



Thames Youth Orchestra

Simon Ferris, conductor

Concert

Saturday January 16th 2010
7.30pm

All Saints Kingston



Programme

Andrzej Panufnik (1914-1991), *Sinfonia Sacra* (Symphony No.3 – 1963)

The *Sinfonia Sacra* was composed in 1963 in celebration of the imminent Polish millennium of 1966. In order to encapsulate the spirit of a thousand years of history, Panufnik chose as his central – indeed, only – theme the hymn tune which had for many of those one thousand years been the unofficial anthem of Poland, *Bogurodzica*. This hymn, a Gregorian chant written at some time between 1000 and 1300, was noted for its martial as well as its liturgical importance, having reputedly been intoned by Polish knights before numerous significant military encounters. Panufnik cites this dual character in his own note to the work, noting that the arenas of “battlefield and of prayer”...[had] “dominated Polish life throughout all the thousand years of its tragic history”.

This tragic history was for Panufnik a matter of immediacy. He had been present in Warsaw during the Second World War and the uprising of 1944, in which he lost his brother (and all of his compositions to date); and in the years after the conflict he found himself unable to work within the strictures of a Soviet-dominated regime, eventually escaping into exile in England in 1960. It was an exile from which he never returned, only visiting his native country once more just before his death in 1991.

It is perhaps no surprise that the material with which he chose to work in his *Sinfonia Sacra* should be so emotionally hot – the choice of a hymn which breathed Polish military and spiritual defiance was an almost political gesture (Polish Catholicism had always been a source of national identity as against both the dominant local orthodox professions and Soviet communist atheism). But the formal control which shaped that material was musically derived and articulated a different sort of defiance.

The post-war European musical world was dominated by the process-driven methods of serial composition associated with the Second Viennese School, and although Panufnik had studied serialism intently in Vienna under Weingartner before the war, he came ultimately to reject it. This stance, and his adoption of an essentially conservative musical idiom, meant that in an England whose musical life was dominated by the powerful influence of Sir William Glock at the BBC – an impassioned advocate of serialism – opportunities in his professional career were limited.

That Panufnik should write, therefore, in his own note to the symphony, that “as in all my work, my emotional involvement with my chosen themes imposed for me the musical form” was a way not only of expressing a compositional credo, but also

of defying power – in this case, the power of institutionalized intellectual conformity.

And perhaps it is not so strange, after all, that, having so emphatically rejected serial techniques, an echo of Webern should remain in his tight, transparent and indeed relentless control of structure, and the way that extremely economical forms marshal emotionally highly-charged materials.

The work is in two parts, *Visions* and *Hymn*, the first part further sub-divided into three sections. These three visions are all built on the first three intervals of the *Bogurodzica* melody: D-C, C-F, and F-E. Vision 1 uses the fourth (C-F) as its basic cell, Vision 2 uses the major second (D-C), and Vision 3 the minor second (F-E) plus, as Panufnik notes, a diminished fifth ‘for colour’. It is not until the second part, *Hymn*, that we hear the *Bogurodzica* as a whole. The three visions, therefore, are necessarily partial, presenting fragmented aspects of the whole in repetitive cycles which share the rhythms of meditative chanting and iteration familiar to Western and other monasticisms.

Vision 1 is a violent and antiphonal fanfare for four trumpets placed at the cardinal points of the orchestra; Vision 2 an elegiac string larghetto, and Vision 3, beginning with a riot for percussion, gives way to the whole orchestra, (in Panufnik’s phrase, “a dramatic tutti in which I wanted to create an interweaving conflict”). When this scurrying of quavers crowds to a pause, the hymn, finally, emerges.

But again, full realisation is deferred. The whole movement (and indeed, the whole work) is a sort of circular working backwards to its origins, as through arriving at the meaning of a word via its etymology and variant spellings, its cabalistic possibilities. Panufnik characterized this involuted movement as a “simple prayer to the Virgin” expressing “adoration and warmth”. The theme is first heard in violin harmonics, almost imperceptibly high, quiet and slow. The gathering that then follows is a tour-de-force of managed (“rigidly-controlled”) crescendo, which, at its climax and with the full statement of the germinal theme, is framed once again by the previously naked antiphonal trumpets.

