

## **Anton Bruckner – Symphony No. 4 “Romantic”**

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Renowned today as a creative force, brilliant innovator and most worthy symphonic successor to Ludwig van Beethoven, Austrian composer Anton Bruckner spent several decades futilely craving recognition for his symphonic compositions from the stubbornly unforthcoming musical elite of Vienna. It was only with his Symphony No. 4, which Hans Richter and the Vienna Philharmonic finally deigned to premiere in 1881, that the 56-year-old Bruckner achieved the public accolades and widely acknowledged respect he had so long desired.

Scholars point to a myriad of reasons why Viennese sophisticates unfairly dismissed Bruckner and his music as unworthy, not least the fact that he stolidly retained the simple dress, deeply devout Catholicism, and uncultured peasant accent of his rural upbringing. He was reportedly socially inept, which led to unfortunate misunderstandings. Further, the solitary composer was crushingly insecure about his music, as evidenced by his lifelong penchant for not only repeatedly reworking and revising his works but sometimes inviting his peers and students to do so, too. This practice has led to what musicologists now refer to as “The Bruckner Problem,” referring to the proliferation of versions of many of his works. There is often no way to determine which of many extant versions of his compositions were Bruckner’s “final” version, nor even if revisions made by others were, in fact, sanctioned by him.

Symphony No. 4 is a case in point. Bruckner completed the first version of this masterpiece in 1874. The Vienna Philharmonic began to rehearse it in 1875, only to change course and discard it as unworthy and “unplayable.” Bruckner spent the next five years reworking and revising, completely rewriting the third movement and other extended passages and allowing two of his students to also make some changes. The work that finally premiered under Richter’s baton in 1881 changed the course of Bruckner’s composing life, cementing his artistic stature; but he still felt compelled to continue tweaking Symphony No. 4 right up until it was published in 1889.

Bruckner himself nicknamed Symphony No. 4 “Romantic,” in homage to the lush, evocative musical style of Wagner, Schumann, Schubert, and others of his musical peers. The work tells a story, musically depicting a day in the life of a medieval village from dawn to dusk. Horn calls welcome sunrise and the new day, knights on horseback pound out from a castle drawbridge, a hunt is undertaken, and a village feast and festival end the long and eventful day. After years of disdain, the Viennese were so thrilled with Bruckner’s creation, they called him to the stage for bows after each movement.

Fun facts: 2024 is being celebrated in Austria as “The Bruckner Year” with an ongoing series of extraordinary museum and musical events in honor of the composer’s 200th birthday. In the U.S., Bruckner’s musical impact is hiding in plain sight. Anyone who has attended a major sporting event lately will have heard the pounding rhythm and compulsive musical themes of “Seven Nation Army” by The White Strips, but few realize the work was inspired by the first movement of Bruckner’s Romantic Symphony.

## **Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky – Piano Concerto No. 1**

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Imagine you are a competitor on Jeopardy. You select for your category “Famous Russian composers in history” and for \$200 your question is, “In what major city did Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No. 1 receive its premiere performance in 1875?” Would your answer be Moscow? Saint Petersburg? Maybe Vienna, or even Paris?

Well. . . No. It was in Boston. How, and why, did this occur?

## Program Notes by Susan Swinburne

In 1874, at the age of 34, Tchaikovsky was already a successful and well-regarded composer with operas, symphonies, chamber works, songs, and dozens of other compositions to his credit. He was fortunate to have had a comfortable young life and a good education in a well-to-do professional family, and he was able to pursue an intensive study of musical theory, harmony, counterpoint, composition, and orchestration at the St. Petersburg Conservatory under the tutelage of founder and director Anton Rubenstein and his renowned brother, conductor and concert pianist Nikolai Rubenstein.

Tchaikovsky composed his Piano Concerto No. 1 over four months in 1874 and 1875. He was an accomplished pianist and had written a number of prior works for piano, but never for piano and orchestra. Therefore, when the concerto was complete, he sought advice and hoped for praise from his friend and mentor, Nikolai Rubenstein, to whom he intended to dedicate the work and whom he envisioned would perform the piece's premiere. Imagine his dismay when, after hearing Tchaikovsky play through the entire work, Rubenstein passionately excoriated it as badly written, worthless, and impossible to play. Rubenstein went on to advise comprehensive changes and revisions before he would consider performing it. Tchaikovsky, whose sensitive and emotional temperament was no secret, was deeply wounded and responded, "I won't change a note of it. I shall publish it precisely as it stands." Which, he did.

Outraged and insulted, Tchaikovsky changed his composition's dedication before publication selecting, instead of Rubenstein, the German virtuoso pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow, whose recent recital at the Bolshoi Theater had impressed him greatly. Von Bülow was honored and sincerely admired the music. Recovering from a personal betrayal of his own after being abandoned by his wife Cosima (née Liszt) for new husband Richard Wagner, the pianist was preparing to depart for a previously scheduled U.S. tour. Declaring the concerto to be a work of "unsurpassed originality, nobility, strength... this true gem shall earn you the gratitude of all pianists," he decided to take it with him. He performed the premiere on October 25, 1875 at the Boston Music Hall (now the Orpheum Theater) with a local orchestra to an immediate enthusiastic reception (the Boston Symphony Orchestra would not be founded for six more years). The Boston audience even demanded the finale be played a second time. Further successes occurred throughout von Bülow's American sojourn. Upon his return to Europe from America, he continued to showcase the piece and its first performance in London a short while later was also warmly received.

In a twist of irony, the concerto was performed in Moscow several months later by Tchaikovsky's student and friend, pianist Sergey Tanayev, at a concert of the Russian Musical Society. At that performance, after which the work was proclaimed an instant success, the conductor was none other than – wait for it – Nikolai Rubenstein. Apparently, he had changed his mind.

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Susan Swinburne has been a lover and student of music since demanding piano lessons at age six. Her work in orchestra management has enriched her life personally and professionally for the past three decades. A habitué of concert halls throughout southern California, she lives, listens, writes, and researches in the South Bay.