PART THREE

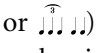
The symphonist

7 The Brucknerian symphony: an overview

JOHN WILLIAMSON

Types, characteristics, and schemas

In a study of the symphony published in the 1960s, Bruckner was subjected to a unique treatment. In place of the consideration of whole works applied to other composers, Deryck Cooke described a 'composite' Bruckner symphony: the Adagio of the Seventh, the Scherzo of the Eighth, and the outer movements of the Third (thereby providing the opportunity to demonstrate the phenomenon of thematic linkage). The strategy was rather clever: by accepting 'a grain of truth' in the hoary old idea that Bruckner wrote the same symphony nine times, Cooke demonstrated the variety of 'characteristics' that existed within movement 'types'.[1] Since then, the same strategy has appeared in different contexts, though the question of the 'schema' behind Bruckner's symphonies has never entirely been resolved, apart from the firm adherence to four movements. The question affects form far more than other aspect of Bruckner's works, and will be considered in detail in Chapter 12. Nonetheless, attempts to define the 'essence' of Bruckner the symphonist have also tended to involve the taxonomy of a fairly narrow collection of characteristics and influences (the contrast between formal schema and characteristics is developed further in Chapter 13 by Margaret Notley).

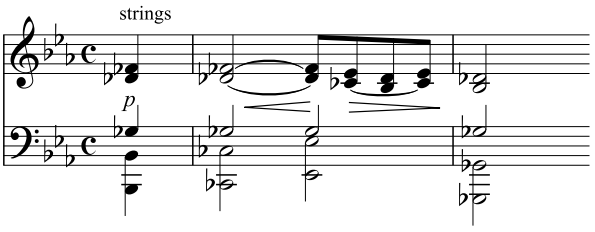
These may be melodic, in which context the famous Bruckner rhythm ( or ) immediately comes to mind, occurring as it does in most of the symphonies from the Second onwards. Yet even so instantly recognizable a rhythmic tic can be used with great variety: melodically, as a brass signal (as it first appears with a significant modification in the Second – ), as a string ostinato (as in the Sixth, once more modified – ). Characteristics may be technical or procedural, such as the high incidence of quasi-religious counterpoint that finds a particular climax in the Fifth. A further category is the use of folk characteristics from Austria and the Danubian area in general, particularly in the Trio sections of Scherzos. Such features are not unique to Bruckner, and can often be compared with other composers such as Schubert, but they are at the foreground in his style to a degree that is unusual and striking. Collectively they tend to place Bruckner's music somewhat apart from what might loosely be called the 'modernism' of his own time (Liszt and Wagner) and of the succeeding age.

In addition, there are characteristics that seem to stem from modern Wagnerian practice but which, on closer inspection, reveal themselves to be so modified as to render the comparison meaningless. The famous tremolo passages that open several symphonies and symphonic allegros (and the ostinato variants found at the start of the Third and Sixth) do not sound conspicuously similar to the Wagnerian 'ex nihilo' opening (as in *Lohengrin* or *Das Rheingold*).[2] Investigation of the phenomenon of tremolo in Bruckner in general has played down 'dramaturgical refinement' in favour of specific musical functions: the tremolo of development, as at the start of the Fourth or Ninth, where thematic material is born out of nothing, or of registral change, as in the introduction of the first movement of the Fifth (bars 31–55 and beyond). Related phenomena can be found in the orchestral religious music (notably the setting of 'Et resurrexit' in the F minor Mass) and may even infiltrate a chamber work (the beginning of the Finale of the String Quintet). Whatever their provenance, Bruckner fashioned something original from them that again sets him slightly apart from the currents of his time.[3]

