

78. Christus factus est

WAB 11

Anton Bruckner

(1824-1896)

arr. William Melton

Bruckner, Josef Anton

(born 4 September 1824 in Ansfelden; died 11 October 1896 in Vienna)

Anton Bruckner, raised in a farming community in upper Austria, began his musical studies with his schoolmaster father and a cousin. In Anton's twelfth year his father died, and the boy was admitted to the choir school of St. Florian. After completing teacher training in Linz, he progressed through a number of teaching posts, finally netting a position as organist of St. Florian in 1845. He refined his compositional skills with years of study with the distinguished contrapuntist Simon Sechter in Vienna. He also won the organist post at the Linz cathedral, made a serious study of the older polyphonic masters from Palestrina to Bach, and composed a catalogue of sacred works that would include three fine large-scale masses and, much later, an inspired *Te Deum*.

At thirty-seven years of age Bruckner first heard a performance of the music of Richard Wagner. A pupil noted, 'Carried away by the intoxicating harmonies and melodies, the astonished and enthusiastic Bruckner recognised that Wagner's great work was an ingenious fulfillment and extension of Sechter's theories'. Hans von Bülow first introduced Bruckner to Wagner at a performance of *Tristan und Isolde* in Munich in 1865. In 1868 Bruckner again made the trip to Munich to attend *Die Meistersinger*, and afterwards exchanged letters with Wagner. In mid-September 1873, Bruckner took his Second Symphony in C minor and Third Symphony in D minor on a visit to Bayreuth to ask Wagner to accept the dedication of one of the of the works (Wagner chose the latter).

Bruckner arrived in Vienna in 1868 at age forty-five to take up the posts of Professor at the Conservatory and Court Organist (Lecturer at the University was added in 1875). His undeniable gifts were joined with such a naïve

personality and an intense piety that fashionable Vienna had difficulties taking him seriously. The Philharmonic musicians were unenthusiastic about his monumental symphonies (each of which was ‘a cathedral in sound’ according to Robert Simpson) that juxtaposed sprawling Gothic outer movements with zen-like Adagios, demonic Scherzi and bucolic Trios. During the Bruckner-led premiere of his Third Symphony, masses exited the hall after each movement, leaving it almost empty at the end. In addition, Bruckner’s openly-declared admiration for the music of Wagner had made an adversary of the influential *Neue Freie Presse* critic Eduard Hanslick, who championed Johannes Brahms. As late as 1876 Bruckner complained, ‘Thus have I have lived in Vienna since 1868, heartily regretting ever having moved here, because support, recognition, and means of subsistence have all been wanting’.

Still, his fame as an organist had grown with successful concerts in Paris and Nancy (1869), and London (performances at Royal Albert Hall and the Crystal Palace in 1871), and he was lionized by his vocal and partisan students. Incrementally, Bruckner’s symphonies also began making themselves a niche — the arrival of Wagner’s former apprentice Hans Richter as musical director in Vienna in 1875 had been a boost to the cause. Though the composer remained wary of Richter’s close friendship with Brahms, Richter’s premieres of Bruckner’s Fourth and Eighth symphonies were popular if not critical successes. In Germany a growing number of conductors championed the symphonies, including Arthur Nikisch in Leipzig, Hermann Levi in Munich, and Jean Louis Nicodé in Dresden. Performances in Amsterdam and London, Boston and New York followed, though reception in the three latter cities was highly critical (and would remain so for decades, *Baker’s Dictionary* still maintaining in 1919 that Bruckner’s ‘music seems, in general, lacking in inspiration and individuality’).

As Bruckner’s health failed him, Kaiser Franz Josef approved the composer’s move to a custodian’s lodge at the Belvedere Palace in July 1895. The first three movements of his Ninth Symphony in D minor were finished by the end of November of that year. When journalist Theodor Helm visited him, Bruckner went to the piano, played the last Wagner tuba passage in the third movement Adagio with shaking hands, describing it with painful resignation as his ‘Farewell to Life’. By January of 1896, Vienna Philharmonic

cellist Joseph Sulzer wrote that the skeletal composer had to be carried on a chair to hear his Fourth Symphony, as he was too ill to walk: 'There was no one in the entire orchestra who was not deeply affected by the tragic scene. And then there was the horrible contrast: the mighty brass sounds – and their creator infirm and mortally ill'. Anton Bruckner died on 11 October 1896, profoundly mourned by a large and loyal band of his former students. Over half a century later, his symphonies had become staples of the international concert repertoire.

The gestation of the Gradual *Christus factus est*, WAB 11, was described by Bruckner's authoritative biographers August Göllerich and Max Auer:

Bruckner was in Prague, and during Holy Week he attended the church services assiduously, especially moved by the mystery of Maundy Thursday. He created an echo of this meditation on 28 May 1884 with his superb third setting of the text *Christus factus est* for soprano, alto, tenor and bass a cappella, a work that the master especially loved.

It was first performed at the Vienna Court Chapel on 9 November of the same year. Dedicated to the 'Reverend Father Otto Loidol, Benedictine Monk in Kremsmünster', the work was published by Theodor Rättig as one of 'Four Graduals' (Vienna, 1886; pl. no. T. R. 41). Max Auer called *Christus factus est* 'a showpiece of the a cappella literature'.

Text by William Melton