

EGON WELLESZ, AN AUSTRIAN SYMPHONIST IN BRITAIN

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The nine symphonies of Egon Wellesz stand Janus-like between tradition and modernism. Though he embraced atonal harmonies and serial techniques, Wellesz remained loyal to tonality even in his most radical compositions. With the release in 1999 of two CDs devoted to his music in other genres, it is to be hoped that enlightened recording companies will soon begin to explore his symphonies - they still await a champion to bring them before the public. The quality of the writing evident in these scores and the fascinating recordings of broadcast performances of the works attest to their significance both to the 20th Century Symphony in particular and to the development of the Austrian tradition in general.



Egon Wellesz was born in Vienna on October 21st 1885. Between the years 1904 and 1906 he studied musicology at the University of Vienna. Even more significantly at the same time he took lessons from Arnold Schoenberg in harmony, counterpoint and fugue. This makes him one of Schoenberg's very first pupils (even before Alban Berg and Anton Webern) and helps to explain why Schoenberg exerted such a strong influence over Wellesz for the rest of his life. In 1908 Wellesz received his doctorate from the University of Vienna and five years later joined the staff as a lecturer. His interest in Byzantine music took root: in 1916 he deciphered the notation of Byzantine music. In 1920 Wellesz wrote the very first biography of Schoenberg, containing lucid commentaries on all Schoenberg's major works up to that time. By the 1930s he was a Professor of Music at the University of Vienna. In 1932, he founded the Institute of Byzantine Music.

During his Viennese years, Wellesz gained recognition as a composer of ballets and operas, though he also wrote chamber music and some liturgical music for his church (like Mahler, he converted to Roman Catholicism). His opera *Alkestis* was hailed as a great work at the time and enjoyed a revival in the 1950s and 1960s, when it met with scarcely less acclaim. Its individual idiom is a heady mixture of Expressionism, Byzantine monody and High Baroque architectural design. By the end of his "Viennese period" Wellesz's style had mellowed. Works representative of this later style include his sonnets of Elizabeth Barrett Browning for soprano and string quartet and the three-movement symphonic poem for large orchestra *Prosperos Beschwoerungen* op53. Inspired by Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, its English inspiration seems to have been prophetic since in 1938, Wellesz emigrated to England.

He settled in Oxford which accorded him academic honours but might well have contributed to his relative obscurity as a composer. One wonders what fate would have befallen Wellesz's music had the composer decided to move to London, for example. After settling in Oxford he produced no new scores for five years, his Muse having been silenced no doubt by the appalling nature of the circumstances which forced him to flee his own country. Instead, he directed his energies into his Byzantine studies. However, in 1944 he produced two masterpieces: his String Quartet no 5 and a beautiful setting for soprano and instrumental group of Gerard Manley Hopkins 'The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo'.

The following year, spurred on by the quartet, he embarked on an even more astonishing project. By the end of 1945 (the score is actually dated the 1st of January 1946) he had finished his first Symphony - a remarkable achievement for a sixty year old composer! He had not contributed to this genre whilst he was in Vienna when opera and church music were readily available to him. It was whilst holidaying in the Lake District in 1945 that the idea of writing a symphony came to Wellesz, together with the work's main theme. He composed the work in a state of exhilaration, completing it in three weeks!

The next 26 years brought forth a series of nine examples in the genre, most of them premiered on the Continent rather than in Britain. However, whenever they were performed it was usually to critical acclaim. Wellesz died in Oxford on the 9th of November 1974 at the age of 89.

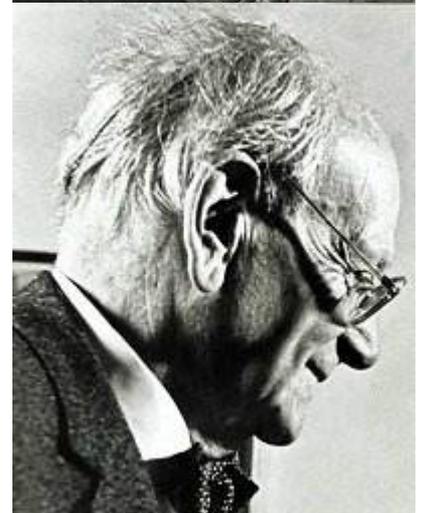
Symphonies 1-4 (BRUCKNER'S TENTH?)