Anachronisms

That such features exceed the symphonic and encroach upon the style of the orchestral choral music suggests a further dimension to the peculiarities of Bruckner's output: the notion of his orchestral works as 'mass-symphonies'. The ramifications of this reach far beyond mere notes into questions relating to 'absolute music' in more than one sense (as pursued in Chapter 9). The resemblance of certain figures in the religious works to similar ideas and motives in the symphonies raises the question whether a specifically 'religious' content is transferred. Although there will be more extensive discussion of this below in Chapters 8 and 9, it is worth noting that even purely musical discussion of Bruckner's symphonies can hardly avoid the world of the church, even if limited to the possible influence of organ registration on his orchestration (see Chapter 11). Once it proceeds beyond that, then the issue opens into such cases as the quotations from mass movements in the symphonies (notably the Second) and from the 'Non confundar' of the Te Deum in the Adagio of the Seventh. At such points discussion can hover uncertainly on the border of ancient and modern: 'The eternity that Bruckner intimates in the Adagio of the Seventh does not mean that world behind and beyond criticized by Nietzsche but the culmination of this world, the "new heaven and the new earth" that music promises according to the evidence of Romanticism.'[4] To believe in this interpretation is to accept a modernist (because Nietzschean) Bruckner in spite of Bruckner's ignorance

Example 7.1 Symphony No. 3 (1873), II, bars 13–15



of Nietzsche. It also flies in the face of traditional interpretations of the composer that rested content with Schopenhauer as philosophical background (as noted by Christa Brüstle in Chapter 16).

To view Bruckner in the light of a coming musical modernism, as a forerunner of Schoenberg even in the limited sense of a vehicle for the ideas of Sechter, also runs into problems with the manner in which his melodic style relates to models taken from the church.[5] This is not simply a matter of echoes of specific works as discussed by many Brucknerians. Obvious archaisms such as the 'Marian' cadence discerned in the slow movement of the Third also do not tell the whole story (see Example 7.1).[6] Where a sacred choral work such as the Te Deum is concerned, it is truer to speak of a thread of unison, Gregorian-like melody that expands and contracts texturally and is decorated by an orchestral pseudo-polyphony rather than the real thing.[7] In this context 'anachronism' is fundamental to style.

Such phenomena are not unknown in the symphonies, often during the elaborated (or double) unisons that function as third or 'closing' theme group in outer movements. To speak of these as being in some sense related to the 'Gregorian' substrata of the Te Deum is not implausible. Bruckner is quite capable of placing such writing in close juxtaposition with an altogether different type of material (e.g. the folk-like); what matters is the maintenance of the underlying monody. Thus from the earliest version of the Third's opening movement (1873), the closing theme group of the exposition (bars 205–84) involved a unison theme in regular minims decorated by octave statements of the 'Bruckner rhythm'. The presence of chromatic inflections in the line cannot be attributable to any single mode but guarantees a restless tone to the underlying solid rhythmic movement that is then fragmented by trumpet fanfares on a diminished seventh (bar 213). The tension generated by the alteration of unison and accompanied fanfare results in a chorale-like figure that fills out the steady minim melody with a more elaborate pseudo-polyphony (bars 235–45). The history of this passage in revision (1877) is of the further elaboration of the chorale by the introduction of a new and distinctive cadence and continuation (bars 205–9). The illusion

of a solidly harmonized chorale tune conceals the monodic inspiration of the passage. At the similar moment in the first movement of the Eighth, a much more sophisticated elaborated unison still falls back on the sudden intrusion of a diminished seventh (1890: bars 97–102), while in the Finale, yet another elaborated unison alternates with fully harmonized chorale-like phrases (1890: bars 135–66). At least one writer speaks of a synthesis of traditional and contemporary elements in relation to the church music, but the symphonies seem capable of bearing a similar interpretation.[8] A strong sense of monody (whether sacred or folk-like) underpins Bruckner's use of modern harmony.

