiosities in the A theme: in bar 17 and its transposed repetition at bar 35, Haitink attenuates the violins' double-dotted minim so that it stops with the crotchet on beat 3 in the rest of the orchestra, whereas this pitch truthfully continues for an extra quaver, before plunging to the low A in bar 17 and B in bar 35. These alterations change the character of the phrase each time, creating brief *Luftpausen* where none exist. Conversely, this is surely one of the finest renditions of the coda committed to disk: the dynamic, tempo and ensemble are immaculately controlled, the dialogue between first violins, clarinet and horns is affecting without being cloying or sentimental, and the sense of a sustained aftermath to a monumental structural and expressive event is profound.

In the Finale, Haitink's initial tempo is bracing and significantly above the stipulated 𝅗𝅥 = 69. Again, the music can tolerate this because the alla-breve time signature is reinforced and with it the material's half-bar groupings. The 𝅗𝅥 = 60 marking for the second theme is more closely observed, although it takes the ensemble until the theme's consequent (bar 79) to settle into the new tempo. Thereafter, the conductor must navigate a minefield of stipulated but ambiguous tempo fluctuations. The indication 'noch langsamer' for the second group's central section is transparent enough and the 'a tempo' at letter G doubtless refers to 𝅗𝅥 = 60. As no new indication is given for the start of the third group, this tempo is presumably sustained and the marking 'Feierlich, innig' at letter L therefore compels deceleration in the spirit of the second group's 'noch langsamer' (conductors invariably read this as such). The return of first-group material at letter N is, however, accompanied by no performance indication; in fact, no change is indicated until letter V in the development's first core section, where the stipulation 'Erstes Zeitmaß' implies 𝅗𝅥 = 69. Subsequent indications are hard to interpret. Should 'etwas breiter' at letter W retrieve 𝅗𝅥 = 60? And should 'a tempo' at letter X take us back to 𝅗𝅥 = 69? Letters Z to Ee (the start of the recapitulation) vacillate between 'ruhig' and 'Erstes Zeitmaß'. The latter is unequivocal, especially given its structural placement; but is 'ruhig' synonymous with the second group's 'langsamer'? If not, how should it be understood?

Haitink's strategy is to return quickly to 𝅗𝅥 = 60 at letter M, and then persist with this until letter V, whereupon the initial tempo is resumed. 'Etwas breiter' at letter W is then substantially slower, but 𝅗𝅥 = 60 is more-or-less regained nine bars later. Letter X's 'a tempo' is equated with 'Erstes Zeitmaß', and 'ruhig' at letter Z is read as a broad return to 𝅗𝅥 = 60. Yet none of this is self-evident. Any tempo designation for the third-group material is inevitably speculative: an alternative reading might see letter L's 'Feierlich, innig' sustained until letter V, or at least until the end of the exposition, and 𝅗𝅥 = 60 retrieved with the return of the third subject at letter U. In any case, the core of the development can easily appear diffuse if these changes are not carefully regulated; the sense here is that 'etwas breiter' pulls back too far from 'Erstes Zeitmaß', and this disarms the music's forward thrust (as Jochum's Dresden recording shows, the material from U to

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Z is highly effective if taken at a single tempo, despite the fact that this ignores Bruckner's designations).

All of this does not, however, detract from the overall quality of the performance. The productive balance between moderation and attention to detail comes into its own in the third-group reprise. After the fugato of bars 617–638, Bruckner extracts the theme's crotchet–two-quaver continuation to form the principal voice. This recedes into the accompaniment to accommodate the return of the first movement's main theme in bars 651–660 before re-emerging and liquidating as the coda approaches. The figure's staccatissimo–legato alternation is consistently and cleanly rendered, and the pacing of the first-movement quotation and its dissolution is ideal. Two details qualify an otherwise compelling rendition of the coda: first, the extraordinary chromatic neighbour-note chord in bar 724 and its resolution towards I in the next bar are relatively underplayed in favour of an emphasis on the downbeat at bar 735, where Bruckner famously combines variants of the themes from each movement. Although this synthesis is presented with rare clarity, the resolution in 724–725 is in many ways more significant, because it dispels a chromatic inflection that has dogged the tonic since the work's initial bars. Second, the impact of bar 735 is dependent upon the trumpets keeping their heads (or at least their lips) in the fanfares between 729 and 734; yet by bar 731 their tone quality and momentum are definitely flagging. This would matter less if these bars were couched as an aftermath to bar 725. As it stands, they carry (with difficulty) the burden of driving the music into its crowning gesture.

Arnold Whittall has recently remarked: 'After a performance of Bruckner's Eighth Symphony, many listeners may ask themselves whether what they've just heard is the greatest symphony ever written.'[3] Whittall immediately notes the naivety of such speculation; yet now that the dust of years of politically charged rhetoric has settled, there should be no problem accepting the Eighth's elevated stature, if only as one of the pinnacles of the symphonist's art in its time. But the price of greatness in this instance is irreducible complexity, not only of structure and expression, but also of textual circumstances and cultural baggage. The plurality of sources, versions and editions undermines any attempt at definitive rendition, whilst the sheer scale of the Eighth's material process and its complex mediation of expressive diversity and consistency generate performative and hermeneutic obstacles that no recording can hope fully to surmount. Haitink's devotion to the Haas edition is undoubtedly the largest such impediment in this regard. Nevertheless, the care with which individual moments are sculpted, the manifest determination to avoid the kinds of ponderous rumination or monolithic self-aggrandizement that are commonplace in the symphony's recording history and the outstanding quality of a great deal of the orchestral playing make this a worthy addition to any collection.

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[3] See Arnold Whittall, 'Symphony No. 8 in C Minor (1884–87, rev. 1887–90; 1890 version, ed. Nowak)' in *The BBC PROMS Guide to Great Symphonies*, ed. Nicholas Kenyon (London: Faber and Faber 2003): 60–62; 60.

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