

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 1 July 2024
1.00pm

Camerata RCO

Marc Daniel van Biemen violin
Coraline Groen violin
Santa Vižine viola
Maartje-Maria den Herder cello
Georgina Poad double bass
Hein Wiedijk clarinet
Fons Verspaandonk horn
Daan Kortekaas piano
Bart Jansen timpani
Ellen Zijm accordion

Anton Bruckner (1824-1896)

Symphony No. 6 (1879-81) arranged by Rolf Verbeek
*I. Majestoso • II. Adagio. Sehr feierlich •
III. Scherzo. Nicht schnell - Trio. Langsam •
IV. Finale. Bewegt, doch nicht zu schnell*



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Anton Bruckner (1824-1896) began drafting his Sixth Symphony in July 1879 just after completing his String Quintet in F, but he set it aside abruptly to compose a new version of the *Finale* of the Fourth Symphony. As a result, the first movement of the Sixth was not completed until the end of September 1880. The *Adagio* followed in November and the *Scherzo* in January 1881. Bruckner completed *Finale* in the following September. He never reworked the Sixth after that, thus it is one of his few symphonies to survive in a single version.

The Sixth originated at a time when Bruckner's compositional approach to the symphony was entering a new phase. Between 1872 and 1876 he had composed a series of four magnificent, innovative symphonies, which we now know as his Second through Fifth Symphonies. In the late 1870s, he had focused his creative energies on revising these works. These revisions, which concentrated on refining the musical structures of these works, were inspired by his renewed interest in what he called 'the science of musical architecture', spurred by his appointment in 1876 to the faculty of the University of Vienna as a Professor of Harmony and Counterpoint. The Sixth was the first symphony he composed after his appointment. Not surprisingly, then, he designed the work with unusual care and precision. Not only are the formal outlines of each movement firmly drawn and well-marked, but even the symphony's phrase structures exhibit an extraordinary degree of regularity. Without exception these are based on units of two bars, most often arranged systematically into eight-bar periods. Far from creating monotony, this regularity lends the music a steady ongoing sense of forward motion.

The musical content that fills these tightly controlled structural frames is unusually rich. The music abounds in complexly woven motivic work, often played out through rhythmic patterns that juxtapose - and at times, superimpose - double and triple rhythmic divisions. Each movement also contains passages with immediate musical appeal, beginning with the striking opening pages, as a mysterious theme arises in the bass below a persistent tattoo in the violins. Highlights in the first movement include the extended second theme group with its soaring turn from minor to major in its final strain, an astonishing recapitulation that begins daringly in E flat before suddenly pivoting to the home key of A major, and the magnificent coda, its 'tumultuous surface sparkling', in Donald Francis Tovey's memorable phrase, 'like the Homeric seas'. The *Adagio* is suffused throughout by deep lyricism, inflected at a key moment by the heart-rending keening of the oboe. The idealised rustic rhythms of the *Scherzo* and *Trio* underwrite uncanny sonic landscapes, as does the mysterious modal theme that opens the *Finale* only to be shattered by great barks from the horns that foreshadow the movement's main theme.

Bruckner considered the Sixth to be among his boldest works; as he wittily suggested, 'die Sechste, die

keckste' ('the sixth, the sauciest'). Yet it has long been among the least often performed of his symphonies. Its relative neglect began almost as soon as it was composed. Bruckner submitted the score to the Vienna Philharmonic shortly after its completion, but after giving the music a preliminary run-through, the orchestra and its conductor Wilhelm Jahn agreed to perform only the *Adagio* and *Scherzo*, presumably because they felt that the complicated rhythms and textures that pervade the outer movements were unduly difficult and too challenging for the Philharmonic audience. The Sixth was neither performed again nor published until after Bruckner's death. Mahler led the first performance of the complete symphony, albeit with some cuts, again with the Vienna Philharmonic, on 26 February 1899. The score was finally published in July of that year. An uncut performance of the symphony was not given until March 1901 in Stuttgart under Karl Pohlig.

Today's performance is an arrangement of the score for chamber ensemble prepared by the Dutch conductor Rolf Verbeek. Arrangements of various sorts have played an important role in the history of Bruckner's symphonies. Many of these works were first heard in public not in orchestral dress, but as arrangements for piano four hands, most often given by Bruckner's young advocates, Joseph Schalk and Ferdinand Löwe. The immediate forebear of the current arrangement, however, is one of the Seventh Symphony that was prepared in 1920 by Erwin Stein, Hanns Eisler and Karl Rankl for Schoenberg's Society for Private Musical Performances, but not brought to performance before the Society ceased operations in 1921. Verbeek closely follows the instrumentation used by Schoenberg's ensemble, a collection of ten instruments - clarinet, horn, piano, timpani, string quintet and an accordion, which offers greater musical possibilities than the harmonium used in the 1920 arrangement.

Schoenberg created his Society to provide a venue for the performance of modern and innovative works during the hard years that followed the First World War. Verbeek's arrangement originated as a way to perform Bruckner in the period of lockdown during the COVID pandemic. Yet arranging Bruckner's orchestral score for a small ensemble has distinct musical value as well as practical advantages. As Verbeek has written, he was motivated in large part by a desire to 'understand Bruckner's language down to the cellular level' and hence gain a new perspective on the music of a composer for whom he has had 'great admiration from a young age'. The translation of the Sixth from a work for a grand symphony orchestra to one for a chamber ensemble does not so much miniaturise the work as put its music into a new perspective, one that brings its lapidary construction into sharp relief and allows its expressive character to emerge with astonishing immediacy.

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