



## Celibidache and Bruckner

Tess James



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[1] This month sees the release by EMI of the Bruckner symphonies of German-based maestro Sergiu Celibidache. Even before his death in 1996, the Rumanian was often considered by many to be the last surviving great genius of conducting. The release of this collection is all the more special because Celibidache throughout his lifetime opposed recordings of his work. Throughout the world, it will be the first chance for many to discover why music critics wrote that Celibidache was capable of presenting an entirely new and extremely moving Bruckner.

[2] There has always been a special relationship between Celibidache and Bruckner, the former being said to have understood the latter like nobody else.

[3] “To him, time is different than it is to other composers. To a normal man, time is what comes after the beginning. To Bruckner, time is what comes after the end. All his apothetical finals, the hope for another world, the hope of being saved, of being again baptised in light, it exists nowhere else in the same manner”—these were Celibidache’s own words when asked about Bruckner. But what precisely did it mean for an orchestra? They had to play Bruckner with Celi’s understanding of tempi, which made each symphony sound as if it were heard for the very first time, and much longer than ever before.

[4] “It meant very hard work,” recalls Joerg Eggebrecht, who plays first Cello at the Munich Philharmonic orchestra, where Celibidache conducted from the early eighties until his death. “His way of rehearsing put enormous pressure on us. If I study the score as closely as Celibidache, if I make it my life’s work to play Bruckner as Bruckner meant us to play him—with great calm and quiet—then this means a great effort especially for the wind instruments. Some of my colleagues had actually taken up yoga in order to fulfil Celi’s breathing technique requirements. The release of the CDs will show that our brass players play completely different than anything we have previously heard of Bruckner.”

[5] Eggebrecht recalls that the wind instruments were required to precisely dosage of their breath. “To keep up this enormous peace and quiet all through the symphony was a great strain” he explains, adding: “but it means that our Bruckner performances were completely lacking in violence. Every note could be born at its own pace, all sound had its own space. Nothing was swallowed up. It was possible to hear every minute aspect of the music and comprehend what Bruckner had meant to bring across. It was like a moment of truth, and the musical space expanded beyond the orchestra, into the audience.”

[6] Eggebrecht feels that Celibidache's Bruckner could have become a household name. "But he did not want to make recordings," the Cellist explains. "He said that our job as an orchestra is to perform the music as it was written down, to bring to life again the original emotion which had been felt at the time of writing. The composer had a certain experience, he used a kind of shorthand to write it down, and we must decipher it to bring the experience back to life. This had to be done anew each time the music was played. Hence, a CD could not fulfil the same purpose." The only reason why the concert recordings are now going to be released is due to Celibidache's son Serge, a film maker who lives in Paris and who believes that the arguably most fascinating Bruckner experience there ever was should not die together with his father.

[7] Peter Jonas, a graduate of the RCM who has formerly worked together with Solti in England is now the Intendant of the Bayerischer Staatsoper in Munich—the first English speaking Intendant ever in Germany. "I remember his Bruckner performances very well," Jonas reminisces. "People have cried openly, without shame. It was so moving, it was more than mere music."

[8] It has been said that Celibidache's Bruckner was never an effort to listen to, that it sounded more like running water and clothed the soul of the listener. Music critics have called it natural, flowing, connecting with the very essence of sound. "That is easily explained," says Eggebrecht. "We found in his music elements which said that we are mortal, that we have an uncontrollable fate, that we go through periods of loneliness, of being god-removed. For all this there are symbols in his music. When a sound becomes reality, it is born. But at the same moment it already dies. The sound C or F comes out of the cosmic force. It is already there, all I have to do is to bring it forth on my instrument: the tuba, the cello. The very moment it is born, it dies already. Just take the wonderful start of the horn in the 4th symphony: bee bam da dee. A very simple structure, where the birth and demise of a sound is the symbol for life: how it arises and fades away."

