

Orchestral Notes: Bruckner Symphony No. 4

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An Interview with Jennifer Montone

Bruckner's Symphony No. 4, "The Romantic," is one of his often-performed symphonies. It was one of the few works of his to receive a fairly positive reception at its premiere and has since remained in the common orchestral repertoire. One of the reasons it is more often performed is because it calls for a smaller instrumentation, with only four horns and no tuben – his popular seventh through ninth symphonies call for eight horns, four of those also performing on Wagner tuben.

Anton Bruckner (1824-1896) achieved renown as an organist, recitalist, and teacher based in Vienna. His initial compositions were sacred in nature, a reflection of his deeply held spiritual faith. An ardent disciple of Richard Wagner, Bruckner's symphonies were Wagnerian in scope, sonority, and length. The majority of his symphonies were not well-received at their premieres and these works have many versions, as his friends often suggested cuts and revisions to make them more popular with audiences and critics.

I had the opportunity to interview Jennifer Montone, principal horn of the Philadelphia Orchestra. These are her perceptive and thoughtful comments about performing this symphony.

Jennifer Montone: When approaching huge works like this one, I was taught to first look at what composers told us on the page, in their other works, and by researching their life and their experiences. Only then can we dare to interpret and thus fulfill the second part of the fortunate two-part art form: creator and interpreter. When one takes the plunge to interpret, our creativity must come from a combination of what we have been taught about music, and our own instinctual, emotional, and personal feelings. In other words, what could this piece mean, or what do I feel it might be saying? I see it similarly to how one silently interprets and appreciates a work of visual art. In music though, as the interpreter of the creation, you have to have the courage to share your instincts, which can be very risky. We are opening ourselves up to criticism, but it is our job, our responsibility, and our great honor to do this – to play what is written, but also to render it from our soul. I'd like to describe some of the personal instincts that occur to me when I get to play this piece.

First Movement

The symphony is subtitled "Romantic"; however, according to Bruckner scholars, the term does not refer to romantic love, or even the romantic era of music but rather something that's known as the medieval romance. It was a style of heroic poetry and storytelling popular in medieval times, characterized by stories about heroes and chivalrous knights who went on quests. That reminds me a bit of Richard Wagner's charac-

ter Siegfried, and indeed, there are several Wagner operas that are said to be patterned after the medieval romance art-form. There are basically seven versions of the 4th Symphony and Bruckner definitely had a programmatic outline for this piece, unlike any of his other symphonies.

The composer's programmatic intentions for the first movement are: "A medieval city-Sunrise-Reveille is sounded from the towers-the gates open-the knights sally forth into the countryside on their spirited horses, surrounded by the magic of Nature-Forest murmurs-Bird songs-And so the 'Romantic' picture develops further."

Movement I, Measures 3-51

Bewegt, nicht zu schnell

mf immer deutlich hervortretend

p dim.

p

cresc.

mf cresc.

cresc. sempre

molto cresc.

51 A

In letters by Bruckner, the horn part is described: "after a full night's sleep the day is announced by the horn." The notes need to start effortlessly (subdivide before each note and during every phrase! Also, practice air-attacking them) and float off into nothing as if they have no end. The indication is *mf* and *immer deutlich hervortretend* – always very clearly accentuated. So it is horn call-ish, not too soft, but it also has to feel calm, tranquil, not at all pressed or forced. It is a lovely tune, simple, beautiful, sweet, but underneath the obvious simplicity and cyclical, dipping qualities, there are also harmonic changes, which to me mean a very subtle, vague, but slightly palpable emotional progression.

When I have something exposed to play, my head can start to swirl with unhelpful thoughts. So in those situations, I need to have really clear ideas as to what I want to do with each and every moment of the solo. For this opening, I try to calm myself completely. Some suggestions for this might include using lots of yoga! I also use the Don Greene (see dongreene.com) centering exercise, breathing in and out of my nose, trying to relax my belly, feeling each of my toes touch the floor, imagining a loved one to play for, imagining my sound in a hall or someplace that I love playing, etc.; and then opening myself up to any possible instinct that my heart will give me.



