

When approached to share my thoughts on Anton Bruckner's Symphony No. 4, I quickly ran through a mental checklist of what I could/should address. Although Bruckner 4 appears infrequently on audition lists (mostly in section rounds), there are certainly many specifics to consider when preparing Bruckner:

The "Bruckner Sound;" execution of loud passages; execution of soft passages; note lengths; tuning; pacing; different editions; trombone section considerations; and the application of each for performing and auditioning.

The physical demands placed upon members of the low brass section in most Bruckner symphonies are significant. Playing principal trombone requires a great deal of stamina and pacing. By the last few lines of the last movement, most trombonists are aware of a certain degree of fatigue. I think the best way to deal with the endurance issue is to "train." Playing Bruckner is akin to participating in a long distance race for a runner. How does the athlete prepare for such an event? Training. If one is going to run a marathon, one has to engage in 'roadwork.' To successfully negotiate a Bruckner symphony, hours of extra practice, well ahead of time, are in order. Since orchestra schedules are made known months in advance, the responsible orchestra player knows what repertoire is coming and conscientiously prepares through extra practice well ahead of time.

The "Bruckner Sound:"

By now we should all know that Anton Bruckner (1824-1896) was an Austrian composer whose primary instrument was the organ. He was a great admirer of the music of Richard Wagner and was greatly influenced by Wagner's ability to compose lengthy, vast musical landscapes. When I consider the "Bruckner Sound," I hear a full, clear, resonant sound, with depth, projection and carrying power. The sound is not edgy and every note has a glow to it...even the shorter notes. At this point I want to stress the importance of musical curiosity. It is a common error to neglect the differences, however subtle, in how different composers are performed. There are different gradations of loud and soft and different timbres within those gradations.

In preparation for this article, I listened to several recordings of my recordings of Bruckner 4. I first learned the symphony, as a student, 25 years ago through listening to the Chicago Symphony/Barenboim recording from the 1972. Although that was the recording I memorized (and idolized) when I was younger, I returned to different versions at this time, consciously seeking out the finest Austrian orchestras. The first I listened to was the Furtwängler, Vienna Philharmonic live version from 1951. It reminded me that there are many different editions of the Bruckner symphonies. Passages that I have been accustomed to hearing and playing were absent. It is fascinating to hear a work that is so familiar in a different version. Bruckner was famous for reworking his symphonies and through the years many versions have surfaced. Today, the two most common editions are the Robert Haas 1936 edition and the Leopold Nowak 1953 edition. In reference to the recording, having seen video of Furtwängler conduct, I could actually

Following the same idea at letter I, ease up on the ascending line:



When performing passages such as this, keep “sostenuto air” and use the tongue for clear articulation. I see many students who confuse tenuto with legato. In addition, nearly every student I run into “articulates” with their air in combination with their tongue. Keep the action of the air and the tongue separate from each other.

I also want to stress the concept of “beat hierarchy,” that is, when the measure contains 4 beats, the beat hierarchy is 1-3-4-2. When 2 beats to the bar, 1-2. When 3 beats to the bar, 1-3-2, etc. When executing passages like this one between letter B and letter C, stress the downbeat slightly...perhaps think of it in this manner:



The fortissimo dynamic should have a density to the sound and never allowed to “flame out.” Keep the sound solid, yet lively. It is my contention that trombone sections get “the hand” more often because of a harsh fortissimo sound, than the actual decibels being produced. If you want to play really loudly, keep the sound intact and you will have more success with the conductor.

The many exposed soft chorales present another challenge. Bruckner 4 reminds me in many ways of Nielsen 4. Both contain extended fortissimo passages followed by exposed soft chorales. These chorales need to glow. They need to be soft, yet present with a clear focus to the sound.

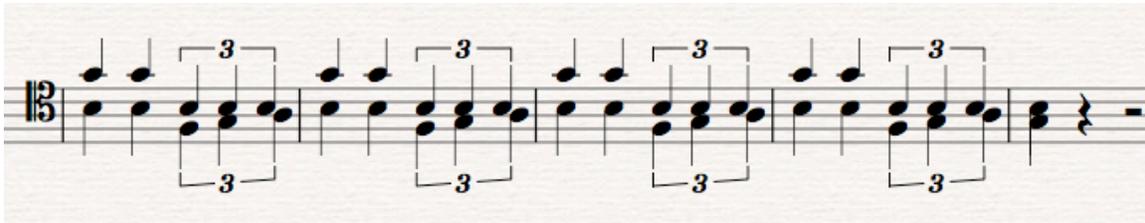
Regarding intonation, Bruckner presents a glorious opportunity to address and advance the cause of great section intonation. Make certain, through study, that you know which function of the chord you have. Learn what to do with each function. Don't be too proud to adjust, nor to write arrows in your part as a reminder. Players in the New York Philharmonic and the Chicago Symphony write tuning arrows in their parts, why shouldn't we? I once asked the Second Clarinet player in the Seattle Symphony how she was able to play so well in tune. She was amazing in her ability to play perfect intervals with her colleagues and make everyone sound better. She replied, "I take the ego out of it and just put it where it needs to be." Great advice! Take the ego out of intonation study...it is not about who is "right," but more frequently who is getting "wronged"...aka the composer. Use the electronic tuner as a ballpark reference tool, then, use your ears. One can be in tune with the tuner and out of tune with everyone else. In preparing for an audition, get together with other players to play through the section excerpts. Get a feel for how it is to play with strangers. Know the parts so well that if someone else plays a little out of tune you are able to adjust. I know of auditions where, in the final round of section playing, the conductor specifically asked the current members section to adjust their playing in an extreme manner to see how quickly the auditioning candidate reacted. When auditioning or performing, it is our duty to make everything sound as good as possible. I am a fan of "beatless" intonation. Frequently, large adjustments need to be made to get the "beats" out of chords and when it happens it is a great feeling. Accurate intonation is nothing more than awareness and split second adjustment. It can be easily improved upon.