[9] In rehearsals, Celibidache's reputation as a slave-driver and dictator was legendary. "Rightly so," recalls Joerg's brother Harald, a music critic for one of Germany's most respected newspapers. "I remember the first time I was sent to write about a rehearsal. I went there to write about a monster, whose reputation had preceded him. And it was exactly as I had been forewarned: there was great drama, he walked out, he sent a musician outside, he screamed, he abused the first violins. And yet, it wasn't like I had expected at all. Whatever he did, he was justified. I realised after a few minutes that his screaming was not for the sake of it: he had an immensely deep understanding of what music should be. He would not stand for anything less than perfection, and he got angry if he felt anyone in his orchestra was not taking the music as seriously as he did. I became one of his greatest defenders, and one of his best friends. Outside of the music, he was the nicest person."

[10] Indeed, Celibidache must have been a very kind man: all his rehearsals were open to the public "to give everyone access to music." He rescued stray dogs from the pound. He always had an open door and heart for his musicians when rehearsals were over, and he maintained very close personal relations with his students and many members of his orchestra.

[11] One of Celibidache's best friends became Helmut Nicolai, first viola and today also the head of the Rosamunde quartet, which is rapidly shooting to fame and will be in the limelight again this month with the world premiere of Bruckner's favorite student Hans Rott's string quartet at the Berlin Festival.

[12] "I do recall my first rehearsal with him," says Nicolai. "I had come from the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra under Karajan, wanting to work with Celibidache, but I had no idea what it meant. It meant four or five days' rehearsal, and each time we performed a symphony again we had to rehearse it as if it were the first time. He wanted a new experience to come out of the music with every performance. What I liked about him was that he always called us by our first names, not by our instrument. It made us feel human, but he wanted something in return. We were not just to play our own notes but to listen where our instrument stands in relation to the entire orchestra. He wanted us to think for ourselves, rather than just being the executive branch. We had to consider the music in its entirety, like the conductor, and he got mad when he found we were just playing our notes. Once or twice I had to tell him not to scream at the first violins so much, because the poor guys got so upset that I was afraid they would eventually become too scared to ever play freely again. What he did not understand is that you have to balance compliments and punishment when you rehearse."

[13] Joerg was there for the first rehearsal ever with Celibidache. "It started with him saying: what is wrong with your breathing technique? to one of the winds. The poor guy replies: I breathe like all the others. And Celi goes: is that so? You

want to be like everyone else, do you? But not here, not with me.”

[14] “And we had to start all over again, as if we had to go back to school to grade one. You have to imagine that: we were a well-known, well-respected European orchestra. So a bass player gets up and he says: but Maestro, we aren’t a student orchestra. And Celi says: but you look like you are. What’s your name? Come on, sit down and play for me.”

[15] “And then we really started work. Ten days. It was as if he had locked the doors to prevent us from leaving, it was really serious. And he said to us: you think I am joking, don’t think that, gentlemen.”

[16] Joerg recalls his first Bruckner rehearsal just as vividly. “The first tremolo came up, and he says: what are you doing? Chicki, chicki, chicki. Wrong, wrong. The tremolo has to sound like hot air. What can we do? Let’s all play at different frequencies, come on, try it out.”

[17] Celibidache saw his work on Bruckner’s symphonies as being defined by the syllable sym = unity. Each member of the orchestra had to be part of the whole. “When we went on tour to the United States,” recalls Eggebrecht, “although Bruckner is not as widely known there as he is here, everyone was spellbound by our performance. I recall an American colleague saying at the start: look they do different bow speeds, but it sounds nice.”

[18] Nicolai once observed a deeply moved Celibidache at the grave of Bruckner in St. Florian. “There is no question that he felt very connected to Bruckner as a person. This may explain the spectacular sound experiences that he could turn a Bruckner symphony into. Celibidache had survived the second World War. As a young man he had been in Berlin when the city was bombed. He fled from the horror of his memories into the world of music. With the help of Bruckner, he drowned out the screams of children he had seen die. Music was more than music to him, it was his reason for staying alive.”

