

Fridrich BRUK

ORCHESTRAL MUSIC, VOLUME FOUR
SYMPHONY NO. 15, REFLECTIONS
SYMPHONY NO. 16, THE RIVER DNIEPER

Lithuanian National Symphony Orchestra
Imants Resnis, conductor

FIRST RECORDINGS

'THE FANTASTIC FORMS OF NATURE': FRIDRICH BRUK'S SYMPHONIES NOS.15 AND 16

by David Hackbridge Johnson

The symphonies of Fridrich Bruk present an edifice of sound that, through the combination of a tightly knit organic technique of musical structure and a mind that responds to a world of triumphs and vicissitudes, marks Bruk as one of the most striking composers of symphonic form writing today. Formal procedures push and pull against an unflinching urgency of utterance in a way that can at times threaten the undermining of compositional 'good manners' – not for Bruk the easy way out afforded to someone blessed with mere technique (although he has that in abundance); rather, he seeks an artistic truth beyond the nuts and bolts of 'doing'. By inhabiting often discomfiting spaces in his symphonies, Bruk charts a sense of 'being' in works that taken together are a sort of testament to those traumatic episodes of the last century that have touched him and ignited the creative spark. In this way narratives of musical thought are moulded to extra-musical frameworks, both specific and non-specific – a method that gives a sense of immediacy in the face of history, a reaffirmed 'being' within the past that keeps events vivid before the listener. Previous volumes in the ongoing series of Bruk orchestral music released on Toccata Classics have given ample evidence of the connection between, to put it crudely, music and life. Volume One¹ brought the autobiographical Symphony No. 17, *Joy of Life*, and Symphony No. 18, *Daugavpils*, based on Latvian-Jewish folksongs and constituting a late protest against Tsarist pogroms and deportations. During one such event Bruk's grandparents were forced from their Latvian home, an atrocity of ethnic cleansing that serves as a personal and historic starting point for the composer and one that will chime with the stark reality of similar happenings in

¹ Released on Toccata Classics TOCC 0455.

recent decades. Volume Two² followed with three symphonies that form an aching arch of Jewish experience in the twentieth century, touching on ghetto life and the tragic story of Anne Frank. Volume Three³ consists of two symphonies of disappearance: Symphony No. 22, *In the Ocean*, encapsulates in churning textures the polluted oceans and their vanishing species, and in Symphony No. 23, *In the Ingrian Mode*, Bruk sets down, in an array of mysterious permutations on folksongs from almost dead languages, his desire to rescue cultures on the Finnish-Russian border that have recently disappeared.⁴ It would be difficult not to notice an overall theme that unites, if in suffering, so many of Bruk's works: that of exile. In his symphonies, where modal ideas are corralled by threatening dissonances and percussive outbreaks into 'holding zones' of musical compression, a metaphor of exile is suggested. Often in these pieces someone – an aged grandparent, a young Jewish girl, the believer of a forgotten faith – can be imagined as being told to move on, perhaps at the point of a gun. The turbulence of Bruk's orchestral textures is symbolic of human unrest, the paranoia of living in confined spaces waiting for the sound of boots on the stairs, the readiness to move at a moment's notice. Symphonies where beauty struggles to shine through a mask of fear.

It is perhaps no surprise to find the idea of disappearance and dislocation in this latest volume in the series: the second movement of Bruk's Symphony No. 16, *The River Dnieper*, is subtitled 'The Story of Chernobyl' and is a case in point [5]. An eerie toccata rustles before the listener with a chattering *concertante*-style piano part. The textures are fleeting, ephemeral, and only later in the movement are they subjected to a battering of heavy brass and percussion. One might be put in mind of the haunting photographs of Chernobyl taken a generation after the 1986 nuclear disaster that caused the evacuation of the entire population of the nearby city of Pripyat (where the river of the same name is a tributary of the Dnieper) – initially 53,000 people; later, over the course of many years, approximately 350,000 left the area. Scenes of abandonment, the rusting Ferris

² On TOCC 0543.

³ On TOCC 0645.

