**Anton Bruckner**

*Sinfonie Nr. 0 (1869)*
Philharmoniker Hamburg, Simone Young *cond*
Oehms Classics 685, 2012–13 (1 CD: 49 minutes), €17

*Studiensinfonie (1863)*
Philharmoniker Hamburg, Simone Young *cond*
Oehms Classics 686, 2013–14 (1 CD: 42 minutes), €17

*Sinfonie Nr. 6 (1881)*
Philharmoniker Hamburg, Simone Young *cond*
Oehms Classics 687, 2013–14 (1 CD: 54 minutes), €17

*Sinfonie Nr. 7 (1881–1883)*
Philharmoniker Hamburg, Simone Young *cond*
Oehms Classics 688, 2014–15 (1 CD: 66 minutes), €18

*Sinfonie Nr. 9 (1887–1894)*
Philharmoniker Hamburg, Simone Young *cond*
Oehms Classics 693, 2015 (1 CD: 59 minutes), €17

The weight of precedent confronting any conductor embarking on a cycle of the Bruckner symphonies must today seem daunting indeed. To put it mildly, Simone Young and the Philharmoniker Hamburg enter a congested field.[1] In addition to the well-known sets recorded by Jochum, Haitink, Solti, Barenboim, Wand, Celibidache, Tintner and Inbal, Young must contend with a range of imposing relative newcomers. Prominent recent competition includes the Berlin Philharmonic under Sir Simon Rattle – not least their acclaimed 2012 disc of the Ninth Symphony, which comes with the Samale/Philips/Cohrs/Mazzuca completion of the Finale – as well as the slowly accumulating offerings from Claudio Abbado, which at the time of his death encompassed the First, Fourth, Fifth, Seventh and Ninth Symphonies with the Vienna Philharmonic, as well as live performances of the Seventh and Ninth with the Lucerne Festival Orchestra, the latter representing his recorded swansong. And this is the tip of a large iceberg. John F. Berky's comprehensive discography lists some 94 releases of the Sixth Symphony alone since 1990. Contributors include Chailly, Muti, Maazel, Nagano, Thielemann, Tilson-Thomas, Pletnev, Rattle, Salonen, Barenboim, Davis, Dohnanyi, Jansons, Järvi, Janowski, Schaller and Eschenbach.[2] Any conductor wishing to take due account of the field has additionally to answer the fresh questions asked of the music by historically informed performance, initially Roger Norrington's 1995 recording of the 1873 version of the Third Symphony with the London Classical Players, and subsequently Philippe Herreweghe's enlightening renditions of the Fifth and Seventh

[1] Simone Young's Bruckner cycle has now been released as a box set: Anton Bruckner, *Sämtliche Sinfonien*, Philharmoniker Hamburg, Simone Young *cond* (Oehms Classics 26, 2016).

[2] John F. Berky, 'Symphony No. 6 in A Major', Abruckner.com, www.abruckner.com/discography/symphonyno6inamajo/.

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Symphonies, and Nikolaus Harnoncourt's at times startling rethinking of the Fifth and Eighth with the Vienna Philharmonic. In all, the problem of how to bring fresh ideas to the table has become challenging indeed.

No less difficult is the textual terrain that any conductor must knowledgeably traverse. The re-opening, in the 1990s, of debates about the provenance of the first editions, which Robert Haas and Leopold Nowak had both attempted to lay to rest earlier in the century, has added a bewildering variety of options from which the interpreter must choose. And thanks to the near-simultaneous launch of two new complete editions in 2014 – an updated *Gesamtausgabe* published by Musikwissenschaftlicher Verlag in Vienna, and the Verlagsgruppe Herman Edition, edited by Benjamin-Gunnar Cohrs – the problems of textual plurality looks set to proliferate, rather than diminish.

Happily, Young has risen admirably to the challenge. The live recordings selected here are sensitive, mostly well balanced and mercifully free of the clichés that have embedded themselves in performance practice. The sound quality, no doubt aided by the spacious acoustic of the Laeiszhalle in Hamburg, has both precision and depth. Her textual choices are not recorded in the liner notes, but audition suggests the Nowak editions for the Sixth, Seventh and Ninth (Haas in any case never produced editions of the F minor Symphony or 'No. 0'). There is one textual anomaly: in bars 299–301 of the Ninth Symphony's first movement, three articulatory timpani strokes seem to be audible (although they could also be an aural illusion); they appear neither in the editions nor in the autograph manuscript. Unlike Rattle, Young elects not to include a completion of the Ninth's Finale – a sensible choice, given the range of completions available and the fraught textual problems that the extant sources engender.