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Often when I play it, I come up with an emotional progression like this: the first three measures are hopeful, sweet and shepherd-like, as in the Berlioz *Symphonie Fantastique* oboe and English Horn solos. The second entrance has the *g''* as a blue note, and the harmony is different, so it's more poignant, with a bit of worry and sounding unsure. In the third entrance (measure 11), the basses descend, and the color changes on the second *f''*, adding more mystery or intensity. Measure 15 feels like an acceptance. When the flute comes in, it is of course a development of a motif, but in a more personal way, as it also adds a partner to the mix. The sound becomes a little mysterious, with some of the harmonies sounding like questions, some sounding like answers. Each phrase has a different feel to it, so we have to express that subtly with our dynamics and phrasing. Ever-growing, the progression of harmonies make the mood more excited, filled with rapturous passion. In measure 44, I usually try to change my sound on the quarters into a leadership forte sound, indicating the loud and sustained sound that I will want throughout.

The whole opening of this movement, until letter D, sounds operatic to me, much like the opening of the curtain onto a village scene in the morning. With Bruckner's ties to and respect for Wagner, this makes sense, especially given the programmatic plan that he wrote about this piece. Bruckner was described by his biographers as being rather simple, religious, and humble. While I feel that his music portrays all of these personal characteristics, it also goes beyond his simple exterior to reveal a very emotional, passionate interior. This is a wonderful thing, and it also gives us permission to let our own emotions and personality shine through when we perform it.

Movement I, Letter H-Measure 252

Letter H to letter I is of course a development of the initial motif. It is preceded by a mysterious progression from the strings and woodwinds. When the horn begins to play, all of a sudden it is brighter, as if the sun is coming out. But as this section develops, it's as if our protagonist is experiencing different things, and is reacting to each one – measure 217 is simple and hushed, measure 221 is more mysterious, and measure 229 is brighter and hopeful. Our part communicates with the woodwinds: with his description of bird calls in his programmatic description, it feels like the protagonist is in the woods with birds responding to his thoughts. As it builds though, it becomes obsessive – dark and moody by measure 246, like insane

darkness coming out of this simple, mysterious beginning. It gets really exciting, but in a visceral way, an "angry" loud.

In general, I believe that it is essential for us, as horn players, to be able to show a palpable difference between at least the three most basic types of loud sound: happy loud, anguished loud, and angry loud. It is of course, equally important that we can show the difference between a soft dynamic that portrays love, to one that expresses pain, to one that fills us with mysteriousness, to one that shows purity and simplicity. This piece is so brilliantly written, it gives us an opportunity to try and develop and perfect these varieties of sounds and colors and moods in our playing. We can try many ways to find out when to use different colors and styles. In this progression, we can look at the harmonies and orchestration that the composer used. In other situations, we learn from traditions, or rely on our own instinct.

Movement I, Letter I- Measure 330

Letter I to measure 330 is a fantastic mix of emotions and colors. Here we continue to develop the awareness of our role during brass *tutti*s. At Letter I, we build to a *fff* and sustain it at perhaps *ff* with the rest of the brass (like an organ), but then in measure 255, everything (our rhythm, our articulation, our volume, our presence of sound) has to alert the listener that we are leading the progression into the harmonic change into measure 257. The duple pickups to measure 260 need to be exaggerated as pickups (always going to the downbeat!), and the motion must go forward. Duple-triplet rhythm, as we see in this excerpt, permeates this whole piece, as well as several of his other works – Bruckner is similar to Beethoven in that he is an incredibly rhythmically oriented composer. He uses rhythm so effectively, it makes his music fantastically exciting and exhilarating, especially if you are playing it! But his music is also clearly and simply structured and designed, almost Mozartean in the simplicity of its composition and structure,



with recapitulations and repetitions of the same motif that are sometimes inverted.

