WIENER PHILHARMONIKER

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

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.

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.

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