These burdens are perhaps lighter for the early symphonies, and particularly for the F minor, Bruckner's first symphonic essay, completed in Linz in 1863, as he was finishing his course of study with Otto Kitzler. This and the Symphony No. 0 nevertheless generate some interesting interpretative problems, central to which is the question of how they should be orientated stylistically. The F minor Symphony's dominant precursors are clearly Mendelssohn and Schumann. The first movement betrays debts to Mendelssohn's First and Fifth Symphonies; the Finale's main theme is self-evidently Schumannesque in its material character and orchestral sound. Bruckner nonetheless shines through. The material is prone to chromatic and rhythmic distortions, which foreshadow some of the most startling features of his style of the 1870s; and there are some literal premonitions, most obviously the use of the main theme's head motive at the first movement's end, which closely resembles the same figure's application in the first movement of the Third Symphony.

The interpretative dilemma posed by these works is whether to emphasize the music's stylistic heritage or its fledgling individuality. The former choice risks downplaying those elements that are authentically Brucknerian; the latter threatens to monumentalize material that won't support such a reading. Young treads a careful line here. In the F minor Symphony, her tempi are on the whole buoyant, the articulation is clear, the climaxes are well controlled and no attempt is made to present highpoints in the manner of the seismic events that articulate the later music. In general, the orchestra responds sympathetically to the work: the material is executed with conviction, and there are some nice expressive touches, notably in the first movement's subordinate theme, to which the strings add some tasteful portamenti. As with all of these recordings, the live sound is mostly very lucid, although two minor ensemble issues recur.

The first is the relative obscurity of the trumpets in the *tutti* sections: their material is sometimes indistinct, and this can compromise the music's sonic force. The second is that the woodwind are occasionally out of synch with each other. The demisemiquaver patterns in the Andante's subordinate-group reprise are a case in point: their execution in octaves by flute and clarinet in bar 101 is a little ragged, which threatens to upset the continuity of texture that the material requires. In the Finale, there are also some matters of tempo to address. Young understandably relaxes the tempo for the exposition's subordinate theme, but the closing section remains sluggish at first, despite Bruckner's 'Tempo I$^{mo}$' indication, an approach that renders the interplay of quavers and crotchet triplets in bars 92–102 somewhat unclear. On the other hand, some of the music's more unusual features come pleasingly to the fore, in particular the astonishing flexibility of phrase length, which regularly discloses five- and nine-bar units, and the Finale's highly effective final stages, where Bruckner recomposes the exposition's closing section and moves seamlessly to the festive coda, to striking effect.

Symphony No. 0 offers a more difficult proposition. Most likely composed in 1869, between the First and Second Symphonies,[3] it foreshadows Bruckner's later style in key respects; the first movement, in particular, contains music that he revisited in the Third Symphony, for which No. 0 is in many ways preparatory. The movement's overriding challenge is its virtual athematicism: the main theme offers figuration at the expense of a clear thematic statement, and the subordinate theme is rarefied and hardly motivically pregnant. This movement resembles those of the First and Second Symphonies, but departs from all the other symphonies, in having a common-time rather than *alla breve* metre, a feature that bears crucially on how it is performed. From the 1873 version of the Third Symphony onwards, the material's motivic subdivision invariably respects the duple division of the bar, a feature that conductors intent on slow tempi often overlook. In No. 0, no such subdivision obtains. Young's rendition is clearly in four, to the benefit of the trudging initial accompaniment, which solidly observes the metre. At the same time, the structural decisions guiding tempi are not always logical. The opening 'Allegro' indication is interpreted on the slow side, and this tempo is retained in the recapitulation. At the opposite end of the spectrum sits the development's climactic passage, bars 170–210, which accelerates towards the *tutti* in bar 183. The gestural logic of the resulting large-scale rubato cuts across the material continuity, since bars 170–210 are also based on the main theme.

Young's approach is at its most successful in the Sixth and Seventh Symphonies; the Sixth in particular is a triumph of musical intelligence. Technically, this is surely the most difficult of Bruckner's symphonies, and its harmonic and textural radicalism make heavy intellectual demands on the interpreter; yet I have seldom heard a more convincing rendition. Most importantly, Young maintains an unflagging structural control across the work: the climaxes are graduated and

[3] The work's date has provoked debate. Paul Hawkshaw maintains that it dates from 1869, a view corroborated by numerous features of the sources and the composers letters; see 'The Date of Bruckner's "Nullified" Symphony in D minor', *19$^{th}$-Century Music* 6/3 (1983): 252–63. The alternative view holds that work on the Symphony dates from 1863–64, after the F minor Symphony, but before the Symphony No. 1, which dates from 1866. This view was held by August Göllerich, Max Auer, Leopold Nowak and Renate Grasberger, all of whom surmised that the 1869 score was a copy of an earlier, now-lost autograph. To my mind, Hawkshaw's textual argument seems the more convincing.

perfectly judged, and the Symphony's narrative arch is always perceptible. This pays particular dividends in the Finale, where the movement's extraordinary formal and tonal eccentricities are ultimately gathered into a convincingly logical conclusion. Throughout, the tempi are relatively lively: her comparatively brisk Adagio runs 16:08, for instance – much faster, and more effective, than the positively geological 19:22 of Solti's 1979 Decca release. Throughout, the use of rubato to shape phrasing is sensitive and consistently makes good structural sense. The marked ritardandi in this piece are particularly hard to render, none more so than the end of the first movement, where the germinal dotted-quaver–quaver–triplet rhythm in the timpani must decelerate in tandem with the crotchet triplets in the brass. In many performances, this results in an effective collapse of the music's rhythmic coordination; but in Young's rendition, the orchestra heads towards the final chord in clean synchrony, with audible benefits for the music's cumulative effect.

