

The Symphonies of Anton Bruckner Revisited (2020)

by John Quinn and Patrick Waller

Introduction

In 2005 we published a selective survey of recordings of the symphonies of Anton Bruckner. The survey was updated in 2009 but since then, though both of us have continued to listen frequently to the composer's music, other commitments have prevented us from updating it.

In April 2020 a reader who had consulted the survey contacted JQ to enquire whether the absence of many references to the cycle conducted by Simone Young implied disapproval. In fact, the reason that Ms Young's recordings did not feature in our 2009 update was that up to that point neither of us had heard much of her work – most of the performances were issued later. However, the enquiry has prompted us to put together an update of the survey. We have reviewed the original text and we feel that most of our judgements on the individual recordings considered in 2005 and 2009 still apply. Readers can find the updated survey of 2009 [here](#).

Our joint recommendations in the previous article may be summarised as follows:

- Symphony No. 00 Tintner (1998)
- Symphony No. 0 Tintner (1996)
- Symphony No. 1 Haitink (1972)
- Symphony No. 2 Giulini (1974)
- Symphony No. 3 Haitink (1988)
- Symphony No. 4 Böhm (1973), Wand (1998)
- Symphony No. 5 Horenstein (1971), Sinopoli (1999)
- Symphony No. 6 Klemperer (1964), Haitink (2003)
- Symphony No. 7 Wand (1999), Haitink (2007)
- Symphony No. 8 Karajan (1988), Wand (2001)
- Symphony No. 9 Walter (1959), Wand (1998)

These choices merely represented what we believed to be the finest recorded performances we had yet heard; sound quality was not taken into account.

We also listed our personal top five Bruckner symphony recordings, in order of preference, which were:

PW: Günter Wand 8th (2001), Carlo Maria Giulini 2nd (1974), Giuseppe Sinopoli 5th (1999), Bruno Walter 9th (1959) and Karl Böhm 4th (1973).

JQ: Günter Wand 8th (2001), Karl Böhm 4th (1973), Jascha Horenstein 5th (1971), Günter Wand 4th (1998) and Herbert von Karajan 8th (1988).

We think it is appropriate to remind readers that our survey is mainly a personal view of recordings which we ourselves have heard. It has never had pretensions to being a full survey of available recordings. Just how gargantuan task this would now be can be gauged from the comprehensive discography available at abruckner.com. In April 2020 this showed that there have been around 400 different recordings issued of the Eighth symphony alone. Whilst quite a few of these would be very difficult to obtain, the [Presto classical website](#) lists well over 200 incarnations of the Eighth symphony available for purchase (albeit with some duplication) and these numbers are similar for

the other later symphonies. There have even been 14 recordings of the Study symphony, over 40 of the *Nullte* and 30 recordings of the last movement of the Ninth in various reconstructions.

In addition to opinions based on listening, we have often taken into account MusicWeb International reviews of performances of individual symphonies and provide links to some recordings which we have not heard ourselves. The list of releases continues to expand at a healthy rate and readers can find links to all Bruckner symphony reviews on MusicWeb through the [Masterworks Index](#).

Rather than cover the ground by symphony this time, the main body of the article is divided into sections by conductor in alphabetical order. This primarily covers what is new to each of us over the past decade, perhaps because it is a new recording, but also covers some older recordings recently reissued and those that may have been long available but have only recently made it into (or streamed through) one of our players.

In 2009, we included a section on downloading Bruckner, this being relatively new at the time. Since then the advent of streaming (and latterly at CD quality or above) has, for PW, greatly expanded potential access to recordings whereas JQ continues to prefer physical CDs. All the recordings we discuss should be currently available in some format. In recent times PW has used [Qobuz](#) for streaming and references to availability through streaming below apply to this platform as of April 2020. To give some idea of the current breadth of coverage on Qobuz, it contains at least 16 single conductor sets of nine or more symphonies as well as hundreds of individual releases. There is probably not much that was mentioned in our previous survey or this one which is not available there. And some other major streaming services appear to offer similar levels of coverage.

As one would expect, in some cases our views and recommendations have changed a little over time. Where a more recent release has caused us to revise our overall recommendation for a particular symphony, we comment on this in the concluding section. We would like to thank readers who contacted us about the article or posted on the Bulletin board for their comments. Further feedback and discussion via [MusicWeb International's Message Board](#) would, of course, be welcomed.

Recordings conducted by Volkmar Andreae (PW)

The Swiss composer and conductor Volkmar Andreae was the first to record all nine symphonies, in mono, in 1953. These were originally Austrian Radio recordings played by the Vienna Symphony Orchestra and broadly they covered editions with Bruckner's last thoughts. Restored and reissued by Music and Arts, the set was reviewed very positively by [Jonathan Woolf](#) in 2010. Like JW, I was glad to be able to hear these vital recordings and many will want to do so for their historical value. But I feel that there are losses as well as gains to Andreae's forthright approach and the orchestral playing is not at the highest level. Moreover, the sound, despite the quality of the restoration, is only average for the period. More than a decade since it was issued the set seems to be very pricey and quite hard to find on disc, and downloads are expensive too. It is available to stream and so, if possible, sampling is recommended – the **Eighth** (for which he uses the 1892 edition) and the **Fifth** symphonies are the ones to which I will return.

