

Mäkelä's Bruckner Eighth

Wednesday, February 4, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw

Klaus Mäkelä, 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

Bruckner's Eighth is the last symphony he completed, and for many listeners the summit of his life's work: a vast, cathedral-like structure of around eighty minutes that travels, as the orchestra's own pro-

gramme puts it, ‘from darkness into light.’ Bruckner, a devout Catholic and a former village organist who came late and painfully to symphonic fame, conceived his symphonies as acts of worship on the largest possible scale, building them from great blocks of sound, long silences, and slow, inexorable crescendos that suggest the architecture of a Gothic church rendered in time. The Eighth is the grandest of them all.

Its path to performance was tortured, as so often with Bruckner. He completed a first version in 1887, but when the conductor Hermann Levi, a trusted champion, confessed he could not understand it, the easily-discouraged composer plunged into doubt and revised the work extensively, producing the 1890 version usually heard today. (One famous change: in the revision the huge first movement ends not in triumph but in a hushed, desolate fade, the only Bruckner first movement to die away into silence.) The symphony was finally premiered by Hans Richter and the Vienna Philharmonic at the Musikverein on 18 December 1892, and dedicated to Emperor Franz Joseph I. Though Bruckner never gave it the title, it is sometimes nicknamed ‘The Apocalyptic.’

It calls for an enormous orchestra, with triple woodwind, eight horns, four of the dark, noble Wagner tubas and three harps, and its emotional range is correspondingly immense, from terror and desolation to radiant, hard-won transcendence. Surrendering to its scale and its slow time is the key to one of the great experiences in all music.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The key to Bruckner is patience: let the long spans unfold, and listen for the great waves that build, recede, and build again toward overwhelming climaxes.

The **first movement** grows from a quiet, ominous string tremor and a brooding theme; it gathers toward shattering brass climaxes but, in a famously bleak stroke, sinks at the end into near-silence, a dying close that Bruckner’s own letters connect with death. The **Scherzo** that follows is massive and earthy, driven by an insistent, stamping theme (Bruckner associated it with a good-natured peasant figure he called ‘German Michel’); listen for its contrasting trio, gentler and graced for the first time by the harps.

The **Adagio** is the heart of the work and one of the supreme slow movements ever written: a vast, glowing meditation, with soaring string melody, solemn Wagner tubas and shimmering

harp, building to a colossal cymbal-crowned climax before subsiding into peace. The **Finale** opens with a blazing fanfare (Bruckner spoke of cossacks, of a meeting of emperors) and proceeds through tremendous contrasts of power and stillness. Listen, at the very end, for Bruckner's masterstroke: the main themes of all four movements are stacked together and sound simultaneously, the whole symphony gathered into a single overwhelming blaze of C major, darkness finally and gloriously resolved into light.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Bruckner Remembered**

Stephen Johnson, Faber & Faber 2001

Bruckner's life seen through the recollections of people who knew him, a lively way into the composer of the Eighth Symphony.

ACCESSIBLE **Bruckner**

Derek Watson, Oxford University Press 1996

A concise life-and-works study of Bruckner, with a guide to the symphonies including the Eighth.

DEEPER **Bruckner: Symphony No. 8**

Benjamin M. Korstvedt, Cambridge University Press 2000

A Cambridge Music Handbook on the Eighth Symphony itself, including its versions and the questions of editions.

SOURCES

1. Klaus Mäkelä conducts Bruckner's Eighth Symphony, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouwkeest.nl/en/calendar/klaus-makela-conducts-bruckner-2026-02-04/>
2. Symphony No. 8 (Bruckner), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._8_\(Bruckner\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._8_(Bruckner))
3. Bruckner Remembered, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780571170951>
4. Bruckner, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780198166177>
5. Bruckner: Symphony No. 8, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521635370>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2026-02-04-makela>

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