Interval (20 minutes)

Anton Bruckner, Symphony No. 4, ‘Romantic’ in E flat major

- I Bewegt, nicht zu schnell**
- II Andante quasi allegretto**
- III Scherzo. Bewegt – Trio. Nicht zu schnell**
- IV Finale. Bewegt, doch nicht zu schnell**

Anton Bruckner, who endlessly tinkered with, revised and reworked his ample symphonic oeuvre, has caused more difficulties for generations of musicologists than, it might be felt, reason warrants. In 1969 Deryck Cooke, in a despairing essay in the *Musical Times* entitled *The Bruckner Problem Simplified*, counted the number of different versions of the nine numbered symphonies (and not counting different editions of those versions) at 34.

The Fourth has a genesis as knotty as any. Completed in November 1874 but not performed at that time, it was revised in 1878, with some 'tightening' (Bruckner's word) of the first two movements, a full-scale revision of the finale, and the replacement of the original scherzo with the now-familiar Hunt scherzo; in 1880 he reworked the finale once more, and it was in this form that it received its first performance under Hans Richter with the Vienna Philharmonic. In 1881 Bruckner did some more tidying, and then prior to publication in 1889, undertook still more serious revision in collaboration with his amanuenses and editors, the Shalk brothers and Ferdinand Ljewe. It thus exists in three distinct versions (1874, 1878-80 and 1889). The final printed version of 1889 is now poorly regarded: the version most commonly played – as tonight – is that of 1878-80.

Many reasons have been advanced to account for this apparent uncertainty. It is suggested that Bruckner was indecisive by nature and self-conscious of his provincial education; or that he was prey to the need to impress both a Conservatory culture and the avant-garde to whom he would always represent the voice of Wagner in symphonic form; or that his works were prized from his control by politically motivated editors and repeatedly wrestled back by a Bruckner who was at bottom a supremely clear-sighted artist; or that the performance conditions of his time compelled him to make pragmatic alterations and cuts in an effort to secure elusive performances.

There is, no doubt, an element of truth in all of this, contradictory though it may seem, but then Bruckner was a contradictory figure. He had been brought up in the Monastery of St. Florian near Linz, where he had imbibed not only a predominantly sacred musical culture, but also a deep draught of (monastic) Catholic piety, on which mystical hinge all his symphonies turn.

But those symphonies are not merely Masses broken free of their liturgical moorings. Bruckner moved from the monastery to Linz, always as organist, and then, aged nearly 40, to Vienna; and through all of this time he sedulously studied harmony, counterpoint and strict style part-writing, disciplines at which he slowly came to excel. And through repeated sympathetic contact with Wagner – both his music and the man – he found himself at the innovatory edge of the German musical world, and his music became a battleground for his (Wagnerian) champions and Vienna's more conservative, classical critics.

And at the heart of this contention and confusion was Bruckner himself, endlessly chipping away at his vast symphonic body of work. It has often been said that Bruckner did not so much write symphonies as explore one continuous symphonic space; that, in effect, he only wrote one symphony of which the nine (in their various forms) each constitute a facet. He developed increasingly arcane processes of revision (his numeromaniac tendencies directing the use of complex metrical grids to chart the duration of different sections and phrases of his works), and his late scores are filled with barely-explicable series of numbers and indecipherable marginalia. These processes operated over the whole canon of his work at once, as though each new symphony necessitated a rebalancing of the whole meta-symphony.

As with almost all of the symphonies, the Fourth has outer movements in Bruckner's own distended and sectional version of sonata form, in which each separate phase of the musical argument develops its own gravitational logic. The sectional juxtaposition which ensues tends to diffuse the dramatic impulse native to sonata form (and many of his late revisions, incidentally, were directed at reclaiming something of that drive), and this tension, between the pushing dynamism of sonata form and the gravitational weight of the individual sections, mirrors the dual character of the great Bruckner meta-symphony: both static, quasi-Baroque, contemplative space and narrative grail quest.