Recordings conducted by Rémy Ballot (PW)

In 2013 Rémy Ballot started a series of live recordings for Gramola in the Basilica at St. Florian, mostly with the Altomonte Orchester. It began with the [Third](#) and has proceeded on an annual basis since. So far this series has since covered the [Eighth](#), [Ninth](#), [Sixth](#), [Fifth](#), [Seventh](#) and [Second](#), all of which have been reviewed on MusicWeb. These are notably expansive performances which have brought comparison with Celibidache's Munich performances made three decades ago. If Bruckner is to be played this slowly it requires intensive rehearsal and consistently fine playing, and these performances rarely disappoint in that regard. The resonant acoustic adds to the whole experience and, generally, I have enjoyed listening to these recordings. Whilst the Eighth (which receives a

remarkably long drawn performance from the Upper Austria Youth Orchestra) uses the revised version of 1890, Ballot goes back to the first (and longest) versions of Third and the Second. Played at such tempi this makes for very long performances and I was least convinced by them, particularly the Second which requires a second CD, and for me the finale of this symphony does outstay its welcome. The Seventh might be counted the least controversial but I also found it rather soft grained in places. As other reviewers have suggested, the **Fifth** is the pick of the bunch and perhaps the place to start any exploration. All are available for streaming at present and I shall await with interest the release of the First and Fourth, although whether concerts can proceed there in August this year remains to be seen.

Recordings conducted by Michael Gielen (PW)

The Austrian conductor Michael Gielen who died last year recorded extensively for the SWR label and was accorded a substantial retrospective of releases to mark his 90th birthday in 2017. One of the boxes was a set of Bruckner's nine symphonies recorded over the period 1968-2013. A mix of studio and live recordings, mostly with the SWR Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden und Freiburg, Gielen's performances are generally flowing, middle of the road Bruckner and very well executed. An exception is the **Eighth** in which he adopted generally slow tempi, and the scherzo in particular was a plod. Here the first (1887) edition of the work was included although he had also recorded the more usual 1890 revision. The varying choices of editions in this set was frustrating to me: first versions of the **Fourth** and **Eighth**, middle version of the **Third**, last version of the **Second** and the Vienna revision of the **First**. So, whilst recognising Gielen as a significant interpreter of Bruckner, my CD shelves are instead graced by his Mahler set which I feel is a stronger contribution to his memory.

Recordings conducted by Bernard Haitink (JQ)

Many of Bernard Haitink's Bruckner recordings, mainly with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and the Vienna Philharmonic, were covered in our previous Survey. Almost without exception, we regarded them highly. In 2019, to celebrate the conductor's 90th birthday, his Concertgebouw cycle of the nine symphonies plus the *Nullte*, set down between 1963 and 1972, was reissued by Decca. This boxed set, which also includes the *Te Deum*, is contained on 10 remastered CDs, handsomely packaged. In addition, all the recordings are offered on a single Blu-ray Audio disc. These are excellent performances, though Haitink went on to surpass several of them later in his career. The remastering has brought the recordings up very well indeed and the sound is particularly impressive if heard on Blu-ray. I believe this is a limited edition but at the time of writing (April 2020) it is still available for just over £50 (Decca 483 4660).

In the years since our 2009 revised survey, a satisfying stream of new Haitink recordings of Bruckner symphonies has emerged, all stemming from live concert performances. With the London Symphony Orchestra, he gave a 2011 performance of the **Fourth** which was issued as an SACD by the orchestra's own label (LSO0716). More recently, the recording has been licensed to Alto (ALC1358) and it may well not be available any longer from LSO Live. I've not heard the Alto incarnation but I presume it's a CD. The performance is a very good one, with Haitink on magisterial form and obtaining committed playing from the LSO.

The same team performed the **Ninth** in 2013 and at the time of writing that's still available as an SACD from LSO Live. I commented on the performance in detail in my full [review](#) of the disc. I summed it up as "a gripping and magisterial reading that should belong in any serious collection of Bruckner recordings." Subsequently, I've heard the magnificent Abbado version (see below) and whilst that would now take precedence, I believe, I have not changed my overall view of what will be, presumably, Haitink's last recording of this work.

Haitink has also made live recordings of Bruckner for the BR Klassik label; on these he conducts the superb Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra. They gave a memorable reading of the **Fifth Symphony**

in 2010. My colleague, Terry Barfoot admired the performance, even if he felt that interpretatively both Karajan and Wand offered even more than Haitink ([review](#)). I know what he means, but this is still a considerable account of the Fifth and anyone wanting to hear Haitink in this symphony will find this single-disc release the preferable option.

There need be no reservations about Haitink's 2017 performance of the **Sixth**, again with the BRSO. Dan Morgan [hailed this](#) as a recording that "should be at the very top of your to-buy list." That was enough for me and I hastened to acquire a copy. It's a masterly performance in every respect. Haitink's conducting is taut and focussed and the BRSO plays superbly for him. It's possible that this will turn out to be the last Bruckner recording from Bernard Haitink, who retired in 2019. If so, this will be a fitting summation of his dedicated and consistent approach to Bruckner's music over more than fifty years. Writing in 2017, Dan Morgan summed up the performance thus: "Haitink may be in the late autumn of his life and career, but his new Bruckner Sixth basks in the heat of high summer. A remarkable achievement all round." I can only agree.

Recordings conducted by Eliahu Inbal (PW)

In the 1980s Inbal recorded a complete cycle for Teldec with the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra which has been re-released at budget price. This includes both the early symphonies and an early draft of the Samale and Mazzuca version of the finale of the Ninth, and so is as complete as possible. It was the first complete cycle to use only Bruckner's first versions at a time when they were rarely played. In the case of the **Second**, **Third** and **Fourth** symphonies, Inbal makes a good case for these versions and they certainly do not outstay their welcome.

Elsewhere, Inbal's interpretations are generally idiomatic but for me the slow movement of the **Fifth** is too fleet. Overall they do not really compete with the very finest, as Terry Barfoot's [review](#) of the Seventh suggests.

Recordings by Eugen Jochum (PW)

We commented previously, and not very favourably, on Jochum's Dresden set of the nine and I don't think I have heard it since. [Paul Corfield Godfrey](#) was, however, more enthusiastic when it was reissued by Warner in 2013. Jochum's earlier DG cycle, which dates from 1958-1976 and was split between the Berlin Philharmonic and Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestras, has many of the same characteristics – wayward but magical in places. I find the recorded sound here preferable to his later cycle and the **Fourth** in particular is a recording that I will return to.

