



# The Motets of Anton Bruckner

R O N A L D L . M I L L E R

Editor's note: This article is a reprint from *Choral Journal*, September 1996. Readers can find performing editions of the pieces discussed in this article online at the Choral Public Domain Library (CPDL) and the International Music Score Library Project (IMSLP).

The major composers of the nineteenth century devoted scant attention to the motet genre. Anton Bruckner and Johannes Brahms are perhaps the best-known composers to produce a significant number of short sacred works for unaccompanied chorus. Taking the motets of J. S. Bach as his model, the Protestant Brahms wrote seven motets on German texts. Bruckner, on the other hand, took Italian composer Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina's style as his model and composed thirty-four motets, all settings of Latin texts. The present study surveys the major influences on Bruckner's choral output and analyzes several representative motets in an attempt to spark interest in the performance of these neglected miniatures.

### **Bruckner as Singer and Choral Conductor**

In 1837, Bruckner's mother enrolled her thirteen-year-old son in the monastery school of St. Florian. There Anton took his place as a chorister until his voice changed after three years. His second opportunity to perform as a singer came in 1845, soon after Bruckner returned to St. Florian Abbey as a teaching assistant, when he sang first bass in a male quartet. In 1855, Bruckner moved to Linz to assume the position of cathedral organist. He joined the male choral society Liedertafel Frohsinn, where he participated as singer and librarian for several years. In November 1860, Bruckner was invited to become conductor of the Liedertafel Frohsinn, and he approached the new responsibility with determined effort, anxious to prove himself as a choirmaster. His priorities as a choral conductor centered on such aspects as clear enunciation, proper phrasing, and, especially, dynamic contrast. He soon built a reputation for demanding extremely quiet pianissimo passages.<sup>1</sup>

The composer benefited greatly from his work as a choral conductor. The experience offered him an opportunity to experiment with writing for chorus. One of his miniature masterpieces for choir—the seven-part *Ave Maria*—was composed for the Liedertafel Frohsinn. For the choir's anniversary performance on May 10, 1868, the composer wrote *Inueni David*, a motet for four-voice male chorus and trombones.<sup>2</sup> As a conductor Bruckner was also able to make significant contacts with other important musical figures such as Franz Liszt, who became a supporter, and Eduard Hanslick, who after some initial support became the composer's nemesis.<sup>3</sup>

## Bruckner and the Cecilian Movement

One of the central features of the Romantic movement was an interest in the past. Leading Roman Catholic church musicians initiated efforts to revive early liturgical music, hoping to reform the nineteenth-century style, which they viewed as theatrical and ostentatious. Karl Proske (1794-1861), choirmaster of the cathedral at Regensburg, became an influential figure in the initial stages of what came to be called the Cecilian Movement. Originating in 1869 as the Allgemeiner Deutscher Cäcilien-Verein (the Cecilian Society of Germany), the society adopted three tenets: 1) sixteenth-century polyphony, particularly that of Palestrina, represented the ideal church style; 2) Gregorian chant should be fundamental to Catholic music; and 3) the concert style exemplified in the masses of Haydn was unsuitable for use in the church.

The Cecilians wished to encourage the composition of polyphonic choral music for the church, either a cappella or accompanied only by organ. To provide models illustrating this ideal, Cecilians began to research manuscripts and publish editions of the Renaissance masters. Volumes of Palestrina's complete works appeared as early as 1862.

Upon arriving at St. Florian Abbey in 1845, Bruckner was introduced to Cecilian ideals through the choirmaster Ignaz Traumihler. The two soon became friends, and Bruckner later dedicated two motets to Traumihler: the four-voice *Ave Maria* (1856) and *Os justi* (1879). In the latter work, set in the Lydian mode and in a polyphonic style, Bruckner clearly adopts Cecilian principles. As he stated in a letter to Traumihler, "I should be very pleased if you found pleasure in the piece. It is written without sharp or flat, without the chord of the seventh, without a six-four chord or chordal combinations of four or five simultaneous notes."<sup>4</sup> As if to emphasize his mastery of the old style, Bruckner ends *Os justi* with harmonized chant followed by an "alleluja" in unison plainchant. The motets *Locus iste* (1869) and *Tota pulchra es Maria* (1878) also reflect Cecilian principles. In 1885, Franz Xavier Witt, president of the Allgemeiner Deutscher Cäcilien-Verein, printed Bruckner's three-stanza hymn *Pange lingua* (composed in 1868) in the Cecilian periodical *Musica sacra*.