Cathedrals and counterpoint

The presence of such underlying monody suggests a possible link between Bruckner and the historicism that manifested itself in his age in other, mainly visual arts. At first sight this flies in the face of Carl Dahlhaus' perception that, apart from a few weak cases, music as a whole was relatively untouched by the historicism that reigned unchallenged in nineteenth-century architecture.[9] Yet few accounts of Bruckner's music avoid reference to styles from history (often wrenched out of any strictly musical context), with the suggestion that Bruckner's personality is to be enlightened by his relationship to them. It is evident nowadays that much of the talk about '"Baroque" or "Gothic structure"' and 'the great pathos of Baroque music' belongs among the clichés of Bruckner perception, but even those that so argue concede that the circumstances of his education at St. Florian made it probable that echoes of earlier historical periods would be important for Bruckner.[10] The perception of continuity between Bruckner the composer of religious choral music and the symphonist, to the point of using 'mass-symphonies' as a positive value judgement (as Werner Notter has pointed out), is closely related to this.[11] In such a context, to speak of historicism rather than mysticism is at least to keep one's feet on the ground of the late nineteenth-century context.

However clichéd talk of the 'Baroque' might be, it is a pointer to certain matter-of-fact aspects that remain of interest to Brucknerians: monumentality, quasi-sacred polyphony, organ-like instrumentation. Such characteristics remain factors in all attempts to define Bruckner's style. The challenge has always been to encompass its contradictions without surrendering to eclecticism. Constantin Floros has defined it in a little collection of propositions originally written in the 1980s. His list of influences embraces the 'archaic' in Palestrina and Giovanni Gabrieli, the 'modern' in Wagner, Berlioz, and Liszt; the symphonic in Beethoven, and the Austrian Schubert.[12] As is

related in Chapter 16, several of the names in this list feature in the writings of other Brucknerians for reasons that have less to do with the composer than with the construction of an image. Floros reminds us that there remain specifically musical elements to the comparisons.

It is not necessary to elevate the homophonic and contrapuntal aspects of Bruckner's music into 'two principles' symbolized by Beethoven and Bach as in Halm's writings. The coexistence of sonata form with fugue, for instance, had continued fruitfully from Haydn until Bruckner's younger contemporaries such as Mahler and beyond. Interpretations of this have varied, ranging from the equation of counterpoint and humour in Viennese Classicism and in Mahler to the perception that fugato was a vehicle of intensification and *crescendo* in such symphonists as Berlioz and Liszt. These aspects are present in Bruckner, where they have been problematized by talk of the opposition of sectional sonata form and Baroque *Fortspinnung* (defined as monothematic and lacking in periodicity); yet the most thoroughgoing analyst of Bruckner's use of fugue can point directly to parallels (unison figures, brass rhythmic monotones, pauses, block contrasts of instrumental groups) with Mozart's use of fugue in the last movement of Symphony No. 41 that suggest not a problem, rather a domestication of counterpoint within sonata form in the century before Bruckner wrote his Fifth Symphony.[13]

There is, however, a qualitative difference between the cases of Mozart and Bruckner that is partly a matter of technique, partly of tone. The Finale of the Fifth Symphony illustrates the similarities and the contrasts. The presentation of the fugue subject in the clarinet is humorous, particularly in its contrast with the opening string polyphony. Once heard in these tones the fugue subject never quite throws off the impression of irreverence, particularly in the manic repetitions that offset the choral theme in the development. Yet its combination of wide leaps with a narrow semitonal motion anticipates the fugue subject of Psalm 150, which urges, 'Alles was Odem hat, lobe den Herrn!' This fusion of contrasting tones helps to explain why Bruckner became a symphonist rather than remained a composer of church music. In a similar manner Mozart in his symphony (and in the G major Quartet K. 387) fused the appearance of archaic polyphony with the sound of the opera orchestra.