Recordings conducted by Otto Klemperer (PW)

Klemperer's later Bruckner recordings, encompassing **Symphonies 4-9** were recorded for EMI with the (New) Philharmonia Orchestra and this has become available as a set. There is not much I could add to the extensive comments in Christopher Howell's [review1](#) and Terry Barfoot's [review](#). There seems to be a prevailing view that the **Sixth** (which was one of our top recommendations previously) is a great performance but the rest are too idiosyncratic (and certainly so in the case of the **Eighth**, which has cuts in the finale) and not Klemperer's finest Bruckner. An uncut version of the **Eighth** he made live in Cologne in 1957 is worth hearing.

Recordings conducted by Lorin Maazel (PW)

After making studio recordings of some of the symphonies, Maazel recorded a complete cycle live with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra over a fairly short period in 1999. Overall, his Bruckner seems to me more mainstream than his variable Mahler. With excellent playing and sound, and consistent choice of editions, this is a set to live with, although it is fairly pricey to purchase. Maazel

1 Christopher Howell has since written further [here](#) about the Sixth symphony and Klemperer's recording.

includes the *Nullte* and in the first movement here adopts the slowest tempo so far on record. For me this works and, overall, I think this is now probably the finest version of the work I have yet heard. Maazel is also very broad in the first movement of **Ninth** but when it is this well played I can live with that. The **Eighth** is a particularly fine performance and I also like the version he made of this symphony in Berlin for EMI.

Recordings conducted by Andris Nelsons (JQ)

Andris Nelsons has embarked on a cycle of the Bruckner symphonies with the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, one of the two orchestras which he currently leads. To date, the recordings have all been made live in concert.

The cycle was launched with the **Third Symphony**, recorded in June 2016 using the 1889 score in the Nowak edition. In my [review](#), I commented on the burnished sound of the Leipzig orchestra: “The *Klang* of the orchestra seems to me to be well-nigh ideal for Bruckner; it’s as if the players have the music in their blood.” Overall, I found Nelsons’ approach convincing, though he does exhibit a tendency to draw out some passages of secondary material at what some may feel is excessive length. The performance is very well recorded and the orchestral playing is consistently fine.

Nelsons followed up with the **Fourth Symphony** in a performance set down in May 2017. Nelsons opts to use the edition by Leopold Nowak of the 1878/80 score. There’s a great deal to admire in this performance, which is superbly played by the Leipzig orchestra, but in my [review](#) I noted, as in the Third, a tendency to slow down significantly to admire the view on several occasions. Nelsons certainly conveys the grandeur of the score and his performance is exciting at times. He may not give the whole picture but it’s still an impressive account of one of Bruckner’s most popular scores.

The **Seventh Symphony** was next to be issued in Nelsons’ cycle, His live performance dates from March 2018. This, I think, is the finest performance in his cycle to date. True, there are occasions when one might feel he loves the music a little too much but I found most of his tempo choices were judicious. I like in particular the way he manages to phrase the slow movement expansively and with expression whilst also maintaining momentum. As I observed in my [review](#), the recorded sound is superb, which only serves to enhance still further the magnificent playing of the orchestra. This is a considerable addition to the discography of the Seventh.

At the time of writing, the most recent addition to the Nelsons cycle is a two-disc set pairing the Sixth and Ninth symphonies. These performances were recorded live in December 2018 and, as in earlier volumes, Nelsons follows Nowak editions. The **Sixth** has a good deal to commend it but is let down by a controversially expansive view of the slow movement. True, the Gewandhausorchester plays very beautifully but I fear that there is insufficient momentum and as a result the structure lacks shape. Elsewhere, Nelsons is much better; his way with the first movement is very convincing and the Scherzo and Finale come off well also, though the phrasing of the Trio section in the third movement may be thought a bit fussy. Nelsons makes a good job of the **Ninth**, though I don’t feel he matches the achievement of Claudio Abbado in his magnificent, visionary performance from 2013 (see below). Though not as spacious as the Italian in the first movement, Nelsons seems to have the measure of it and, as I said in my [review](#), I admired his pacing and control. He also took me with him through the great vistas of the Adagio and here, above all, the sovereign playing of the Gewandhausorchester is deeply satisfying.

Nelsons still has five symphonies to go in order to complete his cycle, including the mighty Fifth and Eighth. Based on what I’ve heard to date, I wouldn’t rank him with the great Bruckner luminaries such as Haitink, Karajan or Wand. However, there’s much to admire in the performances issued to date and Nelsons has been marvellously served by the Gewandhausorchester and by the engineers.

Recordings conducted by Simon Rattle (PW)

Bruckner never seems to have been very central to Rattle's repertoire but he has so far recorded the **Fourth** and **Nos. 6-9**. He started in 1996 with the CBSO in the **Seventh** (a performance I haven't heard and which does not seem to be readily available at the moment), and continued in Berlin in 2006 with a Fourth that [JQ thought](#) was "work in progress". Then in 2012 he recorded a four-movement version of the **Ninth** with the BPO which has been reviewed by [John Quinn](#) and [Ralph Moore](#). More recently he has recorded the **Sixth** and the **Eighth** with the LSO, and an Eighth made in Australia is about to be released. The LSO Eighth is a DVD/Blu-Ray only release which I have not heard but [Terry Barfoot](#) found the performance impressive.

Rattle's **Sixth** was enjoyed by [Michael Wilkinson](#) but had a lukewarm reception from [Ralph Moore](#). It uses a new critical edition but it is hard to tell the difference² and my own view is similar to Ralph Moore's. That leaves the four-movement **Ninth**, which I feel is the finest Bruckner from Rattle yet and was, at the time it was issued, the most convincing rendition of the finale I had heard. The other movements are fine too and I find it interesting that the Adagio, seemingly deliberately, doesn't have the sense of an ending that you get with great performances of the three-movement version. A less valedictory feeling here is logical when there is more to come. Rattle's thoughts on making this recording can be found in this interview on [Seen and Heard](#). It is also worth mentioning that another four-movement Ninth conducted by Rattle in 2018 is contained in the BPO box discussed by JQ below.

