

Bruckner and the sublime experience

There exists the perception of a very strong connection between the music of Bruckner and religion, specifically Catholicism. The fact that Bruckner grew up in the monastery of St. Florian in Austria, where he was the church's organist for many years, obviously supports this connection. In addition, there are elements in his symphonic music that recall sacred music, such as the frequent use of themes and orchestration that bring to mind "chorales". Also, in the development of his symphonies, one gets the sensation of being before something immense, associated by many with God. All of this makes it more difficult to approach the music of Bruckner from a purely human perspective. However, this is precisely the most interesting approach.

Of the three reasons enumerated above, the first two are relatively easy to put aside. An aspect of an artist's life does not necessarily determine the focus of his art. Actually, the use of biographical elements to interpret art is very dangerous since, the greater and more universal the artist, the less his art is affected by personal stories. As for the second reason, the use of "chorales" does not imply that the content has anything to do with sacred music. It could be that this musical language is simply one that the composer knows well.

The third reason is the most important. The sensation of immensity is a basic characteristic of Bruckner's music and could even be said to be his most important objective. This is how we can approach the "sublime". The word means to go through a threshold, implying being at a different level of experience from the normal. Facing something that overwhelms our rational understanding. It is often accompanied by terror. The result is a transformation or catharsis that lifts us from our everyday life and throws us, without mercy, into unknown territory. The sublime experience is often associated with natural phenomena such as earthquakes and powerful storms. However, even in antiquity it has been suggested that situations created by man can produce this effect. The first known essay that broaches the subject is by the Greek Longinus, who, writing about oratory suggests that a good speaker can induce this experience in his audience. It would seem that music could be even more effective at this.

How we psychologically process this experience depends on our attitude. Most people place the unknown in the realm of the supernatural, with God as its head. A few will continue the struggle to understand, even if conscious of the limitations of our own intellect. In this line of thought, we can say that even if our brains are not capable of understanding something, it doesn't follow that this has to be something supernatural or magical. Accepting Bruckner's capacity to induce a sublime experience, we don't know what his attitude towards it was, nor is that really important when we have to face it ourselves. It is an individual experience that, paradoxically, separates us from that individuality, dissolving us in the cosmos. Each individual will interpret that event his own way depending on his attitude towards the unknown: we can bow our heads to the mystery of God, taking solace in the "certainty" of his goodness, or we can struggle to find a deeper understanding of ourselves and the universe with the freedom that some "madmen" feel when they go out in the open in the middle of a hurricane.

Maybe if we try to understand how natural phenomena can lead us to the sublime, we can get a better understanding of the music of Bruckner. We are normally quite happy to enjoy our preeminent position in the world. We are the most intelligent and the “fittest” creatures on this planet, and maybe in the entire universe. We believe that we can control our environment, and this gives us comfort. The civilized society we live in, with its laws and moral rules, gives us security. To experience an absolutely amoral earthquake can shake that comfort and security so violently that our intellect is not capable of assimilating our vulnerability.

It is surprising that a catholic “peasant” like Bruckner would be capable of composing music that can evoke the telluric force of an earthquake. What complex passions must have existed inside that man! We can hear how he does it: with hypnotic repetition of simple melodic phrases, with long *crescendos*, and with overwhelming masses of sound. This is how he makes us face the terror of the abyss, the unknown. This abyss attracts us with an elemental erotic force because it is a place where opposites can coexist: we can be and not be at the same time. My own experience teaches me that, when you enter Bruckner’s world, what you can hear and feel there becomes a necessity. It is a place where one can find roads that enable us to make contact with profound parts of our being that are normally closed to our consciousness.

Although the idea of the sublime can be found in all the music of Bruckner, it is in the last three symphonies where the composer, in his maturity, inspires this experience most effectively. And it is the Adagio of the Eighth Symphony that is usually associated with the strongest sublime experience. Some even consider this the greatest adagio ever composed.

Looking more closely at the Eighth Symphony, one finds that it is in the tonality of C minor, which is associated with tragedy, and specifically with individual tragedy: man confronting his destiny. This individuality is an essential part of the heroic ethic, assuming that we face that destiny with strength and courage. Typical of this approach is Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony in the same key of C minor. In fact, the first movement of the Bruckner symphony has a marked heroic attitude that begins with the main theme, which is rhythmically related to the Siegfried *leitmotif* from Wagner’s Ring of the Nibelung (the *leitmotif* is played, in its original form, by the horns during the long ascent to the sublime climax of the Adagio). The Scherzo, typical of Bruckner, is a demonic dance, while the Trio seems to be the polar opposite of this, full of very un-heroic nostalgia, but in any case very human. It is interesting that the Scherzo is the second movement, as in Beethoven’s Ninth. In this manner, the first two movements, also the shortest, combine to form the first part of a great symphonic triptych.

The famous Adagio has three great sections and a Coda, with two thematic groups in each section. The first thematic group is visionary, with musical lines of great length: these are characteristics associated with the heroic ethic. The second group is more emotional and personal. The first two sections present and develop the themes. In the third section, building on the first thematic group, we reach the climax, coming face to

face with the abyss in its depth as well as its breadth. In this third section the second group is reduced to the minimum. The Coda is characterized by its harmonic stability, supporting this way the objective calm that is the result of the sublime experience.

The experience of the Adagio will give us an inner consistency, which will allow us to go into the world, in the last movement, with greater strength and conviction. This fourth movement is, without any doubt, the most successful finale in any Bruckner symphony. Usually, these symphonies excel more for their beginnings than for their endings, more for opening new roads to explore than for the territory actually conquered. The last movement of the Eighth is long, complex, and difficult to get through coherently. However, the purely human and heroic quality of the symphony gives this movement a form that is as convincing as it is complex. This shows us the way to an end that is the most convincing and imposing of all the works by Bruckner. Firmness and conviction, building on the heroic ethic, is the best way to achieve this.

It is significant that Bruckner achieves his most sublime moment, as well as his most successful finale, in the most human and heroic of his symphonies. We could conclude from this that purely human way is the most effective in leading us to a sublime experience, which is, in the end, a purely human experience. It is thus doubtful whether the sublime has an intrinsic relationship with the religious. Rather, the religious content is something added or not by each person, depending on the attitude we assume towards this experience.