The difference lies in the relative degrees of integration pursued and achieved. Whereas Mozart infiltrated contrapuntal elements into all sectional areas of the exposition in the Finale of the 'Jupiter', Bruckner presents fugue, song theme, massive unison with 'stormy' accompaniment, and chorale scrolled off by the famous pauses. This is not to deny that there may be contrapuntal inflection to the lyrical second subject, for instance, but to note that it is of a different kind, relying on the proliferation of

motivic detail (as at bar 67 where Bruckner asks all three strands to 'stand out'; the texture is all foreground). Analysts have long agonized over this method of construction. If counterpoint is the technical aspect of the 'Baroque' in Bruckner, then the isolated, 'monumental' blocks are the metaphorical, prompting talk of cathedrals in sound.

Within the Fifth's Finale, there is little doubt that the process of contrapuntal intensification goes hand in hand with the evolution of a more continuous musical construction from the isolated blocks. This is first achieved by fugal exposition (bars 223–37) on the chorale theme, which grows through stretto into a combination of the original fugue theme with the chorale (bar 270). Throughout the many ramifications of this section, the opening phrase of the chorale achieves a dominance which was already latent in the whole tune. There Bruckner presented three loud and tonally varied statements of one phrase, interspersed with echoes that struggle to evolve into a sequence (bars 186–9). For contrast there is one quiet phrase in the brass; but it is indicative of Bruckner's overall sense of growth and change that it supplants the final statement of the main phrase during the coda (bars 607–14). The succession of keys and cadence points, not to mention the pizzicato strings' surreptitious 'correction' of the brass from G minor to E♭ major (bars 192–3), suggests that chorale is present here not as traditional form or genre but as topic. It has enough tonal mobility and motivic extension to be ready for symphonic and fugal development.

At the height of the latter, Bruckner presents a combination of old-fashioned 'madrigalian' treatment of the chorale with a key scheme that suggests the mobility of symphonic development while clinging on to the tonic with an un-symphonic obstinacy (B♭ major arrives in bars 270, 350, and 374). Such a tonal structure is not uncommon in Bruckner's movements in sonata form (as in the first movement of the Third), and here it is a product of the nesting of contrapuntal structures within a symphonic context. Counterpoint has the function of a double intensification. Fugal chorale fantasia blends into a *crescendo* that prepares the fugato on the combined themes. Though it threatens to expire prematurely before bar 350, the violent reassertion of the tonic revivifies the fugato for a further *crescendo* to the largest climax (at bar 374). Fugal intensification thus not merely reconstructs the idea of development; it transforms the notion of recapitulation (which of the three returns is the reprise?). Quasi-Baroque procedures in Bruckner thus cease to resemble the examples of Viennese Classicism at the point where they radically restructure form.

The image of the 'Baroque' or 'Gothic' cathedral is also a yardstick of the scale of the sound with its many contrasts between extremes, found at its simplest in the echoing strains of the chorale itself. Bruckner scholarship has sometimes been so intrigued with this that it has failed to see

it in its nineteenth-century context, alongside those few historicist examples that Dahlhaus permitted. When Brucknerians recovered the scale of his early knowledge of Mendelssohn, they were handed a key as yet barely used to rediscovering the manner in which Bruckner had integrated church polyphony with the modern orchestra after the manner of such historicizing works as *St Paul*.[14]

Beethoven

To turn to the influence of Beethoven on Bruckner is to move to a somewhat different level of perception. Whereas the Baroque in a late nineteenth-century composer represents a possible 'anachronism', Beethoven remained a permanent feature of the symphonic landscape. Much analysis of his influence on Bruckner tends to remain at the level of reminiscence: the nature of his symphonic openings, for instance, which probably prompted Hanslick's memorably silly image of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony beneath the horses' hooves of the Valkyrie in Bruckner's Third. Some penetrating comments have been made at the level of formal types and expressive intention in recent years, though this has tended to take the presence of Beethoven in Bruckner's music as a given (if not as a relic of the claims of Halm, Kurth, and others).[15]