Recordings conducted by Stanislaw Skrowaczewski (JQ)

Stanislaw Skrowaczewski (1923-2017) was actively conducting until very shortly before his death at the age of 93. He appeared several times as a guest conductor with the London Philharmonic Orchestra in the closing years of his career and three Bruckner performances which he gave with them have been issued on the orchestra's own label.

The first of these was the **Seventh**, performed in October 2012. As I pointed out in my [review](#), the version of the score was described as "(ed. Skrowaczewski) (1881-83 rev. 1885)". I can't enlighten readers as to what changes Skrowaczewski made to published editions but he does retain the Nowak edition's cymbal and triangle at the climax of the slow movement. Skrowaczewski's conception is spacious, at least as far as the first two movements are concerned. Indeed, his timing of 24:23 for the Adagio is longer than any recording I can call to mind, with the exception of the performance in his commercially recorded cycle with the Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Saarbrücken, where the movement plays for 24:46. There's plenty of life in the Scherzo and finale but the key point is that even when the conductor is at his most expansive, you never feel that the music is dragging. The LPO plays marvellously for him and this is a very fine a performance of the symphony.

In March 2014, Skrowaczewski was back with the LPO and this time the chosen symphony was the **Third**. Ostensibly, this was presented in the Nowak edition but buried away in the notes we find that once again the conductor had used his own, unpublished edition. In my [review](#) of the disc I indicated that I found Skrowaczewski convincing throughout the symphony and I stand by that view. The performance demonstrates this seasoned Bruckner conductor's ability to take a long view, both of individual movements and of the symphony as a whole.

When Skrowaczewski returned to the LPO's podium in October 2015 he selected the **Fifth Symphony**. I think I'm right in saying that on this occasion he became the oldest conductor to direct a concert at the Royal Festival Hall. Both the interpretation and the LPO's playing were warmly

2 Discussion on the [Bulletin Board](#) has indicated that Dr. Cohrs, who edited the new critical edition included, for the first time in any published edition, metronome marks that appear in the autograph score and are thought to have been inserted by Cyrill Hynais. This indicates a quicker opening tempo than has been used in most recorded versions of this symphony and appears to be the basis of Rattle's brisk opening.

received by two of my MusicWeb colleagues ([review](#)) and I'd concur with that. The Nowak edition is used. This mature, imposing performance is conveyed in good sound, though the DG sound for Sinopoli's 1999 version (see below) has far greater richness and more impact. Perhaps in part at least that reflects the respective acoustics of the Royal Festival Hall and Dresden's Semperoper.

All three LPO performances are distinguished, but there's much more of this conductor's Bruckner on disc, including recordings of the Third, Eighth and Ninth symphonies with the Minnesota Orchestra which we have not heard. Between 1991 and 2001 Skrowaczewski set down a complete cycle of the Bruckner symphonies with the Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Saarbrücken. The cycle ran to 12 CDs because it included not just the nine symphonies but also the F minor Symphony WAB 99, the Symphony No 0 in D minor, WAB 100, the G minor Overture and an arrangement for string orchestra of the Adagio from Bruckner's string quartet. In our 2009 survey, we referenced Patrick Waller's [2005 appraisal](#) of the set. He wrote warmly of the performances but was much less enamoured of a price tag at that time of £90. OEHMS have since reissued the set (OC 025) and it can be acquired currently for around £21, which makes it a much more attractive proposition.

Recordings conducted by Christian Thielemann (JQ)

Thielemann has been Chief Conductor of the Staatskapelle Dresden since 2012 and several of his concert performances of Bruckner symphonies have been issued on DVD.

The **Fifth Symphony** is available in a performance from September 2013. It's a distinguished performance, splendidly played by the Dresden orchestra. Thielemann takes quite an expansive view of the work overall but I found his way with the music convincing. That said, as I commented in my original [review](#) of the release, for some reason I felt this was a performance to admire rather than to love.

The **Sixth Symphony** was performed in September 2015. (I believe Thielemann has been in the habit of opening each Dresden season with a Bruckner symphony.) Once again, this is an impressive view of the music and it benefits from aristocratic playing from the Staatskapelle Dresden. Thielemann judges the first and last movements expertly and he shapes the Adagio with care and understanding. Full information is contained in my [review](#).

The **Seventh Symphony** is the earliest of these performances. It dates from September 2012 and the film preserves Thielemann's inaugural concert in his Dresden post. As in his other performances considered here, Thielemann divides the violins left and right, which is a bonus in my view, not least because such an arrangement then positions the cellos in the heart of the orchestra. The interpretation of the first two movements is very convincing; the pacing is very well judged and Thielemann's sense of line is excellent. However, as I commented in my original [review](#), I'm a little less sure about the remaining two movements. The Trio of the third movement is a bit too slow and moulded for my taste and the finale also contains passages that seem to be treated too expansively. The playing of the Staatskapelle Dresden is deeply impressive from start to finish. Incidentally, a 2016 performance by Thielemann of this same symphony is included in the Berlin Philharmonic Bruckner collection referenced below.

The [Dresden performance](#) of the **Eighth Symphony** which has been released on film was actually given a few months before Christian Thielemann formally began his association with the Staatskapelle Dresden; the performance dates from June 2012. It gave the Dresden public a very impressive foretaste of their new Chief Conductor. The interpretation is extremely convincing throughout but reaches its peak in the Adagio. Not only does Thielemann conduct this movement very well indeed but he also draws glorious playing from the orchestra. Indeed, the Dresden orchestra is magnificent throughout the performance. If you're looking for a film performance of this great symphony then you won't go far wrong here.

