

The High-Classical German Instrumental Style as the Foundation of Anton Bruckner's Thematic Designs

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Abstract

Anton Bruckner's symphonies have long been recognized as vital contributions to the canon of late-Romantic western art music. Yet this body of work has not been without controversy. One frequent criticism involves the vast length of his themes and the enormous size of each movement – features that have often been attributed to Bruckner's unremitting adulation of Wagner. Rather than situate Bruckner's art as a product of post-Wagnerian aesthetics, in this paper I argue that it is more profitable to examine Bruckner's melodic style as an expansion upon the instrumental themes of the high Classical German style, paradigms formalized in William Caplin's *Classical Form* (1998). By outlining the relationships between the thematic material from Bruckner's and Beethoven's works, I show that the foundation of Bruckner's melodic style is more reactionary than has been acknowledged. More specifically, I show that the themes from these works are enlarged – in Caplin's terms, loosened – versions of Caplinian theme types. Through the course of the discussion, I identify in Bruckner's symphonies comparable loosening techniques, suggesting stylistic conventions. I end with some remarks about further areas of inquiry with respect to the relationship between the thematic construction and formal designs in other symphonies by Bruckner.

Anton Bruckner's symphonies have long been recognized as vital contributions to the canon of late-Romantic western art music. Yet this body of work has not been without controversy. One frequent criticism involves the vast length of his themes and enormous size of each movement – features that have associated with Bruckner's unremitting adulation of Richard Wagner.¹ Concomitantly, a prevalent assessment found during Bruckner's day was that the composer's music was formless, judgments found in reviews by such varied critics as August Wilhelm Ambros, Eduard Hanslick, Max Kalbeck, and Gustav Dömke. The latter's 1886 Viennese review of the seventh symphony is not atypical: "Bruckner lacks the feel for the primary elements of musical formal shape, [but also] for the coherence of a series of melodic and harmonic components parts."²

Rather than situate Bruckner's music within the realm of post-Wagnerian aesthetics, in this study I argue it is more profitable to comprehend Bruckner's melodic style as an expansion upon the instrumental themes of the high Classical German style, paradigms formalized in Caplin 1998. At first, it would seem Bruckner's music

would be an incongruent body of literature to associate with William E. Caplin's theoretical model – one that the author has primarily used to comprehend late eighteenth-century instrumental music. Yet as I explore below, underlying the expansive length of Bruckner's thematic material is a refined logic that can be reliably illustrated using Caplin's model. I begin with some examples from Ludwig van Beethoven, a composer that features prominently in Caplin's theoretical treatise. While illustrative, the choice of Beethoven is not accidental. As a touchstone for nineteenth-century Viennese composers, it would be typical for a broadly learned composer as Bruckner to know Beethoven's music intimately. For instance, Derek Watson (1975) describes that Beethoven's works were part of Bruckner's musical studies during his early years at Linz and would have been very familiar with at least half of the symphonies by no later than 1839, i.e., by the age of seventeen.³ Further, Beethoven, along with Johann Sebastian Bach, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Franz Schubert, and contemporaries such as Franz Liszt and Wagner remained close to Bruckner throughout his life. Given Bruckner's

¹ For a summary of Bruckner's relationship with Wagner and late 19th-century Wagnerian politics, see Notley 1997.

² Dömke, Gustav, *Wiener Abendpost*, 30 March 1886; citation appears in Korstvedt 2004: 170.

³ For another perspective of Beethoven's influence on Bruckner, see chapter 5 from Horton 2004.