The question is often raised as to whether Bruckner was a Cecilian. Though no recorded statements indicate that he actually supported the society, six motets as well as his *Mass in E Minor* conform to the society's restrictive principles of style to some degree. On the other hand, major sacred works such as his *Mass in F Minor*, *Te Deum*, and *Psalm 150*, which employ soloists and large orchestras, are concert works that exceed the stylistic limits acceptable to the Cecilians. In addition, as Bruckner explored the daring harmonies of Richard Wagner, he could not simultaneously emulate Palestrina's style. Thus, while Bruckner followed Cecilian ideals in a number of motets, in others his Romantic vocabulary emerged in a more characteristic manner.

## Bruckner as a Man of Faith

Bruckner's parents, living in Upper Austria, instilled in him a firm faith in God and unquestioned loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church. Few composers lived more consistently above moral reproach; his dedication to a spiritual life was legendary. He prayed frequently before improvising on the organ, prior to composing, even in the midst of a classroom lecture. He noted in his diary the number of prayers said daily.<sup>5</sup> He adopted the practice of J. S. Bach and other composers by signing his musical compositions with the letters "OAMDG"—*Omnia ad majorem Dei gloriam* (All to the greater glory of God).

## An Overview of Bruckner's Motets

Anton Bruckner's thirty-four surviving motets originated over a period of almost sixty years. As a boy of twelve, he wrote a simple setting of the hymn *Pange lingua*, which was likely his earliest composition. His last small liturgical work, again a hymn (*Vexilla regis*), dates from 1892, when he was approaching age seventy. Each of Bruckner's motets fulfills a functional place in the Roman Catholic liturgy.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to his masses and symphonies, the majority of Bruckner's motets were occasional pieces, composed for particular individuals or events.

*Locus iste* (SATB)

First performed on October 29, 1869, *Locus iste* was written for the dedication of a new chapel in Linz, honoring Father Otto Loidol, who was active at the Benedictine Monastery at Kremsünster.<sup>7</sup> Liturgically the work is a gradual “For the Dedication of a Church.”

*Locus iste* is a masterpiece of serenity and simplicity, much in the same character as Mozart’s *Ave verum corpus*. As is typical of Bruckner’s motets, the music begins softly, goes through one or more climactic points, and arrives at a calm and quiet end. A ternary formal pattern is clearly laid out (A-B-A-coda). In this relatively easy work, a homophonic texture prevails; however, the basses anticipate the upper three voices in several phrases. Voice ranges are moderate, with the soprano reaching  $g^2$  and the tenor rising only to  $e^1$ . A chromatically descending tenor line (mm. 21-29) undergirds an artful setting of the repeated phrase, “irreprehensibilis est” (This place is blameless). Considering its availability in several editions and its modest technical demands, *Locus iste* must be considered the most accessible of Bruckner’s motets.

*Pange lingua* (SATB)

Bruckner obviously felt attracted to this thirteenth-century hymn by Thomas Aquinas, since he set it eight times. The hymn is included in the liturgy for the Feast of Corpus Christi. Bruckner’s 1868 setting includes three of the hymn’s six stanzas: “*Pange lingua gloriosi*” (stanza 1), “*Tantum ergo sacramentum*” (stanza 5), and “*Genitori, genitoque*” (stanza 6). Bruckner sets the three stanzas in strophic form followed by an “amen.” Each of the eight phrases is clearly delineated, ending with either a rest or fermata. The opening phrase evokes a medieval aura as a unison E unfolds slowly to an open fifth (echoing the Kyrie of his *Mass in E Minor*). Although the piece begins and ends very softly, expression is carefully indicated through contrasting dynamic levels noted for each phrase. In 1885, when this simple motet appeared in the Cecilian journal *Musica sacra*, editor Witt found Bruckner’s dissonance in the first measure of the “amen” too severe and changed the alto note to conform to the A minor chord.<sup>8</sup>

*Vexilla regis* (SATB)

Bruckner completed this, his last, motet on February 9, 1892. It was a gift to B. Deubler, who had succeeded Traumahler as choirmaster of St. Florian Abbey. Upon sending the score to Deubler, the composer wrote this brief note: “I have composed it following the dictates of a pure heart. May it find grace!”<sup>9</sup> The motet, on a sixth-century text by Venantius Fortunatus, sets a Vesper hymn for Passion Sunday.