Deeper insight is to be found in an essay by Ludwig Finscher in which he demonstrates the degree to which Bruckner's First Symphony in C minor follows patterns derived from Beethoven's Fifth in the same key, composing out the transition from minor to major with its 'stylized semantic implications' and incorporating a slow movement in A♭ major; the legacy of the Beethovenian model includes the style of thematic working in the outer movements and the tone of the last: 'One will not easily find a second symphonic movement in Bruckner that so splendidly, yet also so traditionally, makes use of the struggling [*agonisch*] character of thematic work since Beethoven and the idea of the work, the breakthrough to C major.'[16] There is a reservation in that sentiment that is explained by Finscher's conclusion that the First is a 'secular' outsider among Bruckner's generally 'sacred' symphonies. It is not necessary to accept this entirely to subscribe to the notion that the Beethovenian influence was mediated in more complex and diffuse ways in later works, though the 'programme' of struggle and apotheosis remains, albeit transformed, in other symphonies (notably the Third, Eighth, and – according to his intentions – Ninth). This is the essential background for the specific features that might be described as Beethovenian: the 'ex nihilo' opening, the intensifying ostinati of the codas in the opening movements of the Second, Third, and Fifth Symphonies that recall Beethoven's

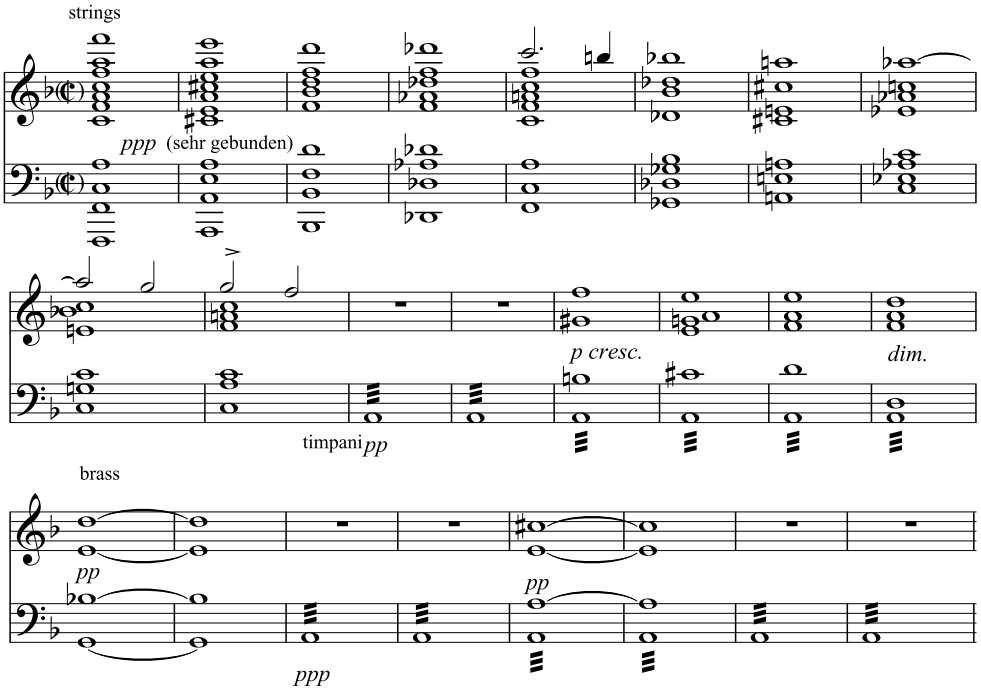
Ninth, the review in 'quotation marks' of music from earlier movements as in the finales of the Third (1873) and Fifth, the modified rondo but with development rather than variations in the slow movements. Less clear in character are the thematic reprises in the finales that are part of the culminating process: these seem to belong rather to the aftermath of Beethoven. Yet they are not full-scale Lisztian transformations but musical icons that signify the conclusion of a more complex process. When the main theme of the first movement of the Sixth Symphony returns at the end of the Finale, the mere brandishing of its head motive announces a musical fulfilment that is acted out on many dimensions besides the thematic and motivic.