As horn players, we have to keep the big picture in mind, since we have such a big role. Too often in pieces that we consider “big brass pieces,” everybody plays their lines either just at the dynamic written the whole time, or plays the especially fun parts louder, no matter what they mean in the structure of the whole line of the orchestra. While that is fun, our job is to make our playing actually make sense within the piece, so we have to be constantly aware of our importance, and our balance within the ensemble. The build up that begins in the 270s to *fff* makes K feel surprised, breathless, hushed, and reactionary, with the rest of the section coming in at measure 297 and all of us blossoming happily as if to say “all is exactly as it should be.” Then it’s back to the organ-like brass orchestrations, with horn calls interjected between the organ-like brass lines. It seems to me that a lot of Bruckner’s orchestral music has certain common traits: a cyclical repetition in outer movements (in this piece it feels heroic), a way of orchestrating with organ-like sonorities (especially in his brass writing) and hushed and intimate colors in his solo writing that can take your breath away.

Second Movement

According to a letter he wrote in 1890, Bruckner intended the second movement to be a song, a prayer, and a serenade. To me, it also feels like a dance, with the dotted rhythm. There is a lot of major versus minor modality in this movement: sweet, simple pastoral tunes and lilting dotted rhythms, alternated with a lot of mystery “color notes.” I think it is an incredibly gorgeous and emotional movement. A lot of the melodies are written for the middle range instruments, and these players tend to use a kind of brushy, impressionistic articulation. The melodies are lovely and interweaving. It’s as if you are swirling around in color and sound and feeling. Within all that, though, we have to keep an eye on our intonation, and stay in the same pitch-world as our colleagues. The horn is used a lot in this movement as an interjection, with the dotted 8th-16th-quarter note motif, transitioning from section to section, and alternating sounding dark (mysterious, minor key) and light (hopeful, pure, sweet). The horn fulfills a slightly different role each time, so it’s important to pay attention at all times to what the tune and the color palette is, so this little motif, which looks really repetitive and random, can make sense!

Movement II, Measures 77-88



In the pickup and downbeat into measure 78 (and when it repeats in measure 181 and then again in measure 238), we join the end of the vocal cello line, but in addition to

that, it’s also very dramatic harmonically. The harmony of the descending F-D-A^b is of course an inverted D diminished chord, but the way you land on the A^b, dissolve into the G, and then change color on the resolution, is important. I try to lead the pickups into the downbeat, with the air between the D and the A^b being incredibly sustained. The A^b starts out with a mysterious sound, dark and poignant, then changes color (lighten up the air) before it resolves to the low G. The mode changes into major in measure 81, so we have to brighten up the sound considerably. Measure 85 is the essence of sweetness, and reminds me somewhat of the pastoral horn call in the third movement of the Brahms Trio (rehearsal letter C): the way I play the two are very similar, in that I am trying for an absolute dolce, with purity, clarity, and simplicity. I also try to be very smooth between the notes, and lilting on the dotted rhythm.

Movement II, Measures 101-108



Movement II, Measures M-200



Letter E and the parallel spot at letter M are excellent examples of the contrast between darkness and light, and intensity followed by breathlessness. While both passages have the same rhythm,

they have a different harmony and therefore different emotional content. At letter E, the tune is hopeful, emotive, yet effortless (marked by the major third between the d[♯] and f[♯] in the second bar), so I try to be simple, loving, and linear. In contrast, the melody at M feels complicated and almost mournful (this time it’s a minor third of d[♯]-f[♯] in the second measure), and the mysterious mood occurs in the next phrase, with the tritone e[♯]-b[♯], followed in measure 199 with “ and then the f[♯]” at the end. The ascending line feels as though you are asking questions, important, emotional questions, so I try to accentuate this. This builds to a complete explosion, and with this dramatic harmonic progression, we are the beginning of an intense build up.

Movement II, Measure 238 to the end



Cued in by a spooky timpani introduction, we play that magical, dark descending line again, followed by another one, starting on the dark color note of b[♯]. The harmony here is fantastically dark, melancholy and mysterious. The movement ends with the timpani continuing into the darkness, reminding me of the slow movement of Mahler 1.





