



ANTON BRUCKNER

Te Deum

Sunday, May 23, 2010 | 7:00pm

The Kennedy Center

WRITTEN BY:

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Notes on the Program

Even choristers will agree that the most significant body of works of Anton Bruckner (1824-1896) is the series of nine monumental symphonies—ten if you count the early “number zero.” But many choristers will argue passionately that there is a second set of works by Bruckner that are worthy of consideration as a major contribution to nineteenth-century music. These are the sacred choral works: the three mature masses, the many motets written for chorus either *a cappella* or with spare accompaniment, and two works on non-Mass texts for chorus and large orchestra, the *Te Deum* and the *150th Psalm*.

Of these works the masses are fairly early, all of them having been written before the Second Symphony. The motets were written throughout his life. The two large-scale settings of a single liturgical text, on the other hand, are late: the *Te Deum* was written while Bruckner was working on his Seventh Symphony, the *150th Psalm* during work on the unfinished Ninth. Of the two, the *Te Deum* has always been the more performed. Indeed, during Bruckner’s lifetime it was performed more times than any of his large-scale works save for the Seventh Symphony.

Bruckner’s *Te Deum* is in five interrelated movements. The most obvious interrelation is between the second and fourth movements: “Te ergo quaesumus” and “Salvum fac populum tuum”, the two lyrical movements, the second of which starts out as a recapitulation of the first. Textures range from the blazing *tutti* C major of the opening, a texture which will recur at intervals through the piece, to *a cappella* sections reminiscent of the motets. There is a magistral if short double-fugue for the final appeal “In Thee, Lord, have I trusted; let me never be confounded.” Over the entire score stands Bruckner’s notation “O.A.M.D.G.” (*Omnia ad majorem Dei gloriam*): “All to the greater glory of God.”

Many settings of the *Te Deum* through the ages have been linked to political events. (Handel’s two large-scale *Te Deums* are named the “Utrecht”, after a treaty, and the “Dettingen”, after a battle.) The two transcendent late nineteenth century settings of the *Te Deum*, those of Bruckner (1881-1884) and Verdi (1895-1896), are exceptions to this tradition: both are personal expressions of their composers’ faiths. Verdi, whose faith was tied loosely if at all to the forms and ceremonies of Roman religion, gives us a reading of the *Te Deum* in which each phrase is a specific and detailed response to the particular words being set. Bruckner, with his profound and simple faith in the Roman Catholic religion, writes a *Te Deum*



which reflects somewhat more its liturgical formality. But Bruckner's *Te Deum* remains a personal witness of faith. We can even see it as balancing the early masses in Bruckner's career: the masses the work of a young composer not yet sure he could express his unshaken faith through the abstract form of the symphony; the *Te Deum* a hymn of thanks for the gift he had been given to invest the symphony with the language of faith.