By titling this section "Bruckner's Tenth" I do not mean to imply that the early Wellesz symphonies are carbon copies of the late 19th Century Austrian Master but rather that they breathe the same mountain air. Commentators described Brahms's First Symphony as "Beethoven's Tenth" (much to Brahms' annoyance) not because the work sounded particularly like Beethoven (apart from the obvious kinship between the main theme of the Finale of the Brahms work and the "Ode to Joy" theme of Beethoven's Ninth) but because here at last was a symphonist capable of writing with the same breadth and spiritual depth of the earlier master. Similarly, in Wellesz we find a composer effortlessly writing in the same idiom, scale and spiritual sincerity as Bruckner (and, to a lesser degree, Mahler). The shock of recognition in the listener soon gives way to a thrill of realisation that the Austrian tradition has been revitalised by someone who knows and loves it.

Hans Redlich, in his article for the Music Review (vol 7 1946) entitled 'Egon Wellesz - an Austrian composer in Britain' describes the Molto adagio sostenuto Finale of Wellesz's Symphony no 1 (1945) as: "a worthy offspring of Anton Bruckner's cathedral-like slow movements". Robert Layton, in a broadcast on the Third Programme, commented "...in his finest pieces among which the eloquently wrought Third Symphony should be numbered, there is a nobility that recalls the art of Bruckner whom he so revered". Robert Layton, a friend of Wellesz, remembers visiting the composer at his home in Woodstock Road, Oxford and hearing the Third Symphony (1951) played on the piano by Wellesz accompanied by the composer's foot-stamping and singing!

Symphony no 2 – a case study

It is fair to say that the early symphonies of Wellesz emulate many of Bruckner's symphonic methods. Arguably, Wellesz's Second Symphony (1948) demonstrates the Bruckner influence at its most acute. The first movement has three themes to its Exposition, the first of which actually resembles the opening theme of the Finale of Bruckner's Fourth Symphony (both employ wide falling intervals emerging from monolithic mists). The second theme is an espressivo molto cantabile melody for strings in the manner of a Bruckner Gesangsperiode, whilst the third theme is a creeping, slightly cramped motif similar in mood and character to the third thematic group of the first movement of Bruckner's Ninth. Again, in harmony with Bruckner's own methods, this third theme has already been hinted at in previous material (bar 29). In the Development section (from bar 86) Wellesz ruminates on previous themes, a favourite



formal device of Bruckner's at this stage in his symphonies. Bars 98-101 incorporate an inversion of the first theme - a typical Bruckner procedure in the development sections of his outer movements. In bars 226-233 of the Recapitulation the opening theme is repeated, transposed up a semitone - a classic Brucknerian device evident in virtually all his own Development or Recapitulation sections.

The Scherzo of Wellesz's Symphony no 2 (which looks even further back into the Austrian tradition - bars 54-61 remind us of the Scherzo of Schubert's Great C Major Ninth Symphony) has an amiably rustic Trio characterised by simple counterpoint. It feels like a second cousin to the Trio of Bruckner's Fourth, which is also replete with counterpoint.

The Finale has a fugato main theme, characterised by a certain academic rigour. One finds a parallel academic loftiness in the Finale of Bruckner's Fifth with its breathtaking double fugue. In bar 134 of the Finale, a theme from the Adagio returns - a favourite Bruckner device, designed to unify movements and create a homogenous quality in all his symphonies.

The scoring of the Second Symphony is echt-Bruckner. For example, tremolo strings feature in the violins in bars 386-395 of Finale). Most importantly, the "Bruckner rhythm" (a mixture of duplet and triplet in the same bar) is employed by Wellesz (eg the accompaniment to the second theme in violas and celli in the Development section - bar 133 onwards). In bar 188, the second theme of the first movement is transposed to E flat and a flute and violin descant appears over the theme, mirroring similar descants to Bruckner melodies. An example of this would be in the Recapitulation of the Adagio of Bruckner's Seventh Symphony where the first violins "wreath laurel leaves in the hair of the second subject" (Richard Osborne in his programme notes to the 1977 DG Karajan recording).