⁴ *Unustatud Rahvad* ('Forgotten Peoples'; 1970–89) by the Estonian composer Veljo Tormis (1930–2017) is a collection of six choral cycles which preserve the folksong heritage of six vanished ethnic groups from the same general area.

wheel, the buildings reclaimed by contaminated nature – all are redolent of the vanished population, many of whom had to leave everything behind in those first terrifying days. Thus Bruk's wild and disconcerting scherzo, as though the memories of the inhabitants are etched on these frozen vestiges of their city as their footsteps hurry away and the tendrils of other forms of life fill the vacated space.⁵

The symphony begins with a movement called 'The Interrupted Melody' [4] – an apt description of how much of Bruk's music functions. Certainly, one should not expect the uninterrupted flow of Smetana's *Vltava* – Bruk's river of choice is rather more silted and dammed, even though fully navigable. Significantly for Bruk's attraction to liminal and conflicted tropes, the River Dnieper is a transboundary waterway with all the political and social implications that term implies, threading its way through parts of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine before finding its end in the Black Sea. Needless to say, in times of conflict – as at the time of writing – the river can form a defensive line over which bristles the weaponry of opposing forces. In Bruk's soundworld there is little room for the glorious sweep that nature-painting affords. His river has rapids that hint at more than choppy waters – this is a river of history. In spite of the transnational course of the waterway, Bruk does suggest a Ukrainian focus for the work; the inscription on the frontispiece of the score reads 'Dnipro [the Ukrainian spelling of the river] is the longest, widest and most beautiful river of Ukraine. Its stream begins from western Russia.'⁶

Interlocking oboe and cor anglais melodies begin the symphony with celeste and percussion commentary. Flute and piccolo hint at faster flowing currents at 2:21 before a plaintive cello melody heralds a passage in rich parallel harmonies so typical of Bruk's style. The movement progresses via a series of short episodes that run seamlessly together in the manner of a rondo. The effect is of a free fantasia with immense culminatory flow rather than the rondo of the classical model. At 6:42 the trombones initiate a highly

⁵ Startling images of Chernobyl in 2019 were photographed by Cheryl L. Reed for *The Chicago Tribune*: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/travel/sc-trav-weekend-in-chernobyl-0416-story.html>. I am put in mind of other abandoned places: Tyneham in Dorset (discussed in Patrick Wright's *The Village that Died for England*, Faber and Faber, London, 2002) or the vast Mayan temples choking in the forests of Mesoamerica.

⁶ 'Dnipro on pisin, leivin ja kaunein; Ukrainan joki. Sen virta alkaa Länsi-Venäjältä' (both English and then Finnish texts are on the frontispiece of the score).

fraught section – one might imagine the river scything through the landscape. At 7:53 timpani, cymbals and triangle mark the central point of the movement, after which a solo clarinet line returns, reminiscent of the opening but altered in the manner of Bruk's organic processes. After another point of crisis, a *scherzando* episode ensues at 10:07. A solemn brass chorale at 11:18 introduces an element of calm before celeste and bassoon re-establish the mood of the opening with a mournful continuation courtesy of the cor anglais. The next section is full of shimmering cross-currents of melody and *tremolandi* strings. The coda begins (at 13:08) with barking dissonances from brass with woodblock. The final bars are vicious and violent, as if elemental forces were being let loose.

The aforementioned Chernobyl movement is followed by a section called 'The River Dnieper' [6] with the feel of an intermezzo. Percussion and piano feature in a continual dialogue of fleet-footed ideas: the river would appear to be in spate. A cor anglais is doleful amid a shimmer of strings (4:50) and a marimba bubbles as if from the depths (5:11). Typically, Bruk's themes emerge from each other in a curious form of musical parthenogenesis. At 6:53 a surprise: a recording of birdsong and water currents is melded with the rough *tremolandi* of the string section and eventually seething waves of river sounds eradicate the orchestra or rather subsume it into nature, creating an extraordinary and shocking sound-world that may put some listeners in mind of Gloria Coates and others in mind of Einojuhani Rautavaara's *Cantus Arcticus*, a work that also employs a recording of nature sounds. Only bassoon and bass clarinet appear to survive this onslaught (8:13). Cor anglais and solo strings take up the lament. The music seems to have weathered the cataclysm of nature, reaching the safety of the riverbank in a state of exhaustion.