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Third Movement

Movement III, Measures 1-33

We play the first statement of the motif in this movement also. It is, of course, a hunt, starting softly and in the distance, but the articulation has to be clear as a bell, even in the soft dynamic. Pay attention to the pitch in the triad between the horns. For articulation clarity, I use a very forward, fast, and facile airstream, with a very forward-in-the-mouth, spitty tongue. This motif is usually played with the sixteenth note very close to the triplet, and with incredibly crisp tonguing overall. It's very bright, exciting, and bursting with positive energy. We become lost in the sea of hunters as the other brass join in, and measures 27-32 are incredibly fun! We get to play quite loudly, but we need to have very tight rhythm, strong accents, and a slight crescendo to the end of the measure 27 and in the triplets in measures 31 and 32. Throughout this movement, it's important to keep our rhythm, tempo and articulation unified with the rest of the brass. We can sound sluggish and late if we're not careful. The Scherzos in Bruckner's symphonies all have a fairly similar feel, and need to be approached similarly with clear rhythm, crisp articulation, and excitement, energy, and conviction.

Movement III, Measures E-121

The duple-triplet rhythm is the rhythmic glue that holds this movement together. It is a common compositional technique to use one rhythmic motif at different volumes and character, to portray different emotional content. Letter E, for example, is the same rhythm as the beginning motif, but obviously with a different feeling: this one sounds surprised and lost. I still try to use the same clear articulation as in the beginning, but I imagine a lost child who just noticed being alone and is talking in a high-pitched voice, brightly, nervously. Then, when playing measures 110-121 you have to use almost non-existent air – light, fluid, facile, very woodwind like – very

much like the air used in the *pp* harmonic series exercise in the Farkas book. I use that same air in measures 37 and 197.

Movement III, Measures 37-38

Measures 197-198

Fourth Movement

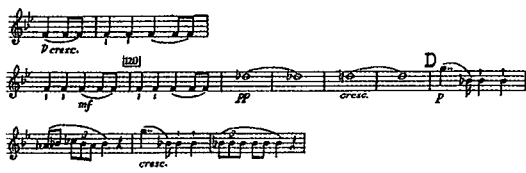
Movement IV, Measure 1-90

It has been stated that Bruckner gave no program for this movement. In fact, his different versions have wildly different last movements, some of them with a very festive feel. To me, this version has two main moods – frightening and loving -- and it is much more dramatic than celebratory. From the first bar, it feels dark and ominous, like a horror film. It's as if our protagonist is doomed to some horrible fate. Our initial *pp* motif turns into the big brass chorale at letter A, and is scary in character in both dynamics. The duple-triplet rhythm from earlier movements starts in measure 29 being creepy, and then building to an obsessive rhythm that creates the sensation that someone is after you. I try and manifest this technically by starting measure 29 with a "Da" brushy tongue and kind of a hushed sound, and then building to a very intense sound, with clear tonguing and tight rhythm, playing the 16ths very close to the 8th notes. Letter A is a fantastic *tutti*: dark, intense, sustained, with very clear articulation and a long line, crescendoing in measures 2, 4, and 6. It conveys the feeling of doom, which continues for a while. Then suddenly the spell is broken, and everything brightens up with the resurrection of our first movement motif at measure 79. This reminds me of a Wagner *leitmotif* in that it seems to symbolize our protagonist reestab-



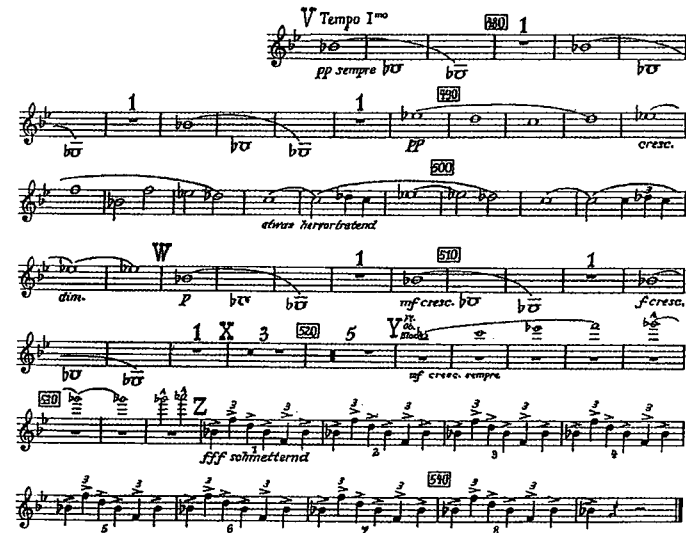
lishing his heroic character and intentions. Later in this movement, we also play the dark brass *tutti* at letters E and M. In this movement all of the large, broad motifs return sometimes like the original, and sometimes varied or inverted. There is intensity and passion, an excitement that builds up, then dissipates only to build again. It's a cyclical effect, taking you on a musical roller coaster, and finally leaving you feeling exhilarated and exhausted at the end. This type of writing also is used in many of Gustav Mahler's final movements and in pieces like Richard Strauss's *Alpine Symphony*. One has to strive to be a consummate orchestral colleague with the brass writing here, really listening for pitch, balance, rhythm, note endings, phrasing together, etc. Only then does the organ-like balance and sonority shine through.