Wagner

The most vexatious aspect of Bruckner's style is its relationship to Wagner. As with several matters mentioned here, this goes beyond purely musical influence to raise issues that impinge on Bruckner's personality and aesthetic. That the writing of symphonies ran counter to the picture of music history that Wagner held throughout much of his career is a truism; from a Bayreuth perspective it should have been as much a 'heresy' as Bruckner's departure from the world of church music.[17] The analyst is left with the principal theory that Bruckner's debt to Wagner was essentially in harmony. To consider this may involve reinterpretation of those passages that seem inflected by the archaic. In a particularly virtuosic article, Graham Phipps considered the idea of 'church style' in the first movement of the Seventh Symphony, noting that 'modal characteristics' could derive from certain tonal and harmonic traits in Wagner which were then cross-fertilized by specifically Brucknerian thematic material. The complete lack of adequate criteria to confirm that these traits are 'quotations' (why does Bruckner bury them in subordinate parts?) does not refute his argument as a whole.[18]

The Brucknerian who despairs of saying anything truly meaningful or original about Bruckner's debt to Wagner is confronted with the problem that there are so many different images of Wagner on which to draw; he is too protean for simple musical classification. To claim that Bruckner's style clamps a four-square periodicity on 'endless melody' is to overlook those many passages in Wagner that follow similar strategies (the 'Liebestod' manages to be both 'infinite' and to grow from two-bar phrases). Comparison with one possible Wagner quotation in the 1873 version of the Third Symphony reveals certain striking differences, not so much in the use of chromaticism as in the way that Bruckner allows a greater degree of prolongation of diatonic moments (see Example 7.2). Although this evocation of the 'Magic Sleep' motif from *Die Walküre* (see Example 7.3) resembles

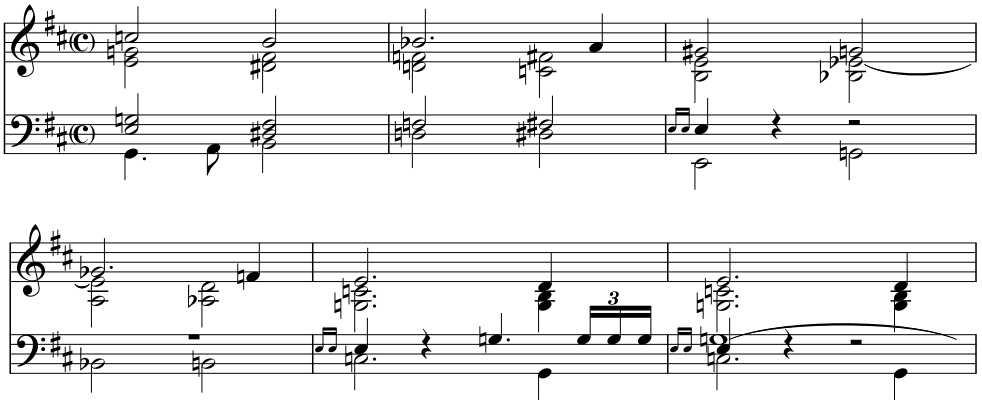
Example 7.2 Symphony No. 3 (1873), I, bars 479–502



