

Funeral Music for the Master

Thursday, April 23, 2026 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin

Herbert Blomstedt, conductor

approximately 70 minutes

Anton Bruckner

1824–1896

70 minutes

Symphony No. 7 in E major, WAB 107

THE COMPOSER

Anton Bruckner was among the most unlikely of great composers. Born in 1824 in the small Austrian village of Ansfelden, the son of a schoolteacher, he seemed destined for provincial obscurity. After his father's death, the thirteen-year-old Bruckner became a choirboy at the monastery of St. Florian, where he would eventually serve as organist. He trained as a schoolteacher, since the family was too poor for a musical career, and for years divided his time between teaching and organ playing in small towns.

Bruckner was a late bloomer. He did not begin serious composition studies until his thirties, spending some six years studying harmony and counterpoint with the Viennese theorist Simon Sechter, much of it by correspondence. He completed the course in 1861, at thirty-seven, with such mastery that one examiner, Johann Herbeck, remarked: "If I knew one tenth of what he knows, I'd be happy." Soon afterwards his next teacher, Otto Kitzler, introduced him to the music of Wagner, which Bruckner studied intensively from 1863 onwards.

In 1868 Bruckner moved to Vienna, where he would spend the rest of his life teaching at the Conservatory and, later, the University. But Vienna was hostile territory. The city's musical life was dominated by the critic Eduard Hanslick, a champion of Brahms who despised Wagner, and Bruckner, by aligning himself with Wagner, made a powerful enemy. His symphonies were mocked, rejected by orchestras, or subjected to humiliating premieres. The Vienna Philharmonic rehearsed his Third Symphony in 1874 and declined to perform it; when it was finally premiered in 1877, with Bruckner himself conducting, most of the audience walked out.

Recognition came late. Bruckner was sixty when his Seventh Symphony, premiered in Leipzig in 1884, brought him the first genuine triumph of his career. He died in 1896, aged seventy-two, leaving his Ninth Symphony unfinished. He was buried, as he had wished, beneath the organ at St. Florian.

ABOUT THE WORK

The Seventh Symphony was composed between 1881 and 1883, during a period when Bruckner was increasingly preoccupied with the failing health of Richard Wagner, the composer he revered above all others. Bruckner had visited Wagner in 1873 and dedicated his Third Symphony to “the Master”, though the chaotic premiere of that work had been one of his greatest humiliations.

In January 1883, while composing the slow movement, Bruckner wrote to a friend: “One day I came home and felt very sad. The thought had crossed my mind that before long the Master would die, and then the C-sharp minor theme of the Adagio came to me.” Wagner died on February 13, 1883, in Venice. When Bruckner received the news, he added a devastating coda to the Adagio, which he called “the funeral music for the Master.”

For this movement, Bruckner employed Wagner tubas for the first time in symphonic music. Wagner had invented these instruments for his *Ring* cycle, to evoke the world of gods and heroes; Bruckner borrowed them to mourn the man who had created that world.

The premiere took place in Leipzig on December 30, 1884, conducted by Arthur Nikisch. It brought Bruckner the greatest success of his life so far, and when Hermann Levi conducted the work in Munich in March 1885 to an enthusiastic reception, its future was assured. Performances in other cities followed, and Bruckner’s international reputation was finally established. He had waited sixty years for this moment.

The symphony is dedicated to King Ludwig II of Bavaria, Wagner’s great patron.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The opening horn and cello theme emerging from the string tremolo; the way Bruckner builds his immense paragraphs from small motivic cells; the long timpani pedal on E that prepares the coda.

The Wagner tubas’ opening theme and their return in the coda; the enormous C-major climax (with or without the cymbal); the hushed, grief-stricken ending.

The trumpet’s “cock-crow” theme; the pastoral, lyrical trio section; the return of the scherzo’s driving energy.

The kinship between the finale's opening theme and the first movement's; the serene chorale second theme; the return of the first movement's material near the end; the final, hard-won arrival in E major.

FIRST MOVEMENT: ALLEGRO MODERATO

The symphony begins in mystery. Tremolo strings shimmer quietly, a sound that seems to emerge from silence, from nothingness. Over this foundation, cellos and horn intone the first theme: a long, noble melody that Bruckner said he heard in a dream, played on a viola, and wrote down on waking.

This opening is characteristic of Bruckner's mature style. Where Beethoven's symphonies announce themselves with dramatic gestures, Bruckner's seem to grow organically from silence, like cathedrals rising from the earth. The music is in E major, the symphony's home key, but Bruckner wanders far from it, and the first movement is, in a sense, a long journey toward home.

Two more themes follow: a chorale-like second subject and a more urgent third theme. Bruckner develops these ideas at vast length, building gradually toward climaxes of overwhelming power. In the coda, a hushed timpani pedal on E provides the foundation for a final, solemn conversation built from fragments of the opening theme. The intensity mounts until, at last, E major blazes forth in triumph.

SECOND MOVEMENT: ADAGIO (SEHR FEIERLICH UND SEHR LANGSAM)

This is the heart of the symphony, and one of the most profound slow movements in all music. It is a threnody, a song of mourning, composed in anticipation of Wagner's death and completed in its shadow.