Contrapuntal devices such as inversion, augmentation and diminution are used throughout the symphony. As an example of diminution, the third theme of the first movement is telescoped on its last appearance into a final synthesis between the first and second themes). There are more stylistic similarities: for example unisons and chorales, Brucknerian fingerprints all, find their way into the textures of Wellesz's Second Symphony (indeed, the later Wellesz Symphonies also contain much unison and chorale-like writing).

However, it would be overstating the case to claim that the Wellesz Second Symphony was entirely under the spell of Bruckner's spirit. There are no long pauses in the work and hence one does not have the feeling that the symphony would be better off being performed in a cathedral (to allow the climaxes to fade naturally into silence) as one constantly does with the Bruckner symphonies! In fact there is a distinctly Mahlerian influence in certain sections of this work: in the Adagio, the themes are wide-ranging and searing and the second subsidiary theme of the Adagio is angular and march-like, inhabiting the same soundworld as the first movement of Mahler's Fifth.

Nonetheless, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the influence of the symphonies of Anton Bruckner loomed large over Egon Wellesz's early examples in the form. One cannot help feeling that at this early stage in his exile in Oxford the proud Austrian composer was somehow getting in touch with his musical roots, consolidating his mastery over the traditional Austrian Symphony as exemplified by Bruckner before turning to his old teacher and mentor Arnold Schoenberg for a symphonic model in his last great statements in the genre.

Symphonies 5-9

The last five symphonies of Egon Wellesz demonstrate a radical change in style. Whilst the Fourth Symphony (1952) basks in its Austrian pedigree (it is nicknamed "The Austrian"), the Fifth, which was written only four years later, shows how completely Wellesz has assimilated the Expressionist style of the Second Viennese school. The points of comparison with the Orchestral Pieces of Schoenberg,

Berg and Webern are so many as to make a convincing argument for Wellesz to be regarded as much as an Expressionist as a Serialist. Tone rows are certainly present in the last five Wellesz symphonies but they do not conform to the strictures of pure dodecaphony. For example, the start of the Fifth Symphony of 1956 includes tonal patterns at the outset and the melodic passages mirror the modal practices of early Eastern and Western chants.

When Wellesz was studying with Schoenberg (from 1904 to 1906), the latter was just about to enter this Expressionist period with such works as the Mahler-influenced First Chamber Symphony (1906). During the first lesson together of Wellesz and Schoenberg, the latter pointed out harmonic extremes in Strauss's "Salome". Wellesz later described this first lesson with Schoenberg as "an unforgettable experience" and it seems reasonable to regard the Expressionist leanings of his late symphonies as a mature reflection and assimilation of the teachings of his old Master. When Wellesz wrote his book on Schoenberg (the first biography to be published) in 1920, he covered only the Schoenberg compositions up to and including the Expressionist works. When the book was reprinted in 1971, Wellesz declined to add to it. His passionate writing in this book makes it very clear how important the younger composer feels these early works of Schoenberg's to be. Indeed, the Wellesz Symphonies 5-9 belong more to the Schoenberg of the Five Orchestral Pieces op16 than the Schoenberg of the 12-tone theory and it is this kinship with the archetypal Expressionist Pieces of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern which merits full attention.

A feature of the style of the Expressionist Pieces for orchestra is their use of pointillism. At the start of the Allegro giocoso of the Symphony no 7, for example, the first eight bars of the opening theme are made up of single notes first heard in the cellos, then the first violins, then flute, harp, oboe, trumpet, clarinet in C, bass clarinet and harp. Such extreme use of pointillism is akin to that of Webern in the central movement of his Five Orchestral Pieces op10.

Another fingerprint of the Expressionist works is their use of ostinati. In the final molto tranquillo movement of Wellesz's Symphony no 8, the timpani and basses in bars 52-58 and timpani in bars 66-69 provide a perfect example of this. The opening piece of Schoenberg's Five Pieces for Orchestra entitled "Premonitions" is characterised by this device in its bass lines.