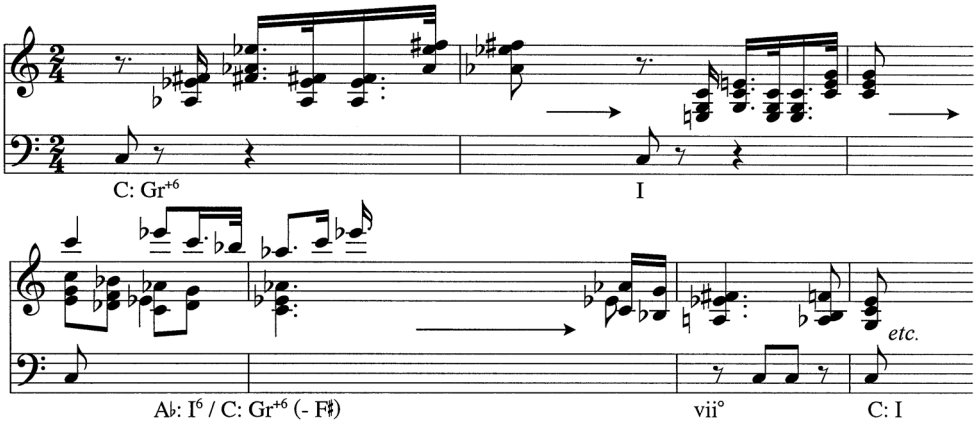
its model in side-slipping chromaticism allied to third motion in the bass, there are much clearer diatonic landmarks such as the subdominant in bar 481, the return of the local tonic (F major) in bar 483, and the pedals on the dominants of F and D minor. Part of the relative stiffness of this passage (which may explain why Bruckner eventually cut it) comes from its strong sense of what is tonally appropriate at this point in a symphony. If Wagner is protean, Bruckner remains fairly circumscribed in his appreciation of how recapitulations are prepared. Later he grew much freer in his use of such chromatic resources without abandoning completely his faith in tonic and dominant pedals as means of anchoring chromaticism. The Scherzo of the Ninth derives much of its force from deployment of chromatic resources first without, then with, tonic pedal.

In assessing the degree to which Wagner's harmony influenced Bruckner, it is important to balance this by consideration of the aspects that create chromatic enrichment by more Schubertian methods. Thus in the swaying folk-like Trio of the Second Symphony the choice of subsidiary keys within a traditional C major tonic–dominant pattern is clearly Schubertian: E major, the Phrygian D♭ major, and B major (related by third to the dominant of C, and also the dominant of E). Schubertian also is the way in which each region is prolonged by mostly diatonic phrases. Although this section of the

Example 7.3 *Die Walküre*, 'Magic Sleep'



Example 7.4 Symphony No. 6, III, Trio, bars 1–9



Second is relatively simple in tone, similar sections in later symphonies take up tonal relationships by third more thoroughly (A♭ and E majors in the Eighth) without discarding the fundamentally diatonic material, while the Trio of the Sixth is an extended game with the Schubertian German sixth (see Example 7.4).[19]

Tone

Discussion of Bruckner's music inevitably circles round the symphony. His largest religious works are often discussed from a 'symphonic' perspective, his most substantial chamber work is scrutinized for symphonic characteristics. Close inspection of the String Quintet has suggested that its symphonic characteristics are matters of 'tone' and 'foreground' rather than an exact

relationship to symphonic characteristics.[20] It also reveals that much that is 'schematic' about Bruckner's type of symphony could be transformed within the sphere of chamber music. Thus the much-discussed tripartite exposition is still present in the Quintet's first movement, but in surprising form. Uniquely in Bruckner's mature instrumental works, the movement is in triple time with a first subject involving contrast between soft and loud material, but the 'ex nihilo' opening is abandoned for the sake of a chamber texture that diffidently inserts contrapuntal detail into a well-formed melody; unlike the mainly quadratic constructions that Bruckner used as themes in his symphonic movements, subtle overlaps and extensions generate a ten-bar period before the louder idea brings a note of classical regularity both in phrase structure and ornamentation. The second subject is not scrolled off from the first by a pause, nor is it a typical *Gesangsthema*, but it exhausts the possibilities of a number of rococo figures that climax in a unison passage. There are still changes of 'register', but their impact is of dynamic rather than tone colour, and the unison figures are more elaborate. Of the 'three-key exposition' described in Chapter 10 by Korstvedt, elements remain, since the second group is tonally mobile, and the final section, which recalls the loud material of the first subject in characteristic fashion, flirts with F♯ major, before the addition of a Schubertian A♭ pulls the music via a German sixth into the dominant, C major. In the closing bars of the exposition, echoing fragments provide clearer reminiscences of the tone of the Brucknerian symphony than the themes themselves.