The sections alternate between distinct stylistic registers. In the opening movement the first theme group – a long-breathed horn melody over tremolando strings, which never quite resolves into either major or minor (and which will return throughout the first movement and again at the end of the finale) – gives way to a more muscular and heroic first theme proper. The second subject group is in the 'low' or pastoral idiom (the theme itself based, according to Bruckner, on the call of the great tit). The development similarly moves between woodland idyll and blazing chorale (always a mystical reference point for Bruckner), and the recapitulation, which Bruckner generally grouped with the development as forming the second part of a binary structure, is followed by a coda of some structural weight, which opens in menacing quiet and ends the movement in a triumphant reiteration of the first hesitant theme.

The *Andante* is a rondo – a form which Bruckner studied with almost as much intent as sonata form. He glossed this movement as a "rustic love scene" in which a peasant boy's love is ultimately scorned, and the overall tenor of the movement, notwithstanding its hesitant cello *cantilena*, quiet chorale, and lyrical viola melody, is indeed one of tragic, and perhaps unrequited, questing.

The scherzo, uniquely among Bruckner's symphonies in duple rather than triple time, is the 'hunting' scherzo which replaced the ambitiously distended version of 1874; and while the replacement is much tauter, it too seeks to expand on simple scherzo form by subdividing the outer shell of the movement (nominally ABA) into

small scale ternary structures in their own right. The opening horn motto is marked “jagdthema” (hunt-theme) in the score by Bruckner.

The finale announces the renewal of dramatic impetus by opening in a louring B flat minor, setting up the sort of harmonic tension that sonata form typically seeks to resolve. The opening three-note horn figure, quickly picked up by the clarinets, is an ominous distortion of the opening gestures of the first movement, and hardens into the first theme proper, stated in a brutal full orchestral unison, which in turn metamorphoses into a broad E flat restatement of the opening idea. Again the second subject group confides glimpses of Schubertian pastoral (C major weaving in and out of C minor), but it will not dispel the mood of unquiet which predominates in the movement as a whole – at any rate, as far as the coda, often a section of major importance for Bruckner in his sonata form movements in spite – or possibly because of – its formal separateness. In this case the coda is the location of redemption, recalling earlier thematic material – most notably the opening horn theme.

No symphony of Bruckner can be called finished – Deryck Cooke bemoaned the fact that had he not gone back over his body of work repeatedly he might not only have completed the great Ninth symphony but even have stretched to a Tenth – but it is precisely in their provisional, hovering state, their repudiation of closure at whatever psychological or spiritual level, that, at their best, they remain the great open-ended meditative interrogatives of the symphonic tradition.

programme notes © John Ferris, 2010

Simon Ferris, conductor

Simon Ferris, founder director of the Thames Youth Orchestra, read music and was organ scholar at King's College London. As an undergraduate he pursued additional instrumental and musicianship studies with Bernard Oram at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and, after graduation, received composition tuition and encouragement from the composer and John Ireland pupil, Geoffrey Bush.

A skilled and experienced jazz pianist, Simon's wide-ranging professional career now embraces an array of genres and disciplines, as performer, composer (published by ABRSM), arranger, writer (with programme note credits for, among others the Maggini Quartet and the Hanover Band), conductor and teacher, with duties including preparing children's choirs for the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden.

Simon is currently Musician in Residence at Tiffin School, and Musician in Residence at Tiffin Girls' School, Kingston upon Thames, where in addition to his composing and performing duties he also teaches harmony.

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Max Liefkes, leader

First Violins

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*principal

Horns

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Nicolaj Schubert
Robert Hawkins

Trombones

Edmund Jillings*
Julius Whiteman
Matilda Ashe-Belton

Tuba

Richard Fox

Timpani

Patrick Milne

Percussion

Daehyun Lee
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