The movement opens in C-sharp minor with a solemn theme intoned by Wagner tubas and lower strings, the first time these instruments had appeared in a symphony. Their dark, smoky sound creates a unique atmosphere, forming an acoustic bridge between horns and trombones. A second theme, in the major mode, offers temporary consolation, but the music returns again and again to the mournful opening.

The movement builds toward an enormous climax in C major. At the moment of greatest intensity, a cymbal clash with triangle crowns the climax, added early in 1885 on the advice of Bruckner's circle and with the particular support of Arthur Nikisch. Whether Bruckner truly approved it remains controversial: the addition was later marked "invalid" in the autograph, and nobody can say for certain whose hand wrote it. After this shattering moment, the music subsides into the

coda that Bruckner wrote upon learning of Wagner's death: the funeral music for the Master. The Wagner tubas intone a chorale of heart-breaking solemnity; the movement ends in peace, but a peace born of grief.

THIRD MOVEMENT: SCHERZO (SEHR SCHNELL)

The scherzo provides dramatic contrast: vigorous, rustic, almost aggressive after the Adagio's intensity. A trumpet announces a theme said to have been inspired by a cock's crow, over an insistent string ostinato. This energetic music alternates with a contrasting trio section marked *gesangvoll* (songful), one of Bruckner's great melodic inspirations.

The movement is relatively brief for Bruckner, about ten minutes, but it serves an essential structural function, releasing the tension accumulated in the Adagio and preparing for the finale's resolution.

FOURTH MOVEMENT: FINALE (BEWEGT, DOCH NICHT SCHNELL)

The finale opens, like the first movement, with tremolo strings. The main theme contains echoes of the symphony's opening melody, but now transformed into jubilant dotted rhythms. A serene chorale provides contrast, propelled by a walking bass in the low strings.

Bruckner structures the recapitulation in what analysts call "tragic sonata form" or "arch form," reversing the order of the themes. This creates a sense of return and resolution rather than forward drive. Near the end, a truncated version of the first movement's opening theme returns, a cyclical gesture that binds the symphony together.

The conclusion is triumphant but not bombastic. Bruckner brings back his opening themes, now fully transformed, and ends in a blaze of E major, the home key that the symphony has been seeking since its mysterious opening bars.

HERBERT BLOMSTEDT AND BRUCKNER

Tonight's conductor, Herbert Blomstedt, is one of the great Bruckner interpreters of our time. Born in 1927 in Springfield, Massachusetts, the Swedish-American conductor has led the world's finest orchestras over an exceptionally long career, and he has called Bruckner the greatest symphonist since Beethoven. His Bruckner performances are celebrated for their architectural clarity, spiritual depth, and unhurried grandeur, qualities that come from a lifetime of devotion to this music.

Blomstedt's relationship with the Berliner Philharmoniker spans five decades. Now in his late nineties, he continues to conduct with remarkable vitality, bringing to each performance the accumulated wisdom of a long life in music.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Bruckner Remembered**

Stephen Johnson, Faber & Faber 2001

Recollections of Bruckner by pupils, friends and colleagues, gathered by Stephen Johnson, that bring the man behind the Seventh Symphony into focus.

ACCESSIBLE **Bruckner**

Derek Watson, Oxford University Press 1996

A compact life of Bruckner that surveys the symphonies, including the Seventh and its Adagio, written as Bruckner anticipated Wagner's death.

DEEPER **The Cambridge Companion to Bruckner**

John Williamson (ed.), Cambridge University Press 2004

Essays on Bruckner's life, symphonies, the problem of versions and editions, and his reception, a good next step after the Seventh.

SOURCES

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3. Symphony No. 7 (Bruckner), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._7_\(Bruckner\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._7_(Bruckner))
4. Symphony No. 7 (essay by Hans F. Redlich), abruckner.com. https://abruckner.com/down/articles/articlesEnglish/redlichhansessayon/redlich_b7.pdf
5. Symphony No. 7 in E Major, WAB 107, All Classical Research. <https://research.allclassical.org/composer/bruckner-anton/symphony-no-7-in-e-major/>
6. Anton Bruckner "Symphony No. 7": For "The Master", Classical Ex Burns. <https://classicalburns.com/2021/08/26/anton-bruckner-symphony-no-7-for-the-master/>
7. Anton Bruckner, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton_Bruckner
8. Symphony No. 3 (Bruckner), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._3_\(Bruckner\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._3_(Bruckner))
9. Dr. Bob Prescribes: Anton Bruckner, Symphony No. 4, Robert Greenberg. <https://robertgreenbergmusic.com/dr-bob-prescribes-anton-bruckner-symphony-no-4/>
10. Herbert Blomstedt about Bruckner's Symphony No. 7, Digital Concert Hall. <https://www.digitalconcerthall.com/en/interview/56421-2>
11. Herbert Blomstedt, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Blomstedt
12. Bruckner Remembered, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780571170951>
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14. The Cambridge Companion to Bruckner, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521008785>



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