

Bruckner's Fourth Symphony

Nathalie Stutzmann tells Christian Hoskins about bringing Bruckner to Atlanta

My conversation with Nathalie Stutzmann takes place shortly after she has conducted performances of Bruckner's Sixth Symphony in Atlanta. I'm interested to hear that, alongside Bach, Bruckner is one of her favourite composers. 'The way he writes is unique,' she enthuses. 'If you hear a few bars, you know it's Bruckner. The Sixth is perhaps less typical, but the Fourth is very Brucknerian from the first bars. What attracts me so much is the combination of styles. You have this extremely Romantic, extremely sensual music, and it communicates this passion over a long timescale. There are also elements of Bach and music from earlier times, even medieval chords, and suddenly in the middle of that you have harmonies which are almost like contemporary music. So it feels like he's covering a large part of music history in a score which, on the first approach, doesn't at all sound like Bach or music from our time.'

'What I find interesting as a musician is how much you have to hold and maintain his long musical lines. For example, in the climax at the end of the first movement (one of the most incredible codas ever), if you give too much before the very end, it's dead. I heard some young conductors looking at the score and saying, "Bruckner is easy because you don't have too many complications in terms of how to beat this and that." But actually, I think he's one of the most difficult composers, because you need so many years of music-making to know how to pace it. Every note has to have the right weight. The right pulse is also essential.'

In addition to giving the title *Romantic* to the Fourth Symphony, Bruckner provided descriptive explanations of the movements in letters to friends, including references to morning calls from medieval towers, knights on horseback, forest murmurs and birdsong. I ask whether Stutzmann feels this is an important aspect of the music, or whether it's something that's irrelevant to the way we should hear the symphony. 'Well, I think it's always very interesting to collect this kind of information when preparing a score,' she explains. 'It won't transform the interpretation, but it probably has an influence somewhere along the way, even if you don't know why. And if you don't get what you want from the orchestra, you can inspire them by sharing this kind of anecdote. I've often experienced that sometimes you need to give the idea and then they get it. Therefore, I think this sort of information is really important.'

For her recording with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Stutzmann has chosen the second of the three major versions of the symphony: the one dated 1878-80 and the most frequently performed. I wonder whether she has a strong preference for this particular version, or if she's interested in



Stutzmann, Atlanta SO Music Director since 2022, is keen to share her love of Bruckner's music

exploring all three. 'Well, I think each one is very interesting. There is a part of the first version which is somehow more direct, but I feel the second is the more balanced one in terms of the overall architecture. The first thing I do when I analyse a score is to try to understand the rhythmical structure, whoever the composer is. And for me, it's a dream with Bruckner – it's like putting on a favourite pair of shoes. I remember when I discovered that he often counted the outline of the bars before writing in the music. And I think the second version has a rhythmical balance where you feel nothing is missing. I wouldn't like any bar to be different.'

I ask what challenges the score brings for a conductor. 'There are many. First of all, there's the issue of how to shape the second movement, which is so beautiful, with its opening like Schubert's String Quintet, but where the development is very long. Also, how to bring out the sensuality of the movement without exaggeration. Balancing the brass so that you get the warmth of the strings and the harmonies in the orchestration is not so easy with modern instruments. You also have to hold back so that the main climax comes at the right time, and to convey the feeling that although we are playing at maximum power, there is even more in reserve. Musicians want to give everything, and they sometimes give too much and too early. Therefore, one of the most difficult things is to know exactly where you want the climax and to keep the orchestra going in that direction.'

'I would also say the fourth movement is very delicate, very strange,' she continues. 'It has some disturbing moments, disturbing harmonies. I think it's important not to hide them,

not to worry about whether it sounds inelegant. It has to be the most honest vision of it. Meanwhile, in between these massive moments, you have much doubt, much fragility in the movement, which I cherish very much.'

A perusal of John Berky's invaluable website abruckner.com reveals that the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra has never previously recorded Bruckner's music. This provides a different set of challenges compared with conducting an orchestra such as the Vienna Philharmonic, which most likely has a strong idea about how the symphony should go. 'What you say is interesting, and very true. It is, of course, an advantage and a disadvantage. But for me, it was an advantage to have an orchestra that was totally fresh with this music. They have played very little Bruckner. They are dying to play Strauss, Wagner, Bruckner, Brahms – all the composers that are my core repertoire, which is partly why they wanted to have me in Atlanta, because they previously did a lot of contemporary music. So it's naturally a very precise orchestra, which knows how to deal with modern music. But they were very hungry to play this repertoire again.'

'You have to work very intensely on building up the sound, the Bruckner sound that you have in your ears, especially as a European'

'When I programmed the Bruckner bicentenary festival here, the response from the marketing section was, "Bruckner in Atlanta? Are you crazy?" And I said, "It's 2024, we have to do it." And actually it was a huge success. The impact that the symphonies have had on people who don't know anything about music is extraordinary.'

'Of course, some of the players know Bruckner very well as musicians, but for some of them it was a rediscovery. When we did the Sixth Symphony two weeks ago, they hadn't played it for 39 years. You have to work very intensely on building up the sound, the Bruckner sound that you have in your ears, especially as a European. I grew up with that sound, and I feel I have to pass it on and share it. In the second movement of the Fourth Symphony, especially, I used my voice a lot to sing the phrasing I was looking for; and they were very receptive, so I really hope the recording will show that.'

'Sometimes people ask, "Why is it interesting to play Bruckner?" and "What does it mean in our day?" What I admire in the music is the feeling you have when you just dive in. You don't need to analyse it. Of course, people like you and me love to analyse things, but if you don't want to analyse it you don't have to. In these times we are living in, with all that's happening in the world, we are offering an extraordinary journey of one hour of meditation, of escaping the world. I don't know what Bruckner does with this music, but after hearing it, you feel different. You feel more calm. You feel like you've come back to the essence of being alive.'

'In a world where everything has to be quick and short, where if you put a video on social media, it has to be 15 seconds long because otherwise people will swipe to the next one, Bruckner offers the exact opposite. It's a spiritual moment. And no matter if you are a believer or not, it's a moment out of the world. And that's why I think we need to still listen to this music.'

► Nathalie Stutzmann's recording of Bruckner's Fourth Symphony will be issued on Warner Classics and reviewed in a forthcoming issue of Gramophone

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