The use of Klangfarbenmelodie or "ceaseless melody" in the Expressionist works is also taken up by Wellesz in his late Symphonies. An example of this would be bars 151 to 156 of the opening Andante moderato, energico from Wellesz's Symphony no 9, where important phrases are allocated to different instruments - the cor anglais has a falling 3-note motif, espressivo, followed by a 2-bar phrase on muted second trumpet and then a timpani and double bass rhythmic figure features before the strings enter Maestoso with the main theme. Such use of Klangfarbenmelodie harks back to the central piece of Schoenberg's op16 ("Colours: Summer Morning by a Lake").

Expressionist works provide many examples of the use of funeral marches: the late Wellesz Symphonies are no exception. Funeral marches, led by percussion, occur in bar 53 onwards (Lento) of the Allegro moderato, ma energico Finale of the Symphony no 5 and the start of the opening Langsam und schwer movement of Symphony no 6. The most obvious examples of funeral marches in the Expressionist period occur in the fourth of Webern's Six Pieces of Orchestra op6, the ending of the final "Marsch" movement of Berg's Three Orchestral Pieces op6 and the very opening of Mahler's Seventh Symphony (though all the latter's symphonies include a funeral march at some stage in their progress).

Other Expressionist fingerprints displayed by Wellesz in his symphonies include large melodic leaps, instruments played at extreme registers (ie in ranges where they can only play with great effort, producing a forced tone). The idea of perpetual variation which the Second Viennese composers strove for in their Pieces is also continued by Wellesz: the last symphonies are truly through-composed (eg the feeling of a "stream of consciousness" behind the flow of the first movement of no 8).

Scoring and Instrumentation

Throughout the symphonic cycle, Wellesz changes his orchestration to suit his developing style. For example, the Second Symphony (1948) is a Bruckner-sized orchestra:

3 flutes, 3 oboes, 3 clarinets in B flat, 2 bassoons, 4 horns in F, 3 trumpets in C, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, tambourine, bass drum and strings

Whereas, by the time the Wellesz Symphony no 7 was written (1968) the orchestra employed is one of Expressionist dimensions:

3 flutes (1 doubling as piccolo), 3 oboes (third doubling as cor anglais), clarinet in C, clarinets in B flat, two bassoons, 1 contrabassoon, 4 horns in F, 3 trumpets in C, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, xylophone, celesta, triangle, castanets, side drum, bass drum, gong, harp and strings.

The above instrumentations provide a strong counter argument to those who accuse Wellesz of not varying his orchestration throughout his symphonic cycle!

Wellesz deployed his large orchestras with taste and restraint, never clouding the textures and ensuring every note could be heard. In bar 49 of the *Molto tranquillo* Finale of the Eighth Symphony, for instance, the harpist has a single bar with two notes in it separated by a crotchet rest. This bar is marked "solo" with an exclamation mark after it. Clearly Wellesz is at pains to ensure that each note is heard in the orchestral texture since it plays a vital structural role as well as providing orchestral colour.

There is a wide range of stylistic effects on display in the Wellesz symphonies. For example, the first violin part in the central *Allegro giocoso* movement of Symphony no 7 employs the following: glissandi in bars 3-4, *sul tasto* in bars 45-49, *sul ponticello* from bar 51, *divisi* (*pesante*) in bars 67-73, muted and tremolo (*sehr ruhig*) in bars 88-90, *spiccato* in bar 102, playing with the wood of the bow in bar 113 and ending with a *pizzicato* in bar 121.

His writing is characterised by a transparency in instrumentation causing even works requiring the largest forces to possess a chamber-like texture in the manner of Mahler's late works. Wellesz manages to combine dense counterpoint with substantial unison passages and favours a linear approach in his compositional technique.

Conclusions

Wellesz's symphonies provide a synthesis of 19th and 20th Century Vienna eg the Bruckner and Mahler influences in numbers 1-4 and the Second Viennese School in numbers 5-9. They bring together both serial and non-serial procedures in the same movements and employ both tonal and non-tonal structures. Influences of other composers on Egon Wellesz are not hard to discern: as well as the Austrian Masters, Mahler, Berg and Webern, Wellesz also betrays the occasional leaning to the styles of Stravinsky, Bartok, and Hindemith, thus sharing his influences with the German composer Karl Amadeus Hartmann. Wellesz was also influenced by Bruckner and Debussy and these added influences create a kinship with the works of Nicholas Maw whose *Odyssey* of 1987 might be regarded as the product of a lifetime's admiration of all the composers listed above.