The fourth and final movement of the symphony [7] gathers at once the combative elements that have always sought to interrupt Bruk's melodies. Strings intone a unison G, as tubular bells invoke not so much the suggestion of a religious element but something more sinister, even animistic (0:54). From this severe rhetoric the piano takes flight in a flurry of chromatic figuration (1:31), initiating another *scherzando* episode. At 2:26 the strings begin a plaintive contrapuntal section, with the parts soon collapsing into Bruk's

favoured parallel dissonant chords. The voice of a solo cello attempts a lyrical statement (2:59) which is answered by the clarinet. The music seems to hover between beauty and terror as slithering harmonies often obscure any tonal stability – for example, the bassoon solo at 3:50 is underpinned by ominous *pizzicato* chords. When a solo trumpet enters at 4:27, a sense of energies being released is felt. A solo piano at 4:53 tries to establish an almost Brahmsian pool of intimacy amid these anguished textures. Wind soloists remain determined to speak their *cantabile* lines as forces gather for a final climax, with the bells returning at 7:11 – the whole orchestra seems now caught up in the vibration of bell overtones and the music finally achieves a clamouring A major chord with an added sixth – a shimmering resolution.

The symphony, which was written in 2016, twenty years after the Chernobyl disaster, seems to be best summed up by the subtitle of this fourth movement: ‘Storm and Enlightenment’, and yet the sense of enlightenment symbolised by the A major conclusion is hard won. Whereas Smetana’s *Vltava*, as part of his large-scale cycle of tone-poems *Má vlast*, can be seen as fulfilling the desire for a specifically Bohemian consciousness in the context of nineteenth-century nationalism, Bruk’s river seems to flow through the twentieth and 21st centuries with a rootless, fractured identity; a river that even today constitutes a fissile barrier between competing political and social ideals, and where armies are found straddling its waters. Bruk’s symphony is a protest against violence, but also contains an appreciation of the ability of nature to reclaim locations damaged by mankind’s depredations.⁷

Bruk’s Symphony No. 15, *Reflections* (‘Peilikuvia’ in Finnish), was written in 2015 and consists of three movements called simply ‘Reflection I’, ‘Reflection II’ and ‘Reflection III’. It is dedicated to the Finnish historian Martti Turtola, whose works include not only books on Carl Mannerheim (1867–1951), the Finnish soldier and statesman,⁸ and

⁷ ‘For example my observe about Chernobyl: I tried to express my sincere admiration – how Nature try to cover that terrible Incident. How Nature in the [fourth] part [...] rise own voice as a protest against violence’ – private correspondence from Fridrich Bruk to the author on 4 February 2023.

⁸ The most recent is *Mannerheim*, Tammi, Helsinki, 2016.

Konstantin Päts (1874–1956), the Estonian statesman,⁹ but also *Reflections: The Decades of Central Uusimaa*,¹⁰ a work that in charting the history of Uusimaa, the southernmost region of Finland, and its relations with the Kingdom of Sweden, Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, consists of exactly the kind of territorial contestation that again and again has stimulated Bruk's imagination. Turtola is also a music-lover, and Bruk admires his *I Love Sibelius – and Other Musical Confessions*.¹¹ Perhaps it is by keeping in mind the soundscapes of Sibelius that one can obtain a hint at an undeclared programme behind Symphony No. 15. Bruk, who has lived in Finland since 1974, has written that

Finland is a land of endless forests and vast lakes. The forests are omnipresent. You may be walking along a forest path and suddenly you come upon a small pool, clear and translucent, the water seeming to bubble up from its depths. The surface is as clear as a mirror and it throws back reflections of both the fantastic forms of Nature and of your own face.¹²

One might say, then, that Bruk reflects on nature and the self, or the relation of destructive man to his environment – a familiar combination in his work. He reveals that the music is programmatic but does not give specifics:

Symphony No. 15 *Reflections* is programme music making reference to a certain subject area while still allowing the performers complete freedom of interpretation. In programme music the name of the work is merely indicative, leaving space for the listener's personal view.¹³

There is nothing in Bruk's writing to suggest that autobiographical reflection is intended – no nostalgia is involved here. The first movement [1] begins with a curious and fragmentary set of musical ideas, in the manner of late Nielsen. A bass-drum rumble initiates the proceedings. A pair of puckish bassoons is prominent. The music

⁹ *Presidentti Konstantin Päts: Viro ja Suomi eri teillä*, Saga Egmont, Helsinki, 2022.

¹⁰ *Heijastuksia: Keski-Uusimaan vuosikymmenet*, Keski-Uusimaa, Helsinki, 2000.

¹¹ *Rakastan Sibeliusta – ja muita musiikillisia tunnustuksia*, Tammi, Helsinki, 2015.

¹² From the booklet note of F&N Bruk FBWBCD-17, Bruk's private release of this recording.