Recordings conducted by Mario Venzago (PW)

Swiss conductor Mario Venzago recorded Symphonies 0-9 for the cpo label over about a 5-year period, ending in 2015. Five different orchestras were involved but this cycle is pretty consistent in its approach. Venzago consciously tried to give us a different kind of Bruckner not, as some have done through use of unusual (or their own) editions, but by creating a different sound world. Orchestral forces are smaller than usual, vibrato largely eschewed, tempi generally fast and sometimes very fast. With low resonance acoustics this is the polar opposite of Rémy Ballot's approach (see above), but one that I suspect will be less likely to find favour with most Brucknerians. All the individual discs apart from the Ninth have been reviewed on this site and the reviews have been mixed. Links to these can be found in Terry Barfoot's review of the **Fifth** (apart from the **Eighth**). For me his conclusion there just about says it all: "Venzago misses the sense of awe, majesty and symphonic power that lie at the heart of Bruckner's vision". The perfunctory first entry of the chorale in the finale alone might be enough to convince you. This is definitely a cycle to try before you buy and the Fifth, the fastest uncut version on record, might be the place to start. If you can live with this then the rest of the cycle may appeal to you. But I really didn't enjoy Venzago's Bruckner and won't be returning to it.

Recordings conducted by Simone Young (JQ)

Simone Young recorded a complete cycle of all eleven of Bruckner's symphonies during her time as Generalmusikdirector in Hamburg (1999-2015). Wherever more than one edition exists Ms Young used Bruckner's original versions. All the recordings derive from live performances and throughout the cycle the playing of the Philharmoniker Hamburg is first rate. The recordings are presented on hybrid SACDs and the OEHMS sound is consistently excellent.

The early **F minor 'Studiensinfonie'** (1863) is done well but while it's valuable to have it included in an excellent performance and recording, it's not so interesting a piece that I'd want to hear it frequently. It's also not particularly good value for money as a single-disc purchase, since the playing time is only 41:59. See my [review](#) for a more detailed assessment. The **D minor Symphony No '0'** (1869) is rather stronger as a composition and I'd agree with [Terry Barfoot's view](#) that Simone Young and her colleagues make a good case for it. Once again, though, prospective purchasers should note that the single disc has a short duration of 49:41.

The **First Symphony** comes in the 1865/66 first or 'Linz' version. I enjoyed the performance a bit more than my colleague Stephen Francis Vasta ([review](#)), but it's true that there are better things elsewhere in the cycle. Indeed, one of those better things comes in the very next symphony. The **Second Symphony** was subject to copious revision but Simone Young lets us hear the composer's original 1872 thoughts, using the critical edition by William Carragan (2005). In my [review](#) of the disc I discussed the changes to the score that were made subsequent to Bruckner's first version. There's no doubt that the revisions tautened the structure. However, Ms Young makes a highly persuasive case for Bruckner's original conception. On balance, I preferred this to Georg Tintner's account of the same text. I was also persuaded by Young's account of the **Third Symphony** when, belatedly, I caught up with it. This performance uses the original 1873 score and I found much to admire in the performance. The orchestra makes a fine job of the first movement and I was convinced by the conducting too. I also liked the solemnity of the reading of the second movement. The impressive recorded sound gives the listener great clarity yet also presents an excellent overview of the orchestral sound. I guess, though, that some readers may prefer the revised 1877/78 version. That was the ultimate verdict of Gary Higginson when he [reviewed](#) the disc.

Simone Young presented the **Fourth Symphony** in the original 1874 version, which differs radically from the score with which most of us will be familiar. I covered the key differences in my original [review](#) of the disc and refer readers to those comments. In that review I said "seasoned Brucknerians will find this a fascinating listen but the more general collector should approach with a degree of

caution.” I stand by that statement. If you know Bruckner’s Fourth then you’ll quite often be caught unawares by what you hear on this disc. Yet you may well be stimulated, too, by gaining insights into the evolution of one of the composer’s most popular compositions. There’s no doubt that Simone Young and her orchestra make a very strong case for this version.

The **Fifth Symphony** was the last to be recorded; it was performed in March 2015, towards the end of Ms Young’s final season in Hamburg. It is worth readers consulting the [review](#) by my colleague Dave Billinge for two reasons. Firstly, he is very positive about the performance and interpretation - and I share his enthusiasm. Secondly, so far as I can see, this is only one of two among these releases – the other being the Seventh - that has been reviewed by someone who is set up to review SACDs using the surround sound option.

With the **Sixth Symphony** questions of which edition to use don’t arise for once; this symphony was not subject to significant revision. So, on this occasion Simone Young is playing the same text as everyone else. It can be a tricky work in terms of tempo selections but in general, as I said in my [review](#), I found Ms Young’s speeds were persuasive, though I parted company with her in the Trio of the Scherzo. Overall, though, this is a good performance and, as usual in this cycle, both the orchestral playing and the recorded sound are admirable. In the **Seventh Symphony** I admired the flow which Simone Young imparts consistently to the music; it turned out that my colleague, Dave Billinge was of similar mind when our [reviews](#), independently written, appeared together. I was particularly impressed with the conductor’s handling of the noble slow movement. This is a very successful issue.

Unexpectedly, I had the opportunity to see Simone Young conduct the **Eighth Symphony** live in Birmingham a few years ago when she deputised at short notice for an ailing Andris Nelsons. Greatly impressed by what I saw and heard that evening ([review](#)), I hastened to get hold of a copy of her recording of the work. As she has done throughout this cycle, Young presents the original version of the score, which Bruckner completed in 1887. The original score evidences many changes as compared with what we are accustomed to hearing in the familiar Haas edition and I give more detail about the differences in my [review](#) of the recording. Probably the most obvious difference comes at the end of the first movement which in the original version ends in a *fortissimo* major-key blaze. I suppose anyone who hadn’t heard the familiar revised version would be content with that, but how wise Bruckner was to revise his ending so that the movement concludes in subdued unease. In fact, that change was a masterstroke. That said, it’s interesting to hear the composer’s first thoughts on this and on the rest of the symphony. Young leads a splendid performance.

