

Bruckner: Symphony No 8 (Australian World Orchestra)

by Angus McPherson on January 30, 2017

Review

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Ever the perfectionist, Bruckner left two versions of his Eighth Symphony – the last symphony he completed. After his “artistic father” Hermann Levi rejected the first version, Bruckner spent three years revising the work. In this performance by the Australian World Orchestra, recorded live in the Sydney Opera House’s Concert Hall in 2015, Sir Simon Rattle uses Robert Haas’s 1939 edition – a hybrid that incorporates elements from both of Bruckner’s versions. The Haas version has remained popular, conductors like Karajan and Haitink continuing to use it even after Leopold Nowak released his more authentic scholarly editions of the symphony in 1972.

From the shimmering violins and brooding basses of the opening, Rattle leads the AWO through a mammoth symphony, which has attracted the nickname Apocalyptic – a moniker that captures the scope if not quite the atmosphere of the work. The two-plus-three “Bruckner rhythm” – given so much motivic weight in the composer’s Seventh – sweeps through the strings in the first movement while the descending figures, like peeling-

magically shimmering strings. The AWO's brass and timpani conjure vast landscapes that fade away again into solitude.

The Adagio is the weightiest movement in this symphony, clocking in at a little over 27 minutes, but Rattle lends it a masterly cohesion. The finer moments come through with clarity and nuance, quiet horn lines and glittering harp are highlighted with exquisite detail. From its opening dark, brassy fanfare, the finale – which Bruckner dubbed the most significant movement of his life – blazes with a powerful grandeur.

The Australian World Orchestra have well and truly established themselves as more than just a 'once-a-year wonder' and there is no doubt as to why this performance took out the 2016 Helpmann Award for Best Symphony Orchestra Concert.