Not the least curious moment is the opening of the development. At this point, Bruckner's outer movements almost invariably fall into a brooding quiet in which motivic fragments or simple rhythmic recollections refer to earlier thematic events. In the Quintet, he brings back fragments of the opening theme but disturbs its momentum with recitative-like passages for first violin and first viola. That Bruckner's orchestra often declaims against a sombre backcloth at this point in his symphonies is clear from such moments as the horn at the start of the development in the first movement of all three versions of the Third, the cellos at bar 177 in the Finale of the Sixth, and the melancholy tuba in the first movement of the Eighth. Even small details, such as the emphatic horn echo of the scherzo theme at bars 234–5 of the Finale of the Eighth (1890), have a rhetorical purpose, as they attempt to convey a content too full for mere notes. None of these instances gives quite such a clear example of instrumental oratory as the solos in the quintet; the melodic style of the opening of the movement leaps beyond its bounds to embrace the unison material of the second group. A surprisingly modern operatic dimension appears briefly, as though the writing of chamber music had peeled away a layer of Bruckner's tone to leave its technical correlative in an unusually bright glare.

Elsewhere surprises are fewer. The Scherzo possesses both the forward impetus and the quadratic structure that are characteristic of the symphonic equivalents, but with occasional hemiola effects and expansion. Thus the main theme at the opening creates an initial eight-bar period out of two four-bar phrases. The expected balancing eight-bar period, however, is expanded to twelve bars, thereby upsetting symmetry while retaining quadratic uniformity. This is a different kind of irregularity from that found in many of the early Bruckner symphonic scherzos, but is a clear model for a mature example such as that of the Seventh Symphony, which begins after a four-bar ostinato with a theme that expands an eight-bar period to sixteen by sequential extension of one idea.[21] The Trio confirms that in Bruckner it is a place for construction in tone-colour even in a chamber work: the bald juxtaposition of Ländler melody with pizzicato is comparable to the equivalent moment in the Sixth Symphony, where pizzicato and horns compete on the same rhythmic figure.

The tone and characteristics of the Brucknerian scherzo, which remain relatively fixed in spite of the interesting fluctuations according to period, thus carry over from symphony to chamber music. If the instrumental recitative of the first movement suggests Liszt at some distance, then the style of the Scherzo has been compared to a combination of Beethoven for his rhythmic drive and Schubert for his integration of popular Austrian dance idioms with the forms and procedures of 'high' art. The picture of the 'Austrian' Bruckner depends heavily upon comparison with Schubert. It is not simply a matter of popular idioms, there are the factors detailed by Floros: monumental construction, three theme complexes, tonal layout of the expositions, the 'song periods'.[22] In this context much that might seem discordant in the attempted reconciling of anachronistic and modern comes together on a nineteenth-century Austrian basis.

Even the harmony of the Quintet's Adagio encroaches upon Schubertian procedures when textures change at the prompting of a German sixth (bars 34–5), or when sequential patterns revolve around the rise of a third in the bass (bars 47–50). This is hardly surprising given the manner in which hymnal textures and Schubert's characteristic tonal procedures came together in songs like 'Das Wirtshaus' and 'Die Nebensonnen' and provided one model for the early Brucknerian Adagio in the Second and Third Symphonies. Such details had been absorbed into the common practice of tonality by Bruckner's day, however, as comparison with Brahms richly illustrates. Between them and the idea of a monumental layout interpretable as Schubertian 'heavenly length', there lie so many discrepancies that to speak of a common Austrian tone misses the distance that Bruckner travelled from Biedermeier to the verges of the modernism of the 1890s. If we are to

understand Bruckner as an Austrian symphonist, it is necessary to see him within an age at once more characterized by a ritualized splendour and worship of the powerful and monumental in the past and present. That may be a crude estimate of Bruckner's relationship to his own time, but it is more truthful than the viewpoint that would see him in the timeless perspective of a mystical peasant.