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## APPENDIX

### Munich repertoire of Celibidache – Bruckner

#### SYMPHONIES

- No. 3 in D minor
- No. 4 in E $\flat$  Major
- No. 5 in B $\flat$  Major
- No. 6 in A Major
- No. 7 in E Major
- No. 8 in C minor
- No. 9 in D minor

#### VOCAL WORKS

- Mass No. 3 in F minor
- Te Deum

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## IMPORTANT DATES

Celi born Rumania 11 Juli 1912

1936: Celi arrives in Berlin. Meeting with composer Heinz Tiessen. Enters conservatory. Studies philosophy at university until 1945: studies and then teaches at conservatory. His main teachers are Tiessen, Hugo Distler and Walter Gmeindl. Works at his own compositions (concertos, mass and four symphonies) which have not been performed to this day.

Assistant at concerts of Willhelm Furtwaengler, conducting the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra

August 1945: Becomes conductor of the Berlin Radio Orchestra. Because Furtwangler becomes suspended from conducting the BSO as part of the “denazification” process, the orchestra contacts his young protegee, Celibidache

29 Aug 1945: First concert with the BSO and great success for Celibidache

February 1946: Celibidache becomes conductor of the BSO

1945–1954: Conducts 414 concerts with the BSO

21 December 1946: Premiere in Germany of the 7th symphony of Chostakovitch. The Russians record the concert, which Celibidache hates. He becomes a great enemy of recordings.

25 May 1947: First concert of Furtwangler after the war's end

1949–54: Furtwangler and Celibidache share the conducting of the BSO

1950: Celi premieres in Berlin the Violin Concerto of Berg with the BSO. Blacher, Hoffer, Raphael, Tiessen. Hindemith and Wellesz are among the composers whose works Celibidache premiered with the BSO.

28 Nov 1954: Receives the Great Cross of Merit of Germany

29 Nov 1954: Last concert with the BSO

30 Nov 1954: Death of Furtwaengler

13 December 1954: Karajan becomes head of BSO, Celibidache leaves Berlin

1953–1967: Celi is active in Italy with the orchestra of La Scala and others.

1960–63: Works intensely with the Orchestre de la Chapelle Royale in Copenhagen

May 1965: Marries Ioana Procopie Dhnitrescu

1963–71: Works regularly with the Swedish Radio Orchestra.

19 June 1968: Birth of only son Serge

1970: Receives Swedish equivalent of knighthood. Receives the Danish Leonie-Sonning Musical Award

1972: Gives master classes of conducting in Siena and Bologna

1972–77: Chief conductor of Stuttgart Radio Orchestra. For the first time, he records his own composition "Taschengarten." It is dedicated to the children of the third world, and the proceeds go to UNICEF

1973–75: Chef Principal de l'Orchestre National de l'ORTF in Paris

1978: Nominated Professor at the University of Mayence. Gives courses until 1992

1978–80: Concerts in Japan with the Yomuri Orchestra in Tokyo

1979: Is nominated general director of music of the city of Munich, and head of the Munich Philharmonic orchestra (conductor). He travels with them throughout the world: across Europe, North and South America, Japan and the rest of Asia, and the former Soviet Union

1984: Works with students of the Curtis Institute's Orchestra in Philadelphia. Concerts in Philadelphia and New York

1991: Nominated "Professor Honoris Causa" of city of Berlin and of the Munich Conservatory

1 April 1992: At the request of the president of Germany, Celibidache conducts the BSO for the first time after 37 years

June 1992: Receives the Cross of Merit of Germany

1993: Becomes honorary citizen of Munich

1995: Awarded “Commaudeur des Arts et Lettres” by the French Government

1995: Master classes in France

June 1996: Last concerts at Munich

July 1996: Still gives conducting courses

14 August 1996: Dies

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**Tess James**

**Cross Media UK - Music**

**Essex, England**

[Xmwords@aol.com](mailto:Xmwords@aol.com)

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Prepared by Jon Koriagin and Rebecca Flore and Tahirih Motazedian, Editorial Assistants