Although the Seventh feels less convincing as a whole, there is a similarly palpable sense that expressive detail and large-scale form collaborate productively. Young's approach is well exemplified by her reading of the first movement. The orchestral balance is firmly controlled throughout, and the tone is clear and expressive without becoming self-indulgent. Crucially, she exerts sustained control over the brass, who are well-blended and restrained when they need to be. The clarity of sound allows many of the beautiful, chamber-musical details of Bruckner's orchestration to emerge, to compelling effect. Particularly noteworthy is the subordinate-theme recapitulation, where Bruckner initially redistributes the material as a wind sextet, punctuated by pizzicato violins. The movement's formal articulation is equally subtle. A steady but not sluggish *alle breve* is perceptible across the arching main theme, the half-bar division being clearly audible in the material. The theme discloses a large antecedent–consequent design, in which the consequent transforms into a transition at its end. In both phrase units, Young positions an expressive ritenuto at the gestural and melodic highpoint (bars $16^4$ and $38^4$ respectively), which marks the event without impeding the music's momentum.

The same mentality is not always so effective in the Ninth. To begin with, the music's visionary monumentality implies a sonic density, which, in the first movement, this recording does not always deliver. On the one hand, the distinctness of the orchestral groups sometimes comes to the fore in places where a more unified ensemble seems preferable. On the other hand, aspects of the ensemble are sometimes buried when they might more profitably be foregrounded. Again, the trumpets are critical in this respect. The cataclysmic F minor climax preceding the first movement's subordinate-theme recapitulation for instance depends for its articulation on the trumpet dyad A♭–F in bars 391–392 piercing the *tutti* texture; but here, the trumpets fail to improve on the *fff* attained in bar 387, with the result that the melodic highpoint is undermined. Moreover, the nuanced phrasing, which is so effective in the Sixth and Seventh, can here become an impediment. In the first movement's *Gesangsperiode*, Young places a ritenuto at the end of the theme's first and second bars and retains this articulation wherever this material recurs. This may well be a response to the hairpins beneath the quaver accompaniment, which scholarship now understands to mean an expressive swell rather than an increase and decrease in dynamic in some nineteenth-century music.[4] But the effect is to stall the theme's momentum before

[4] On which subject, see for instance David Hyun-Su Kim, 'The Brahmsian Hairpin', *19th-Century Music* 36/1 (2012): 46–57.

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it has a chance to gather; and the ritenuto's consistency across the theme group means that the time lost is never adequately compensated.

The Scherzo and Adagio are altogether more successful. In the Scherzo, the tempo is moderate but precise, and the pounding main theme at bar 42 is delivered with startling force. Particularly impressive here is the contrast between the theme's basic idea in bars 42–46$^{2}$, articulated by strident down bows in the strings, and its contrasting idea in bars 46$^{3}$–50$^{1}$, the staccatos of which are conveyed with chilling accuracy. Similarly effective are the sustained quaver patterns, shared between the strings, flutes and clarinets in bars 65–88, which provide the texture's relentless, motoric interior.

As perhaps the most challenging Adagio in the symphonic repertoire, the third movement carries an especially heavy interpretative burden, to which Young brings some ingenious new ideas. Most arresting is the way she handles the final climactic intensification of the subordinate theme, which famously culminates, at bar 206, in an unresolved seven-note dissonance, notionally perched above V of C sharp minor. Performances typically emphasize the dissonance as a harmonic event; but Young sustains the bass's melodic prominence up to the caesura on the bar's final beat. This undergirds the passage with the movement's *Hauptmotiv*, thereby making the dissonance subordinate to its motivic context. This imparts an audible coherence to an otherwise disruptive gesture: instead of hearing the climax as a culminating harmonic moment, we hear it as embellishing the terminus of a long motivic liquidation. Moreover, Young resists the temptation to present the Adagio's end in sentimental valedictory terms, in the tradition of seeing the movement as Bruckner's 'farewell to life'. The coda is poignant, but relatively understated, a reading that leaves open the expectation of a finale that never arrives.

In all, these recordings have much to recommend them. Of course, we no longer need to seek advocates for Bruckner's symphonies: they have attracted the devotion of many of the late twentieth century's foremost conductors; to this extent, the discography offers an embarrassment of riches. At the same time, the looming presence of recordings styling the symphonies as monolithic religious experiences still has the capacity to deter listeners and perpetuate tired perceptions of the composer and his music. In this respect, the structural and expressive intelligence of Young's contributions offers a welcome new gloss on these extraordinary works.

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