The three-stanza hymn is set strophically in a predominantly homorhythmic texture. Each stanza begins and ends softly, building to several forceful phrases. Despite an apparent Phrygian modality, the motet displays Bruckner’s modernity in several bold tonal shifts:

Phrase 1 Begins in E minor  
(8 measures) Ends in G Major

Phrase 2 Begins in B minor  
(7 measures) Ends in E Major

Phrase 3 Begins in A minor  
(8 measures) Ends in F Major

Phrase 4 Begins in F Major  
(12 measures) Ends in E minor (open fifth)

*Ave Maria* (SAATTBB)

This beautiful setting of the familiar Marian antiphon was first performed on May 12, 1861, by the Linz Liedertafel Froshinn with the composer conducting.<sup>10</sup> The quiet opening contrasts high and low voicings—three-part women (mm. 1-10) and four-part men (mm. 11-16). Then Bruckner dramatically states the word “Jesus” three times with rising pitches and dynamic levels. (Several years later the composer recalled this passage in the “et resurrexit” of his *Mass in D Minor*.) At the text “Sancta Maria” (mm. 21-30), Bruckner displays his penchant for suspensions as he progresses from A Major to C Major. Octave leaps downward, an interval frequently found in his motets, appear at the phrase “mortis nostrae.” The motet closes with a soft plagal “amen.” The rich sonorities in *Ave Maria* evoke the style of Venetian polychoral motets.

# The Motets of Anton Bruckner

## *Os justi* (SSAATTBB)

Composed on July 18, 1879, the composer wrote *Os justi* for St. Florian Abbey and its choirmaster Ignaz Traumihler.<sup>11</sup> The Lydian modality is maintained throughout with not a single accidental suggesting major or minor. The piece exhibits a clear formal outline:

- A mm. 1-16
- B mm. 16-42
- A' mm. 42-65
- Coda mm. 65-70

The opening phrase begins very quietly with three identical chords. A few measures later the texture expands to eight voices ranging from F to a<sup>2</sup>. The B section is a strict fugue based on an expansive subject that begins in the alto (Figure 1). Bruckner's closing presents harmonized chant on a static F-major chord followed by a unison chant on "alleluja." Although required if performed in a liturgical service, the "alleluja" is optional in a concert performance.

## *Tota pulchra es Maria* (SATB, T solo, organ)

Bruckner wrote *Tota pulchra es Maria* in honor of Franz Josef Rudigier, who in 1878 celebrated his twenty-fifth year as bishop of the Linz diocese. The motet was first performed on June 4, 1878, in the Linz Cathedral.<sup>12</sup> The text is based on an antiphon for Vespers on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Although several scholars have speculated that the melody may be borrowed from plainsong, a chant tune has not been identified.

The most prominent feature of *Tota pulchra es Maria* is the antiphonal interplay between tenor soloist and

choir that occurs through m. 60, after which the choir alone states repeatedly the final phrase, "intercede pro nobis ad Dominum Jesum Christum." Sparing use is made of the organ, which appears in only twelve of the motet's eighty measures. The voices divide into eight parts for one brief passage, the climactic phrase "tu laetitia Israel" (mm. 20-28).

