

What's in a number?

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When listening to the symphonies of Mozart, Beethoven or Schumann, one is left with the sense that each work is a discrete entity written according to a series of broadly-accepted guidelines but essentially individual in character. Bruckner's symphonies, while nominally adhering to the same formal rules and structural principles, suggest something else entirely: for Bruckner, the symphony seems to have been less a form than an ideal – a holy mountain impossible to scale but equally impossible to ignore – and from the *Third* onwards, each symphony can be heard as a refinement of its immediate predecessor, and another step on the path to his singular vision.

If the four symphonies that pre-date the *Third* are performed less frequently it may be because the visionary qualities of those later works are still very much in a formative state; and while the first two numbered symphonies are necessarily included in complete surveys of 'the nine' – albeit not always in performances of the highest commitment – the two unnumbered symphonies are often relegated to the status of curiosities, of interest only to the most hardcore of [Bruckner](#) fans.

Christian [Thielemann](#) is among the few modern conductors to have recorded both works in the context of a complete cycle, and his recent guest appearance with the Berlin Philharmonic offered audiences the chance to hear these rarities in performances of the highest possible calibre. Mr Thielemann's patient, highly considered readings neither dismissed these neglected works as academic curios nor attempted to situate them as essential missing pieces in the Bruckner puzzle; rather, in approaching the symphonies on their own terms, Mr Thielemann revealed works of humble but undeniable merit, intriguing enough to demand our attention and rich enough to reward it.

Of the two works, the *Symphony in F minor* – sometimes known as the 'Study Symphony' or No. 00 – is the more obscure: it may not be a great work when measured against Bruckner's subsequent achievements, but it remains fascinating as much for its



Christian Thielemann © 2019 by Orquesta Filarmónica de Viena
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unmistakable foreshadowing of the later symphonies as for its passages in which almost no traces of the familiar Bruckner are discernible. Mr Thielemann, however, never tried to fashion the symphony into anything more than it was: if the brief Brucknerian flashes were played with convincing grandeur, its moments of relative gaiety were delivered with an appropriately light touch.

Indeed the opening tutti of the first movement, despite the lustrous warmth of the strings, had an animated quality that seemed to draw its inspiration from the classically proportioned symphonies of half a century earlier: Bruckner would never sound so jovial or carefree again. The movement was, admittedly, neither as densely packed as anything from Brahms, nor as tautly argued as Beethoven, but under Mr Thielemann's consistently focussed direction one was never left with a sense that Bruckner was spreading his material too thin; and if much of the movement was notable for its sunny disposition, the brief cascading coda offered a decisive glimpse of the darkness that would feature so prominently in later works.

The second movement was neither slow nor especially calm: from the outset there was an anxiety in the strings – backed by urgent timpani rolls – that set the scene for a surprisingly turbulent middle section; yet it eventually reached a conclusion of glowing calm. The third movement brought us back to more familiar territory: Bruckner's conception of the fearsomely propulsive scherzo bookending the pastoral trio was fully intact from the very beginning of his symphonic output. Here the trio was especially appealing, with its gentle woodwind theme picked up by the strings, and horn playing of captivating softness.

The final movement returned to the vaguely classical mould of the opening – albeit with an urgency all its own – and featured superb woodwinds, beautiful solo horn and playing from the strings that managed to be incisive without sounding forced. The symphony cannot have been familiar to many of the musicians – it has not been performed by the Berlin Philharmonic in thirty-five years – but Mr Thielemann, confident enough to conduct the work without a score, guided orchestra and audience alike on a rewarding journey of discovery. If one may still have reservations about the greatness of the work itself, there could be no doubting the greatness of the evening's performance.

The unnumbered *Symphony in D Minor* was written between the First and what would eventually become the Second but was neither performed nor published in Bruckner's lifetime. Bruckner's own disavowal, and the fact that it is often weighted with the unfortunate designation of *Symphony No. 0*, has given the work an uncertain place within the corpus: it has been recorded and performed more frequently than the *F minor*, but has nonetheless remained on the periphery. If the familiar presence of Bruckner looms larger than it does in the earlier unnumbered symphony, Mr Thielemann's reading on this evening demonstrated that the work is equally fascinating for the directions that the composer ultimately chose not to pursue.

Although the movement came across as more episodic than anything in the earlier symphony, the episodes themselves had greater brilliance and a more distinctive personality. The hand of Bruckner was nowhere more apparent than in the opening, in which agitated strings led to a sudden outburst from the brass; this was followed by a quiet,

almost trancelike back and forth in the strings which offered a backdrop for beautiful solo playing from the oboe, clarinet and first violins. However it was the final section of the movement that left the greatest impression, a slow unstoppable build in the strings that not to a grand climax but to a moment of unexpected silence that made the heavy coda all the more forceful.

The second movement was something of a revelation. The rapt opening, with its especially delicate violins, lay the foundation for an extended exercise in serenity more inwardly devout than nearly anything else in the later symphonies (the slow movement of the *Second* symphony occupies a similarly reverent space). Although there were moments of animation (an especially brilliant passage for the massed woodwinds) and a characteristically huge exclamation from the full strings, the hushed violins always returned to restore a sense of tranquillity. It was here that Mr Thielemann seemed to exert the most exacting control over the mood conjured by the orchestra, and the results were unexpectedly breathtaking.

The third movement, once again, offered a more familiar Brucknerian landscape with maximum contrast between the warmth of the trio and the feverish urgency of the Scherzo; and while the Finale was undeniably episodic, Mr Thielemann ensured that the sections flowed together convincingly. The episodes themselves contained no shortage of excitement – from the sudden trumpet blasts at the beginning to the brief, triumphal coda that brings the work to its conclusion – but it was easy to see how such expressions would have seemed glaringly unrefined to an audience of the 1860s. Whether Bruckner was ahead of his time or merely outside of it, Mr Thielemann and the Berlin Philharmonic gave the composer's two most neglected symphonies the performances they have certainly always deserved ... and, in doing so, made a thoroughly convincing argument for their musical merit.