

Marek Janowski conducts Bruckner's Eighth

Thursday, December 10, 2026 · 20:00 · Philharmonie Berlin

Marek Janowski, conductor

approximately 80 minutes

Anton Bruckner

1824–1896

80 minutes

Symphony No. 8 in C minor, WAB 108

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

Anton Bruckner began his Eighth Symphony in the summer of 1884, at the age of sixty, and worked on it mainly during the holidays from his teaching duties in Vienna. The four movements were drafted by August 1885, but the orchestration took him until 1887. That September he sent the finished score to the conductor Hermann Levi in Munich, whom he called his “artistic father”. Levi had just given Bruckner one of the great successes of his life with the Seventh Symphony, and Bruckner hoped he would conduct the premiere of the new work as well.

Levi’s answer was a shock. He found the symphony impossible to perform in its current form: the themes were magnificent, he wrote, but their working-out seemed dubious and the orchestration unworkable. Bruckner was badly shaken, but by early 1888 he had come round to the idea that the work could be improved, and he spent much of the next two years rewriting it. The version played at these concerts is the result, completed in March 1890.

The changes were far-reaching. Bruckner rewrote the end of the first movement, which in 1887 had closed in a blaze of C major; in 1890 it dies away quietly instead, the only first movement in his symphonies that ends softly. He composed a new, slower Trio for the Scherzo, cut and tightened the Adagio and the Finale, and expanded the woodwind to three of each instrument. He also added harps, which he had long said had no place in a true symphony. His pupil Friedrich Eckstein remembered Bruckner greeting him at the door one day with the news that he had put harps into the Adagio because “there was no other way”.

Bruckner asked Emperor Franz Joseph I for permission to dedicate the symphony to him, in a letter so crammed with courtly formulas that it has become famous in its own right. The emperor accepted and helped pay for the printing. Finding a conductor proved harder. After plans in Mannheim and Munich came to nothing, Hans Richter conducted the premiere with the Vienna Philharmonic in the Musikverein on 18 December 1892. Bruckner’s supporters were there in force and the reception was warm, though the critic Eduard Hanslick, who had scorned Bruckner for years, remained unconvinced.

The orchestra is the largest Bruckner ever used: triple woodwind, eight horns (four of the players switching to the Wagner tubas that Wagner devised for his *Ring*), three harps, cymbals and triangle. Performances usually last around 80 minutes.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

First movement (Allegro moderato). The symphony begins in near-darkness: a quiet string tremolo and a short, rising and falling figure in the low strings whose rhythm recalls the opening of Beethoven's Ninth. A warmer second theme uses Bruckner's signature rhythm of two beats followed by a triplet. The development builds to huge statements of the main theme on the full orchestra, and near the end the music breaks off to leave trumpets and horns hammering out the rhythm over the timpani. Then, instead of a triumph, the movement sinks into a bleak, pianissimo close in C minor.

Second movement (Scherzo: Allegro moderato; Trio: Langsam). Unusually, the Scherzo comes second. It is built almost entirely from the figures heard in its first bars: a restless pattern in the upper strings over a heavy theme in the basses. The slow Trio, in A-flat major, brings the harps in for the first time and looks ahead to the mood of the Adagio.

Third movement (Adagio: Feierlich langsam, doch nicht schleppend). The heart of the work, lasting around 25 minutes on its own. Over throbbing strings a broad, solemn theme unfolds, answered by harps and a passionate melody for the cellos. Bruckner builds wave after wave toward a single enormous climax in E-flat major, crowned by a clash of cymbals, before the music settles into a long, glowing coda with the Wagner tubas.

Fourth movement (Finale: Feierlich, nicht schnell). The Finale opens with a pounding march rhythm in the strings and a massive brass chorale, with the timpani thundering beneath. It is a long and complex movement that gathers up material from the whole symphony. In the coda, listen for the main themes of all four movements sounding together as the key finally turns to a blazing C major.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Bruckner Remembered**

Stephen Johnson, Faber & Faber 2001

Recollections of Bruckner by people who knew him, drawn together by Stephen Johnson, which bring to life the composer of the Eighth Symphony.

ACCESSIBLE **Bruckner**

Derek Watson, Oxford University Press 1996

A concise life of Bruckner with a survey of the symphonies, a clear introduction to the Eighth and its revisions.

DEEPER **Bruckner: Symphony No. 8**

Benjamin M. Korstvedt, Cambridge University Press 2000

A Cambridge Music Handbook on the Eighth Symphony, covering its versions of 1887 and 1890, its editions and its reception.

SOURCES

1. Marek Janowski conducts Bruckner's Eighth, Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/concert/calendar/57074/>
2. Programme note: Symphony No. 8 in C minor (2nd Version from 1890), Berliner Philharmoniker. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/programme-notes/anton-bruckner-symphony-no-8-in-c-minor-2nd-version-from-1890>
3. Symphony No. 8 (Bruckner), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._8_\(Bruckner\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._8_(Bruckner))
4. Bruckner's Majestic Eighth: Program notes, Jacksonville Symphony. <https://www.jaxsymphony.org/bruckners-majestic-eighth-program-notes/>
5. Marek Janowski, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marek_Janowski
6. Marek Janowski, ccm-international. <https://ccm-international.de/en/?p=2903>
7. Bruckner Remembered, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780571170951>
8. Bruckner, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780198166177>
9. Bruckner: Symphony No. 8, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521635370>



CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/bp-2026-12-10-janowski>

Version 2, 30 September 2026