¹³ *Ibid.*

is highly contrapuntal, freely dissonant and ripples with Sibelian *ostinato* string figures. At 1:38 an oboe mimics the lyric gestures of a typical second subject, although as is usual with Bruk his structural concerns are more towards the concepts of fantasia or free rondo form. The bass drum returns prominently at 2:36, bookending the first large paragraph of the movement. The strings initiate a lyrical passage with the character of a gentle waltz. At 3:12 wintry sounds of *tremolandi* strings and keening oboe presage the first big climax of the piece, marked by a solo for tam-tam. The triple rhythm starts up once more (4:04) but is starved of its lyrical impulse. Bassoon and oboe ride over a faintly jazzy suspended cymbal and 'walking bass' *pizzicati*. A solo clarinet reflects on the lyricism of the 'second subject' before octave strings fuel a trumpet-led *tutti* passage. After such seamless activity Bruk instinctively knows when to apply the rhetorical gesture required to signpost the span of the movement – one such arrives at 5:17, where horns sail over dramatic chords played by the rest of the orchestra. As is so often with Bruk, the timpani and percussion play a role in the aftermath of the gesture, in the manner of a combative response. At 5:36 the tempo quickens and a fraught contrapuntal section leads to another climax, which is brutally cut off. The full orchestra begins to move in large waves of harmony before at 7:16 the wind and marimba playfully introduce a lonely cor anglais melody. Sliding chromatic string chords join the cor anglais. A noble trumpet theme at 8:54 brings about a climax from which strings in parallel thirds creep insidiously. From the dead leaves of rustling strings and the irregular heartbeats of the timpani, a grainy scherzo mood emerges that re-establishes the triple metre. Fearsome dissonance from the whole orchestra is interrupted only by the tam-tam, once again used as a structural marker. A flute sings wistfully from the desolation (10:40), but Bruk will not allow this supplicatory mood to take root. Gestures of violence this time leave a lone clarinet (11:36). The 'walking bass' returns and the strings dart in and out of wind soloists. The ending is as enigmatic as the beginning: a bassoon trill answered by a triangle – as if a nightmare had passed by, and yet all was somehow as before.

Reflection II [2] begins with sad string chords from which rise solo flute and bassoon. Triadic harmonies (think Vaughan Williams but with a Finnish twist) come clear of the chromatic thickets for the first time in the symphony; they begin to cloud only at 2:09 so

that by 3:00 a rough climax has smeared the pastoral of the opening with vast discords. A distorting mirror of the opening material then follows before the trumpet announces a yearful cello theme (3:52). This atmosphere of tremulous sorrow is extended by the oboe so that by 5:08 the brass instruments are compelled to an impassioned outburst by way of sympathy. The dissonant chords of 3:00 return at 5:30 and bring about an angular climax, with trilling wind and brass over the strident marching tread of the strings, a texture that recalls the more baleful pages of Shostakovich. The tempo picks up at 6:32, with the cymbal beats of the first movement returning. At 7:02 the timpani stimulate the orchestra to a wildly atonal passage before the tam-tam marker, again from the first movement, makes itself felt in no uncertain terms. The triadic pastoral opening is then recapitulated in altered form. As strings and marimba rise in pitch, a vista of uneasy beauty is glimpsed – like the mist rising from a hidden forest.

Reflection III [3] begins in the manner of a toccata, with all sections of the orchestra involved in garrulous interplay. The percussion is fully integrated into the body of players, performing a thematic and structural role as well as providing punctuation. The tam-tam (at 2:06) calls attention, as if some forgotten ritual were being enacted; in the wake of its overtones a clarinet, horn and glockenspiel make a kind of ‘second-subject’ lyric episode, but before long fierce chords break the spell (2:57). Parallel minor seconds in the trumpets crown the dissonance of this passage. A march strides threateningly over the landscape. A solo clarinet speaks after this fearsome display has passed (4:43), and a restless dance begins with the woody coloration of marimba and *pizzicato* strings. The strings condense the weight of a Mahlerian adagio at 5:58 before scurrying away to leave wind solos and a single violin. At 6:57 the tempo increases and textures change rapidly in a kaleidoscope of counterpoint that recalls the start of the movement. A trumpet sparks the coda with an angular jazzy line (7:48) which is in turn taken up by the bassoon. Hocketing trumpets over the full orchestra conclude the work in a defiantly optimistic G major.