The penultimate release in the cycle was the **Ninth Symphony**, which rather disappointed. As I said in my [review](#), heard in isolation the performance is quite good. The trouble is that beside the masterly, searching account conducted by Claudio Abbado in 2013, Young’s interpretation almost always comes up short. It’s a classic case of the excellent being the enemy of the good.

But it would be a shame - and unfair – to end on a downbeat note. There is a great deal to admire in Simone Young’s cycle. In my review of the Seventh, I said this: “As I listened, I reflected that, having heard several of Simone Young’s Bruckner recordings, I’ve been attracted pretty consistently by her straightforward, thoroughly musical approach. The use of the word “straightforward” does not imply that the poetry and majesty of the music is not brought out - such is not the case – but this conductor seems to me to have a clear grasp of where the music is going and she is sensible and direct in the way that she lets Bruckner’s music unfold.” Since I put forward that view, I’ve heard the remaining releases in the set and I think the judgement holds good. I also salute Simone Young for her enterprise and scholarship in going back to Bruckner’s first thoughts.

This cycle has many merits, including consistently fine playing and engineering. Even so, it might not be a first-choice cycle because not every collector will want recordings of the original versions in

preference to the more familiar Haas or Nowak editions. However, OEHMS have now repackaged the cycle in a 12-disc boxed set at a much more advantageous price. Effectively, one could acquire the whole cycle for around the same price as three of the individual discs. That's a much more attractive proposition and it means that you can then afford to have the Young cycle alongside the more conventional editions, enabling you to compare and contrast at leisure. Details of the boxed set are given in the very positive [review](#) by my colleague Ralph Moore.

Berlin Philharmonic Bruckner cycle (JQ)

It's pertinent to mention this de-luxe release on the BPO's own label, which was released at the end of 2019. It contains the nine symphonies, all recorded live, under the baton of eight different conductors (Bernard Haitink is represented by two performances). The performances are offered on nine CDs, one per symphony, and there are also three other options for purchasers. The package contains three Blu-ray video discs and the entire cycle is also presented on a single Blu-ray audio disc. In addition, purchasers get a code which enables them to download the entire cycle in high-resolution audio. Inevitably, it's not inexpensive. However, the presentational quality is very high indeed. Also justifying the price tag is the peerless playing throughout of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. In terms of the interpretations, none will disappoint but, inevitably, some stand out more than others. For me, the highlights of the set are Herbert Blomstedt's distinguished account of the Third Symphony in its original version; Bernard Haitink's wise performances of the Fourth and Fifth symphonies; and, somewhat to my surprise, Zubin Mehta's traversal of the Eighth. I wasn't sure how successful Mehta would be in this music but I found a great deal to admire, especially in magnificent renditions of the last two movements. Full details of this set are contained in my [review](#).

Miscellaneous single symphony releases (JQ)

Claudio Abbado: Symphony No 9

This performance of the Ninth stems from live performances at the Lucerne Festival in August 2013. Abbado conducted the Lucerne Festival Orchestra, a hand-picked ensemble which he founded. As it turned out, the concert on 26 August was the last one that Abbado ever gave; he died the following January. However, it's important to note that this wasn't *intended* as a valedictory concert; the conductor had future plans at the time. Nonetheless, it turned out to be a fitting farewell. As I indicated in my [review](#) of the disc, this is a performance of enormous stature. The first movement is magnificently done and the Scherzo is no less fine. The Adagio is absolutely memorable. I commented "This is emphatically not an elegiac performance; rather, it's noble in character." The orchestral playing is peerless throughout the symphony and the recorded sound captures the performance impressively. At first hearing I summed up Abbado's Ninth thus: "There are a good number of top-quality recordings of Bruckner's last symphony in the catalogue. I think we can set sentiment aside and say that, judged solely on its musical merits, Claudio Abbado's final recording deserves to be ranked among the elite versions." Having had time to reflect, I would now make this exceptional and moving recording my first choice for the work.

Manfred Honeck: Symphony No 9

Manfred Honeck has been Music Director of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra since 2008. They have made a number of recordings for the American label, Reference Recordings, all of them stemming from live performances. They issued a 2013 account of the Fourth Symphony but I haven't heard that and so I can't comment on it, though it met with a varying reception from two of my colleagues ([review](#)). However, I have heard their 2018 account of the Ninth. Ralph Moore was generally welcoming, drawing attention especially to the "grandeur, dignity and sonority of the Adagio", which he thought "are the equal of any other recording" ([review](#)). I was equally impressed, especially by Honeck's compelling reading of the first movement. Whilst I wouldn't rank this performance above Abbado's, it's a considerable achievement, all the more so since the orchestral playing and recorded sound are both excellent.

Giuseppe Sinopoli: Symphony No 5

In our 2009 Survey PW commented as follows on Sinopoli's recording of the Fifth Symphony: "Amongst more recent recordings, Giuseppe Sinopoli's rendition from Dresden in 1999 stands out. Stated to be a live recording, and with excellent sound, there is no evidence of an audience but this reading is superbly concentrated and lacking in idiosyncrasy (perhaps unusually for Sinopoli)." In fact, this became, along with Jascha Horenstein's 1971 version, one of our two recommendations for the Fifth. The Sinopoli disc was deleted from the DG catalogue some time ago. However, it is one of many recordings which Presto Classical has licenced for to-order reproduction. Though the recording is now more than twenty years old, the DG engineering still sounds marvellous and it does justice to the resplendent playing of the Staatskapelle Dresden. Collectors wishing to obtain this fine version should [visit the relevant page of the Presto Classical website](#).