## *Virga Jesse* (SATB)

This gradual is for the feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the subject is appropriate for Advent and Christmas. Although written on September 3, 1885, for Traumihler, the motet was not performed until several months later in a concert in Vienna directed by the composer.<sup>13</sup> Highly dramatic, the music builds to several climaxes followed by fermatas (mm. 9-10; mm. 19-20; mm. 33-34; m. 51); yet, as is typical for Bruckner, the opening and the ending are subdued (*p* and *ppp*, respectively). *Virga Jesse* is laid out in two large sections. The second section (mm. 63-91) consists of an animated "alleluja" that makes use of spirited dotted rhythms (Figure 2 on the next page). Harmonically, Bruckner displays his penchant for progression by thirds: E minor to G Major (mm. 1-9); G minor to B<sup>b</sup> Major (mm. 11-19); and B<sup>b</sup> Major to G<sup>b</sup> Major (mm. 21-23). The motet represents Bruckner at the pinnacle of his expressive powers. Both dynamically and harmonically the composition displays true mastery in projecting the emotional qualities contained in the text.

## *Afferentur regi* (SATB, three trombones ad lib.)

This brief motet sets an offertory text based on Psalm 45:14-15. It was first performed on December 14, 1861,



Figure 1. Anton Bruckner, *Os justi*  
Fugue Subject




acclaim for his Seventh Symphony, marking the composer's long-awaited recognition as a symphonic composer. In contrast to the restrained openings that characterize his other motets, here the music bursts forth on a dramatic *fortissimo* open fifth with full organ accompaniment. This relatively long work (approximately seven minutes) displays clear sectionalization:

- A mm. 1-9
- B mm. 9-22
- C mm. 23-39
- D mm. 40-63
- C mm. 64-80
- E mm. 81-88
- C mm. 89-105

Bruckner includes a ritornello (section C) that brings back the phrase “*Ideo jurejurando fecit illum Dominus crescere in plebem suam*” (swearing an oath to uphold him, God therefore in glory exalted him among the people). Its rhythmic vitality and bold harmonic progression (E Major—C minor—G Major—E<sup>b</sup> minor—B<sup>b</sup> Major—

F<sup>#</sup> minor—D Major—A Major—F Major—C Major) cause this refrain to be one of the most stirring passages in Bruckner's entire choral output (Figure 5 on the next page). Quite unexpectedly, between the exclamation Bruckner inserts the *Gloria Patri* as a unison chant (section E). Thus, Bruckner directly juxtaposes medieval and Romantic elements, reflecting the dualistic style of his music.

## An Expression of Faith

From one point of view, Anton Bruckner lived his life as a displaced musician. As a teacher and composer, he circulated in the cultural milieu of Vienna; however, as a sincere Christian he lived a life dedicated to prayer, devotion to God, and intense loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church. Rather than patronizing members of the upper echelons of society, Bruckner sought out trusted friends among choirmasters and bishops. His sacred output stands as a unified and consistent musical expression of Christian faith. 

13 *ff*

S af - fe - ren - tur ti - bi in lae - ti - ti - a

A *ff* af - fe - ren - tur ti - bi in lae - ti - ti - a

T *ff* af - fe - ren - tur ti - bi in lae - ti - ti - a

B *ff* af - fe - ren - tur ti - bi in lae - ti - ti - a

Figure 3. Anton Bruckner, *Afferentur regi*



6

*f* *dim. sempre*

S o - be - di - ens, o - be - di - ens, o - be - di - ens

*f* *dim. sempre*

A o - be - di - ens

*f* *dim. sempre*

T o - be - di - ens, o - be - di - ens, o - be - di - ens

*f* *dim. sempre*

B o - be - di - ens

Figure 4. Anton Bruckner, *Christus factus est*

23

*ff*

S I - de-o ju - re - ju - ran - do, i - de-o ju - re - ju - ran - do, i - de-o ju - re - ju - ran - do

*ff*

A I - de-o ju - re - ju - ran - do, i - de-o ju - re - ju - ran - do, i - de-o ju - re - ju - ran - do

*ff*

T I - de-o ju - re - ju - ran - do, i - de-o ju - re - ju - ran - do, i - de-o ju - re - ju - ran - do

*ff*

B I - de-o ju - re - ju - ran - do, i - de-o ju - re - ju - ran - do, i - de-o ju - re - ju - ran - do