David Hackbridge Johnson has written over 500 works, some of which can be heard on three recent Toccata Classics releases with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, Royal Scottish National Orchestra and Liepāja Symphony Orchestra, all conducted by Paul Mann. Lowell Liebermann has recorded an album of his piano music for Steinway. His most recent projects have been operatic: in 2021 Surrey Opera conducted by Jonathan Butcher premiered Madeleine, and in spring 2023 Welsh National Opera premiered his Blaze of Glory, to loud applause from critics and public alike. When not composing, performing or teaching music, he writes poetry.

Imants Resnis, born in Riga in March 1949, is a prominent Latvian conductor. He received his first international recognition in 1988, together with the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra, at the 'Prague Spring' festival. In 1992 he became the artistic director and principal conductor of the Liepāja Symphony Orchestra, a post he held until 2009. In 1993, he founded the International Pianism Stars Festival, which – now as the Liepāja International Stars Festival – takes place there in the second week of March every year, with the participation of musicians from different countries around the world. He conducted the Liepāja Symphony Orchestra in Germany, Malaysia, Spain and Sweden, and has visited Colombia, Mexico, Portugal and Turkey as a guest conductor, and in 2000 he performed in Egypt together with the Berlin Symphony Orchestra.



From 1956 to 1967 he studied cello at the Emils Dārziņš Music School, the specialist junior music school in Riga. In 1972, he graduated from the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music as a cellist, and in 1982 as an orchestral conductor, honing his conducting skills at the Tchaikovsky Moscow State Conservatoire with Gennady Rozhdestvensky. Since 1967, his music-making has been directly associated with the Latvian National Symphony Orchestra, first as a cellist and since 1987 as a conductor.

In both 1995 and 2006 Imants Resnis won the Latvian 'Grand Music Award', and in 2007 the newly established 'Latvian Music Award' for his systematic contribution to the creativity and popularisation of Latvian music. He was awarded a letter of appreciation from the Liepāja

City Council in 1998, was 'Liepājān of the Year' in 1999, and in 2006 he received a bronze 'Gloria Artis' medal for services to culture from the Polish government. In 2007 he was awarded the Order of the Three Stars for his services to Latvia, and in 2022 he received another Latvian 'Grand Music Award', on this occasion for lifetime achievement.

The **Lithuanian National Symphony Orchestra** (LNSO) has been active for over eight decades: it was founded in 1940 by the pianist and composer Balys Dvarionas. It has long represented Lithuanian culture abroad, appearing at various festivals and concert halls across Europe. In 2013 the LNSO performed in the ceremonial opening and closing of the Lithuanian Presidency of the European Council at the Klara Festival, Brussels, and at the Białystok Philharmonic in Poland. In 2018, in celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Restoration of the State of Lithuania, the LNSO performed at the Warsaw Philharmonic and the Konzerthaus Berlin under the baton of Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, and the Baltic Sea Festival in Stockholm with the Swedish Radio Choir, where an ambitious contemporary programme was conducted by Giedrė Šlekytė. The LNSO has accumulated an extensive repertoire, and its discography contains numerous significant examples of Lithuanian symphonic music. The leading Lithuanian conductor Modestas Pitrenas has served as principal conductor and artistic director of the Orchestra since autumn 2015.



Recorded on in September 2015 (Symphony No. 15) and in June 2016
(Symphony No. 16) in the Congress Hall, Vilnius, Lithuania
Producer-engineer: Laura Jurgelionytė

Booklet text: David Hackbridge Johnson
Cover photograph: Minna Jalovaara
Cover design: David M. Baker (david@notneverknow.com)
Typesetting and lay-out: Kerrypress, St Albans

Executive Producer: Martin Anderson

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FRIDRICH BRUK Orchestral Music, Volume Four

Symphony No. 15, *Reflections* (2015)

30:30

- | | | | |
|---|-----|----------------|-------|
| 1 | I | Reflection I | 12:24 |
| 2 | II | Reflection II | 9:30 |
| 3 | III | Reflection III | 8:36 |

Symphony No. 16, *The River Dnieper* (2016)

36:08

- | | | | |
|---|-----|-------------------------|-------|
| 4 | I | The Interrupted Melody | 14:01 |
| 5 | II | The Story of Chernobyl | 4:38 |
| 6 | III | The River Dnieper | 9:32 |
| 7 | IV | Storm and Enlightenment | 7:57 |

Lithuanian National Symphony Orchestra
Imants Resnis, conductor

TT 66:40

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