Miscellaneous single symphony releases (PW)

Pristine Classical has a reputation for excellent restorations of historic recordings and has quite a few conducted by **Jascha Horenstein**. I have yet to hear Bruckner's Sixth, a BBC studio performance with the London Symphony Orchestra from 1961, although [JQ has heard it](#), but was tempted to purchase the set of the **Eighth and Ninth** made in the 1950s for Vox with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra. This version of the Eighth was the first I ever heard and it remains a favourite of mine. I have listened as a CD quality download and compared it with the Vox CD, and the sonic improvement is indeed considerable. I had not heard the Ninth before and it is another admirable performance. Horenstein is fairly fleet in both outer movements but less so than Andreae whose recordings were made with the same orchestra in the same year. I strongly prefer Horenstein and for me it is a pity that he never recorded the complete cycle.

At the other end of the sonic spectrum is a recording of the **Fourth Symphony** recorded by **Osmo Vänskä** with the Minnesota Orchestra for BIS in 2009. This has been reviewed very positively by [Dominy Clements](#) and, to a large extent, I share his enthusiasm. We are used to hearing the 1878/80 version of this symphony (and occasionally the composer's first thoughts from 1874) but here we get the more controversial (i.e. how much was really Bruckner's intention?) 1888 revision in a new edition. There are quite a few recordings of an earlier edition of the 1888 version (e.g. by Furtwängler and Knappertsbusch) but this is now undoubtedly the one to hear. Whilst the differences are much less marked than between the first two versions of the symphony there are a few aural surprises, and I remain unconvinced that the symphony was actually improved by this revision.

As a listener who is interested to hear transcriptions (occasionally!), I should mention a chamber version of the **Second** released on Linn and conducted by **Trevor Pinnock**. This arrangement was made by Anthony Payne (of Elgar's Third fame) for twenty instruments including a piano. It was also positively received by [Dominy Clements](#) and I agree that the arrangement works surprisingly well.

Also of interest is the transcription of the **Ninth** for two pianos made by Karl Grunsky in 1911. This has been recorded at least three times and I have the version by **Till Alexander Koerber and Reinhold Puri-Jobi** made live in 2015 which also includes the reconstructed finale arranged by William Carragan. The performance is quite a remarkable feat, was released on High Definition Tape Transfers and has been reviewed positively by [Jonathan Welsh](#).

The first commercial recording of the **Study Symphony** (No.00) was released by EMI in 1972 with London Symphony Orchestra being conducted by **Elyakum Shapirra**. It has long been unavailable but was released in 2010 by [Klassik Haus Restorations](#) and also as a free download at [abruckner.com](#). This recording has a pioneering feel to it and, although the sound is a bit raw in places, I have greatly

enjoyed listening to this version. Tempi are on the broad side, certainly in comparison to Tintner, and Shapirra's approach more clearly foreshadows the mature Bruckner.

Three conductors who have completed cycles in the last decade or so are **Yannick Nézet-Séguin** in Montreal, **Jaap van Zweden** with the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra and **Marek Janowski** with the Suisse Romande Orchestra. So far I have only dipped a toe or two into these cycles, starting with Nézet-Séguin's **Third** which uses the first version of the work from 1873. Like [Ralph Moore](#) I found this recording from 2014 to be disappointing and for me it fails to make the case for this version. Much more to my liking is van Zweden's **Second** on the Exton label for which I share [Terry Barfoot's](#) enthusiasm. This series is quite expensive to purchase (on hybrid SACDs) but is available for streaming and I intend to work my way through it. I also hope to do likewise for Janowski's series made for Pentatone where again I was impressed by the sound (this is on also SACD and available for streaming at high resolution). So far I have heard the **Eighth**, noting that it was one of Lee Denham's recommendations in his recent [article](#) about this symphony. I too was impressed by the interpretation and playing, particularly of the very sweet-sounding brass. The (three-movement) **Ninth** in this series also struck me as a fine performance. Finally, I should mention **Gerd Schaller** who has made a complete series for Profil with the Philharmonie Festiva that has received positive reviews and which I intend to explore this further. He has recorded three different versions of the **four-movement Ninth**, including one he made himself (see [review](#)) and then a revision of it (see [review](#)). These recordings are discussed further in the next section.

The finale of the 9th Symphony

First we should refer the reader to Aart van der Wal's very interesting [MusicWeb Article](#) on the Finale of this work. Although this dates from around the time of our first survey this "completion" was not really on our radar at the time. In 2009 we wrote that "no front rank Bruckner conductor has yet recorded a four-movement version". Arguably, that has changed; two recordings from **Simon Rattle** and the three from **Gerd Schaller** alluded to above have been issued since. In terms of versions of the completion of the finale, if we ignore fragments and free composition, there are basically three that have been recorded (see [discography](#)), all of which have undergone revision. These are by Carragan (first recorded in 1985, last revised in 2010 and then recorded by Schaller), Samale, Mazzuca, Phillips and Cohrs, an early draft of which was recorded by Inbal in 1987, last revised in 2012 and used in Rattle's recordings, and Schaller whose completion dates from 2015 and was revised in 2018. They are, of course, all based on the same thematic material and involve some conjecture, and there are many differences between them.