The topic of section balance is an important one. My admittedly biased opinion (as a former second trombonist) is that the role of the second trombone player is to make the section sound great. A great second player is keenly aware of what is happening on both sides. An agreement needs to be made between the first and second player regarding section balance. Some principals encourage the second player to play with a bit more volume during unison passages. This allows the first player to rest a little bit for the more taxing sections. Some principals do not want anyone in the section ever playing louder than they do, including unison passages. When I encounter that approach, I decrease my volume on the unisons and increase it for the chordal passages. In the soft chorale passages, the second trombone usually needs to play a little louder to fill out the chords, even the soft ones. When playing octaves with the first trombone, give a little more volume in order to help the upper octave feel more secure. When playing unison passages, make sure your sound will blend well with others...i.e. not too much "personality."

Here are a couple of passages in Bruckner 4 where the second trombone gets a chance to “air it out.” Here is a terrific short passage where the interesting descending line is in the second trombone part:



Here is another example, just before letter O in the first movement, where the second trombone again has the more interesting line:



Lastly, there is in Bruckner 4, perhaps the “Grand Daddy” of all second trombone passages. It is found in the fourth movement at letter E. It calls for great projection in the staff. The descending line in the third and fourth bar is in octaves with the third trumpet. When playing this passage, make sure not to drag the tempo and use lots of follow-through on the notes to not get buried in the thick orchestral texture (remember, longer notes sound louder than shorter notes). Breathing will become an issue, which can be solved through taking a huge breath (staggered with the first trombone) before the eighth note in the second bar and then quick “catch breaths” as necessary. In the triplet passage that follows, make certain to observe which measures have half notes and a rest and which have a dotted half. Make a difference between the two.

The Bruckner symphonies are all very similar in approach. Take the time to listen to many different orchestras. There are certainly Bruckner specialists in the conducting world and a goldmine of recordings to be found. Be a detective and learn to listen with a discerning ear. Performing the works of any composer require us to learn the sound that is specific to that composer...it is a very enjoyable part of the journey.

In closing, I will take this opportunity to share a few thoughts I have about auditions. Having sat on many audition committees, I want to reveal what I look for in a candidate. The most important things I look for are control of musical product, sound, intonation, articulation, rhythm, style and accuracy. Is the candidate in control of their musical product or not? It is easy to determine, relatively quickly, how well a player plays. In the first 15 seconds a judgment can be made on sound, intonation, articulation and level of comfort. After one or two excerpts the candidate will demonstrate understanding (or lack thereof) of different styles. Only once did I change my mind about a candidate during the audition after the first minute or two. I remember it clearly because the audition got stronger and stronger as it went along. Usually the audition remains excellent or poor or begins well and disintegrates. Seldom does it start out poor and get better to the point of redemption.

A couple of audition myths:

I was dismissed because I missed a note.

Chipped or missed notes are not deal breakers, unless there are too many or are crucial misses, e.g. the first note of *Bolero*, the high E-flat in the *Rhenish* or the high B in *Hary Janos*. Musicians are generally pretty forgiving about brass players chipping notes here and there, as it is common to what they experience on the job. Yes, it is best to not miss, but a little “bloop” here and there is not grounds for dismissal. Note perfect auditions can also be dismissed due to lack of other vital elements.

I was dismissed because I played first (or last, or after lunch, or on the first day, etc.)

Audition committees desperately want candidates to play well. They are looking for a great colleague to be a positive addition to the orchestra. If someone plays well, it does not matter where they are in the day or what day they play. Every time a new candidate is announced, there is an air of expectancy on the committee. It is usually deflated fairly quickly. It may seem harsh but it is true. Out of a hundred players auditioning, only about 4-5 of those attending are actually in contention for the position. Figure out how to get into that elite group.

While ego-wise I understand the need to assign a single reason for dismissal, in reality, it was most likely a combination of factors that led to dismissal. Keep working, keep studying, keep listening, keep playing for others. Don't take the rejection personally, use it as a motivator for change.

Why are orchestras frequently not hiring people these days?

There are many, many excellent players auditioning. The playing is at a higher level than ever. I suspect that since there are so many wonderful players, who are so adept at auditioning, that no one player rises above the crowd. It may also be possible that there are more "technicians" than "musicians." There is also the variable of the Music Director. It is not always the audition committee that does not choose a winner. Many times it is the Music Director, whose whim may prove unpredictable. There is only one certainty: If you do not audition, you will not win.

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