*ff pleno*

Figure 5. Anton Bruckner, *Ecce sacerdos magnus*



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Theodore Albrecht, “Anton Bruckner and the Liedertafel Movement,” *American Choral Review* (January 1980): 12.
- <sup>2</sup> Alan Crawford Howie, “The Sacred Music of Anton Bruckner” (Ph.D. diss., Victoria University of Manchester, United Kingdom, 1969), 230.
- <sup>3</sup> Albrecht, 19.
- <sup>4</sup> Letter from Anton Bruckner to Ignaz Trauimihler, July 25, 1879, quoted in H. F. Redlich, *Bruckner and Mahler* (London: J. M. Dent, 1963), 72.
- <sup>5</sup> Redlich, 48.
- <sup>6</sup> “Based on the chronology in Anton Bruckner: Sämtliche Werke, vol. 21, “Kleine Kirchenmusikwerke, 1835-

- 1892,” ed. Hans Bauernfeind and Leopold Nowak (Vienna: *Musikwissenschaftlicher Verlag der Internationalen Bruckner-Gesellschaft*, 1984), xvi-xvii.
- <sup>7</sup> Alan Crawford Howie, “The Sacred Music,” 228.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.
- <sup>9</sup> Quoted in Howie, 243.
- <sup>10</sup> Derek Watson, *Bruckner* (London: J. M. Dent, 1975), 142.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.
- <sup>12</sup> Alan Crawford Howie, “The Sacred Music,” 232.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.
- <sup>16</sup> Derek Watson, *Bruckner*, 104.

## The Motets of Anton Bruckner: A Chronological Listing

Name	Key	Liturgical Function	Voicing	Date
<i>Pange lingua</i>	C Major	Hymn	SATB	c. 1836
<i>Libera me, Domine</i>	F Major	Responsory	SATB, organ	1844
<i>Asperges me</i>	F Major	Antiphon	SATB	c. 1844
<i>Christus factus est*</i>	F Major	Gradual	SATB	1844
<i>Dextra Domine*</i>	F Major	Offertory	SATB	1844
<i>Asperges me</i>	A minor	Antiphon	SATB, organ	1845
	F Major	Antiphon	SATB, organ	1845
<i>Tantum ergo</i>	D Major	Hymn	SATB	1845
	A Major	Hymn	SATB	1846
	B <sup>b</sup> Major	Hymn	SATB	1846
	A <sup>b</sup> Major	Hymn	SATB	1846
	E <sup>b</sup> Major	Hymn	SATB	1846
	C Major	Hymn	SATB	1846
	D Major	Hymn	SSATB	1846

<i>Libera me, Domine</i>	F Major	Responsory	SAATB, organ, 3 trombones	1854
<i>Tantum ergo</i>	B <sup>b</sup> Major	Hymn	SATB, 2 violins, clarini	c. 1854
<i>Ave Maria</i>	F Major	Antiphon	SATB, organ	1856
	F Major	Antiphon	SAATTBB	1861
<i>Afferentur regi</i>	F Major	Offertory	SATB, 3 trombones	1861
<i>Pange lingua</i>	E Phrygian	Hymn	SATB	1868
<i>Inveni David</i>	F minor	Offertory	TTBB, 4 trombones	1868
<i>Iam lucis orto sidere</i>	E minor	Hymn	SSBB	1868
<i>Locus iste</i>	C Major	Gradual	SATB	1869
<i>Christus factus est</i>	D minor	Gradual	SSAATTBB, 3 trombones, 2 violins	1873
<i>Tota pulchra es Maria</i>	A minor	Gradual	SSAATTBB, tenor solo, organ	1878
<i>Os justi</i>	F Lydian	Gradual	SSAATTBB	1879
<i>Ave Maria</i>	F Major	Antiphon	SATB, bass solo	1882
<i>Christus factus est</i>	D minor	Gradual	SATB	1884
<i>Salvum fac populum</i>	G Major	Antiphon	SATB, bass solo	1884
<i>Veni creator spiritus</i>	F Major	Hymn	Unison, organ	c. 1884
<i>Ecce sacerdos magnus</i>	A minor	Antiphon	SSAATTBB, organ, 3 trombones	1885
<i>Virga Jesse floruit</i>	E minor	Gradual	SATB	1885
<i>Ave regina caelorum</i>	A minor	Antiphon	Unison, organ	1886
<i>Vexilla regis</i>	E Phrygian	Hymn	SATB	1892

\* included with the *Messe für den Gründonnerstag* (Mass for Maundy Thursday)