PW has a generally catholic view of versions and editions of Bruckner's symphonies, being interested to listen to them all. Likewise, he is willing to listen to the finale of the Ninth or not depending on the conductor's preference. Whilst inclusion of the finale is becoming more common, most of the great recordings of the Ninth were made well before the completions matured to the extent that they now have. I know that some still view it as sounding like "bad Bruckner" but I would now disagree. The concept was there and enough of it was present to make completion reasonably valid (probably more so than for Elgar's Third, although less than for Mahler's Tenth). Being given the choice is positive, as is having top orchestras and conductors take it on. But there are several three-movement Ninths that I would put above the best four-movement versions and most of me feels entirely content when they reach the ethereal end of the Adagio. What I wouldn't recommend is playing Rattle or Schaller and then stopping after three movements. As to which of the completions is preferable from a listening perspective, I feel most convinced that I am hearing Bruckner by Rattle's 2012 performance of the Samale, Mazzuca, Phillips and Cohrs version. However, I have so far only heard the original version of Schaller's completion and was by no means unconvinced by it, or indeed by Schaller's recording of the Carragan.

JQ's experience of the four-movement completion has been limited to two conductors. I first encountered a 1998 recording by **Johannes Wildner** and the New Philharmonic Orchestra of Westphalia. This incorporated the edition of the finale prepared by Nicola Samale, Giuseppe Mazzuca, John A. Phillips and Benjamin-Gunnar Cohrs (1991, rev. 1996). I wasn't convinced by the finale and I had reservations about both the playing and conducting in the work as a whole, as I explained in my [review](#). It's fair to point out, though, that my colleague, [Ralph Moore](#) appears to have been much more impressed. Some years later, the four editors had done further work on the finale and the produced an updated edition, which was recorded live in 2012 by **Sir Simon Rattle** and the Berlin Philharmonic for EMI. I covered the editorial work in some detail in my [review](#). This time I was more convinced by the completion but I still felt that the finale's thematic material is not especially distinctive and that the movement appeared episodic. Recently, I experienced another Rattle performance of the four-movement version. This was a 2018 performance contained in the Berlin Philharmonic's boxed set of the symphonies referenced above. Rattle and the orchestra turn in another very fine performance but did nothing to dispel my doubts about the completion, as I indicated in my [review](#). If anything, the doubts were reinforced and I don't warm to the blazing affirmative conclusion which seems to me to be very obvious. Interestingly, I understand that the editors themselves admit that the last 109 bars of their completion are the most conjectural of all. On balance, I prefer to stay with the familiar three-movement torso, though I completely agree that if a conductor has chosen to record the four-movement version then one should listen to the whole thing and not stop after the Adagio.

Complete cycles

In 2009, the main contenders for a complete cycle we mentioned were those conducted by Haitink, [Skrowaczewski](#), [Tintner](#), [Karajan](#) and [Barenboim](#) (Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra). The latter now has three cycles to his name, having recorded one early in his career in Chicago and another quite recently with the Staatskapelle Berlin. Of the conductors discussed above, Maazel and Young can be added to this short list although, like Tintner, Young's use of the 1887 edition of the Eighth means that some supplementation would surely be required. As mentioned above, Skrowaczewski's excellent set is now much more affordable and perhaps a top choice for all 11 symphonies in one box. Haitink's and Karajan's have since reappeared with the option of high-resolution sound either as Blu-Ray audio or through streaming. For Karajan, only Symphonies Nos.4-9 are available to stream in high resolution (or to download). In both cases the improvement in sound quality is obvious and increases the desirability of these sets considerably. PW has always had some reservations about the clarity of the sound in Karajan's set but not when heard in this format.

So, at present, our main recommendations for a complete cycle would be Skrowaczewski (11 symphonies), Haitink (10) or Karajan (9) supplemented by Young or Tintner if you wish to hear editions with Bruckner's earlier thoughts.

Conclusion and recommendations (PW)

Over the course of the past decade I have changed my mind about which recording would be a top recommendation for about half the symphonies. Some of these are difficult judgements and mostly they have been made through re-listening rather than hearing something anew. The Shapirra **00** was new to me whilst my change of view on the Karajan Fourth is based on hearing it now in much better sound. Haitink's second Amsterdam **Seventh** has long been a favourite but was not available last time we wrote. Now it can be bought as a [Presto CD or download](#) or streamed. Carlo Maria Giulini's Vienna recording of the **Ninth** from 1988 has perhaps been the version of this symphony that I have listened to most and for me it has some special indefinable quality. No change at the very top of my favourites list – Wand's Berlin **Eighth** is still there in my estimation, although Karajan in 1975 and 1988 runs him close. But there is still a lot of listening to do and I would be surprised if my views didn't change further over the next decade.

My current top recommendation for each symphony:

00 Shapirra (1972); 0 Maazel (1999); 1 Haitink (1972); 2 Giulini (1974); 3 Haitink (1988); 4 Karajan (1975); 5 Sinopoli (1999); 6 Haitink (2003); 7 Haitink (1978); 8 Wand (2001); 9 Giulini (1988).

Conclusion and recommendations (JQ)

There have been some interesting new arrivals in the Bruckner discography since 2009. I've enjoyed the recordings issued to date in the Andris Nelsons cycle on DG and Simone Young's Hamburg cycle has a great deal to commend it. I don't for one moment underestimate the recordings of Georg Tintner but though I admire his work very much I must admit to finding him sometimes a bit austere. I find myself coming back again and again to the acknowledged Bruckner masters: Haitink, Horenstein, Karajan and Wand, though once I've had the chance to immerse myself properly in the Skrowaczewski on OEHMS it would not surprise me if his name were not added to that illustrious list. What distinguishes a great Bruckner conductor from a good one, I think, is the ability to take a long view and to think in (very long) paragraphs rather than sentences. Those four conductors demonstrate those qualities on a consistent basis.

Overall, I don't feel that my recommendations for each symphony have changed significantly in the last eleven years; the recommendations for numbers 6 and 9 are new.

My current top recommendation for each symphony:

00 Tintner (1998); 0 Tintner (1996); 1 Haitink (1972); 2 Giulini (1974); 3 Haitink (1988); 4 Böhm (1973); 5 Horenstein (1971); 6 Haitink (2017); 7 Wand (1999); 8 Karajan (1988); 9 Abbado (2013).