Wellesz was a generous and encouraging teacher, as his ex-pupil John Veale testifies, imploring aspiring composers to be true to their own style even though it could be the very antithesis of his own. In letters to his publisher Herbert Vogg, Wellesz revealed himself to be an implacable opponent of the avant-garde which emerged after the Second World War. He denounced the principles of the Darmstadt school, scarcely acknowledging the products of the school as music. Surprisingly, John Veale reveals

that Wellesz was not a great admirer of Webern, regarding him as a mildly intriguing miniaturist, though the influence of the older composer is as clear as that of Schoenberg in Wellesz's last five symphonies. Wellesz despised Sibelius, claiming that the Finnish composer had only written sketches for symphonies. He had absolutely no interest in contemporary British figures such as Britten, Tippett or Walton (or, it must be said any discernible appetite for British composers from any period). John Veale describes his attitude to British composers as "supercilious", his mission seeming to be to attempt to teach the poor benighted Philistines surrounding him in Oxford what culture was all about.

Egon Wellesz was a perennial outsider. Living out the last thirty-six years of his life in exile as a permanent resident in Oxford, Egon Wellesz was a foreigner in the midst of a culture wholly alien to him. He remained emotionally attached to the country of his birth all his life and was deeply disappointed when the Austrians did not invite him back after the end of the War. He lived in Britain at a time when other foreign composers resident in Britain did not often receive performances of their works. He had no champion, apart from Hugh Rignold who performed his Symphonies 5 and 6 with the CBSO in Birmingham in the late 1960s. His stylistic shift from the world of Bruckner to that of Schoenberg may have meant that he fell between two stools - not advanced enough for the Glock regime at the BBC but still too far beyond the tonal divide to belong amongst the "Cheltenham Symphonies". In Oxford he was more widely regarded as an authority on Byzantine Music than as a composer and as early as 1940 he was appointed to a Special Research Fellowship at the Oxford chair of Byzantine Music. He was also Editor of the New Oxford History of Music in 1946. Even his entry in Who Was Who spends more time on his academic achievements than his compositions. It is fair to say that the music of Wellesz has suffered several generations of neglect from the British Musical Establishment – a performance of one of his symphonies at the Proms seems as unlikely now as when Wellesz was alive, if not more so!

Nevertheless, there are some encouraging signs that Wellesz's achievements as a composer may yet receive some measure of recognition. Some of his works are now appearing on CD eg the Violin Concerto and Prospero's Incantations (ORFEO C478 981 A) and the Piano Concerto, Divertimento, Drei Skizzen, Eklogen and Triptykon (Pan Classics 510 104) see reviews. As the public thirst for Mahler abates (as it surely must one day!), perhaps the Second Viennese School will receive more performances. Boulez has done much to promote Schoenberg, Berg and Webern, for example and it is not inconceivable that other members of the Schoenberg circle may in turn receive due attention. Another recent phenomenon is the success on CD of other serial symphonists writing in Britain eg Benjamin Frankel, Humphrey Searle and Roberto Gerhard and this must surely rank as another positive sign.

Half-Hungarian, half-Jewish and wholly Viennese, Wellesz was, like Mahler, steeped in Europe's most venerable and yet cosmopolitan tradition of which his works form an important part. His nine symphonies constitute a last flaring up of the flame of the great Austrian symphonic tradition and at the same time a late example of the power of the Expressionist movement. Wellesz is the "Fourth Man" of the Second Viennese School and it is to be hoped that one day soon his music will be regarded with the same respect which the works of his venerated compatriots command.

Chronology

- 1934-36 Prosperos Beschwoerungen
- 1944 String Quartet no 5 op 60
- 1944 The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo
- 1945 Symphony no 1 op 62
- 1948 Symphony no 2 op 65
- 1951 Symphony no 3 op 68
- 1952 Symphony no4 op 70
- 1956 Symphony no 5 op 75

1965 Symphony no 6 op 95
1967-68 Symphony no 7 op 102
1970 Symphony no 8 op 110
1971 Symphony no 9 op 111

Recordings of all of Wellesz's symphonies are now available on the CPO label.

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