

Bruckner's Eighth at Suntory Hall

Monday, November 9, 2026 · 19:00 · Suntory Hall

Riccardo Muti, conductor

approximately 80 minutes

Anton Bruckner

1824–1896

Symphony No. 8 in C minor

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.

80 minutes

ABOUT THE WORK

Bruckner's Eighth Symphony is the largest symphony he completed, and for many listeners the summit of his life's work: a structure of such scale and gravity that it is often described, not idly, as a cathedral built in sound. He composed the first version between 1884 and 1887, in the wake of the public triumph of his Seventh Symphony, and brought the finished score to the conductor Hermann Levi, who had championed the Seventh and whose support Bruckner trusted absolutely. Levi's response was a blow: he found the new work confusing and could not see how to perform it, and he gently declined to take it up. For a composer as anxious and self-doubting as Bruckner, the verdict was devastating. It triggered one of the most consequential bouts of revision in the history of the symphony.

Over the following years, helped and prodded by friends and pupils, Bruckner reworked the symphony extensively, arriving at a substantially revised version in 1890. The two versions differ in more than detail. Most famously, Bruckner changed the ending of the first movement: the 1887 original closes with a loud, affirmative climax, while the 1890 revision lets the movement die away into near-silence, a hushed, ticking close that Bruckner himself reportedly likened to a 'death-watch,' the clock counting out a dying man's final hours. He also refined the orchestration throughout, added harps, and tightened proportions elsewhere. The first performance, of the revised score, was given in Vienna by the Vienna Philharmonic under Hans Richter on 18 December 1892, and it was a great success: vindication, at last, after the wound Levi's rejection had left.

The textual history grows more tangled in the twentieth century, because the symphony survives in competing scholarly editions as well as competing versions. The two principal editions of the 1890 score are the one prepared by Robert Haas in the 1930s and the later one by Leopold Nowak, published in 1955. Haas, controversially, restored into his text some passages from the 1887 original that Bruckner had cut in revision, producing a kind of conflation; Nowak's edition adheres more strictly to what Bruckner left in 1890. Conductors continue to choose between them, and a handful return to the 1887 original altogether. The orchestra's listing for these concerts names the Haas edition of the 1890 version; the differences between editions, while real, are matters for specialists and need not preoccupy the first-time listener, who will encounter in any reading the same vast, four-part design.

That design is Bruckner's grandest. The symphony is cast in four movements and runs around eighty minutes. Unusually, Bruckner places the Scherzo second, before the slow movement, so that the work's still, radiant heart (the Adagio) falls third, prepared by the Scherzo's earthbound stamping rather than following directly on the opening Allegro. The first movement, marked *Allegro moderato*, is dark and questioning, growing from a quiet, tremolo-shrouded opening to towering climaxes before that famous fading coda. The Scherzo is built on a relentless, ostinato tread; Bruckner associated its rustic, good-humoured character with a figure he called the 'German Michel,' a folk personification of the plain, dreaming German countryman. The Adagio, in the warm key of D-flat major, is one of the supreme slow movements in the repertoire: a long, patient ascent through wave upon wave of song toward a shattering climax, scored with harps and, at its peak, a chorale of Wagner tubas. The Finale opens with a blazing brass cavalcade over a galloping rhythm, sometimes likened to a meeting of monarchs, and across its huge span draws the symphony's threads together, until in the coda the main themes of all four movements are stacked and sounded simultaneously, the whole edifice revealed at once.

Bruckner, a devout Catholic and a working church organist for much of his life, conceived his symphonies in something like liturgical terms: vast spans of time, great blocks of sound built and rebuilt like masonry, silences as structural as the notes around them. The Eighth is the fullest realisation of that vision: music that does not hurry, that asks the listener to surrender to its scale, and that rewards the surrender with one of the most overwhelming culminations in all of symphonic art.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

In the first movement (*Allegro moderato*), listen for how Bruckner builds from almost nothing: a shadowy string tremolo out of which the main theme emerges, jagged and questioning, in the low strings. The movement proceeds in great waves: long crescendos that swell toward shattering brass climaxes, then fall back into stillness. Bruckner thinks in blocks of sound separated by silence, so do not expect seamless transitions; let each plateau register. Save your attention for the very end. Where you might expect a triumphant close, the music instead dwindles: a soft, ticking figure in the strings over a held bass, fading to near nothing. This is the coda Bruckner called the 'death-watch', the clock at a deathbed, and it leaves the movement suspended, unresolved, in the dark.

The Scherzo that follows (placed second, before the slow movement) is the symphony's most immediately physical music: a heavy, stamping ostinato that drives forward with rustic energy. This is the 'German Michel' Bruckner spoke of: the plain countryman, half comic, half dreaming. Feel the relentless tread of the outer sections, then notice the contrast of the central trio, which slows and softens into a gentler, more lyrical landscape, with harps adding a new glow of colour, before the stamping returns.

The Adagio is the emotional core of the work, and demands patience and surrender. It unfolds in long paragraphs of song in the strings, rising and subsiding, gathering intensity with each return of its themes. Listen for the entry of the harps and, as the movement nears its peak, the solemn, glowing sound of the Wagner tubas, instruments Bruckner reserved for his most exalted moments. The whole movement is a slow ascent toward a single overwhelming climax, often crowned by a clash of cymbals; let the music carry you toward it rather than waiting for a tune to hum.

The Finale opens unmistakably: a blazing fanfare in the brass over a hammering, galloping rhythm in the strings, a cavalcade that Bruckner is said to have associated with the meeting of emperors and kings. From this charged beginning the movement ranges widely, alternating ferocious energy with passages of hushed mystery. Keep your bearings through its vast span by tracking the great brass statements. Then listen, in the closing minutes, for Bruckner's master-stroke: in the coda he brings back the principal themes of all four movements and sounds them together, layered into a single radiant edifice in C major. The symphony that began in darkness and uncertainty ends by gathering everything it has been into one final, blazing affirmation.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Bruckner Remembered**

Stephen Johnson, Faber & Faber 2001

A portrait of Bruckner built from the memories of people who knew him, giving a human face to the composer of the vast Eighth Symphony.

ACCESSIBLE **The Essence of Bruckner**

Robert Simpson, Gollancz 1992

A composer's guide to how Bruckner's symphonies actually move, written for listeners, with an extended discussion of the Eighth.

DEEPER **Bruckner: Symphony No. 8**

Benjamin M. Korstvedt, Cambridge University Press 2000

A Cambridge Music Handbook devoted entirely to the Eighth Symphony, covering its versions, its reception and the music itself.

SOURCES

1. Concert in Tokyo, 9 November 2026 (Haas version), Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/concert-in-tokyo/10956/>
2. Concert in Tokyo, 12 November 2026 (same programme), Wiener Philharmoniker. <https://www.wienerphilharmoniker.at/en/konzerte/concert-in-tokyo/10953/>
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. Anton Bruckner: 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>
5. Bruckner Remembered, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780571170951>
6. The Essence of Bruckner, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780575052215>
7. Bruckner: Symphony No. 8, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521635370>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/wp-2026-11-09-muti>

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