Movement IV, Measures 117-128



This second theme establishes a brighter mood, and we have to be vocal, using easy, fluid air and singing from the heart. It feels like a "love will conquer all" theme. There are many color moments here, with numerous accidentals and changes of harmony. This theme returns in various forms too, at letters I and Q, which we must recognize and play in a similar style each time. We hear themes that first happened in the woodwinds, and themes that were intimate now becoming broad in *tutti* sections. This movement could be a study in music theory since it is so interestingly constructed, but our responsibility is to recognize the different themes, sections, and motifs, and to play them appropriately every time. In other words, we need to listen to how our colleagues played a solo or motif the first time it occurs, so we know how to play it when we get the same line later on.

Movement IV, Letter V to the end



Our original spooky theme morphs into a haunting, gorgeously floating melody at measure 489. It feels spiritual, human, hopeful and vulnerable: it is just an incredible moment. The progression from that point to the *tutti* at Z literally leaves me with goose bumps every time. Our heroic motif comes back at Z in the third and fourth horns, and one feels completely overcome with hope and relief, that through all the darkness, the end of this tale brings such brightness, joy, and light.

RC: Do you have any other suggestions or strategies for practicing, playing, and listening when preparing this piece?

JM: Listen to many recordings, and don't be afraid to emulate what you like. Imitate the sounds that resonate with you. Start from a musical perspective, and if technical parts are slowing you down, then work on that aspect of your playing until those passages are mastered. Don't practice the opening solo of the first movement until you have a concept of what you want it to sound like. Develop an emotional and personal interpretation and, once you have developed your concept, then practice this solo with a technical focus: with a metronome, a tuner, and then using sub-divisions, so that the air spins through the sound. Try to collaborate with the assistant intelligently so you have some chops left for the soft passages – it is very tempting to play all of the loud *tutti* passages, since they are so much fun! When you are playing with the section in the loud passages, play with conviction and leadership, so that you are indicating exactly what style you think would be best.

RC: Any final thoughts?

JM: When you are playing in an orchestra, try to play every week as if it is your "Trial Week." Be prepared, play along with recordings beforehand, so you know what it will feel like, and really give it your all.

It's also important to ask yourself, "What do I need to do to play my best?" and then to follow through and do those things. Whether it is better preparation with a score, subdividing or cueing yourself in, mock auditions, use of a tuner or metronome or etudes, nerve control, good scheduling, or a certain warm up, stretching, breathing, or yoga routine, find which factors you can control. Help yourself to be the best player you can be.

Jennifer Montone joined the Philadelphia Orchestra as principal horn in 2006. A native of Virginia, she began studies with Edwin Thayer, was a fellow at the Tanglewood Music Center, and studied with Julie Landsman at The Juilliard School. She is currently on the faculties of The Curtis Institute of Music, The Juilliard School, and the Aspen Music Festival. She served as the principal horn of the Saint Louis Symphony (2003-2006) and associate principal of the Dallas Symphony. Named the 1996 Paxman "Young Horn Player of the Year," she has since won many solo competitions and awards, performed as a soloist and chamber musician in several prestigious venues, including International Horn Symposia and International Women's Brass Conferences, and written articles on brass performance.

Christine Pelletier, who is earning the BM degree at the University of Dayton, realized the musical examples in this article.