

Anton Bruckner
Trauungschor – Wedding Chorus
Zur Vermählungsfeier – For the Wedding Ceremony

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ABSTRACT – This paper presents two choruses by Anton Bruckner that are rarely included in the standard repertoire, *Trauungschor* WAB 49 and *Zur Vermählungsfeier* WAB 54. The analytical approach starts from Bruckner’s literary sources, namely the two Austrian poets Franz Isidor Proschko and Heinrich Wallmann, who were contemporaries of the composer. An overview of Bruckner’s work highlights the significance of these two choruses within the composer’s broader oeuvre, deeply rooted in the Catholic tradition and influenced by both Beethoven’s legacy and the Wagnerian style of the time. Details of these choral miniatures’ creative context and purpose reveal their socially cohesive role. The score analysis emphasizes the connection between the lyrics and the music, starting with the persuasive repetition of certain key words in the poetic text, and continuing with the choices of timbres and writing styles, which reveal lasting ties to the church music tradition and the Romantic choral one. The harmonic structure of the choruses, though differently conceived (more direct in *Trauungschor*, and more sinuous in *Zur Vermählungsfeier*), is governed by the harmonic relationship of the third. However, a thorough analysis of the harmonic fabric, still anchored in tonality, reveals Neo-Renaissance modal colours. The study concludes with the present-day reception of the two choruses, a phenomenon that clarifies the lack of popularity of this repertoire for male choruses, approached particularly by specialists. Personal performances by The Hilliard Ensemble and Philipp Sonntag are given as examples.

Keywords: Anton Bruckner, *Trauungschor*, *Zur Vermählungsfeier*.

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1. About the writers and the original texts

Both of Anton Bruckner's wedding choruses¹ are based on occasional texts written by Austrian authors. Franz Isidor Proschko (1816-1891) was a lawyer and police officer who left behind numerous volumes of historical and literary works (treatises, studies, poems, short stories and novels), for which he was decorated by Emperor Franz Joseph and even the Pope. At the time of composition of this piece, Proschko was serving in Linz, the city of Bruckner's early career.

The author of the poem underlying the other choral song, Heinrich Wallmann (1827-1898),² who wrote under the pseudonym Heinrich von der Mattig, was a military doctor in Vienna and an early promoter of cultural tourism in the Salzburg area. Bruckner also wrote a funeral song, *Nachruf*, to Mattig's verses (1877, WAB 81a).

Though written by different authors, the two wedding poems share similar images and expressions: the priest's blessing and the sacredness of the marriage covenant.

2. About the composer and his works

Anton Bruckner (1824-1896), organist at St. Florian Monastery in Linz, then professor of music theory at the Conservatory and University in Vienna (since 1868, while continuing his work as a church musician), was one of the most fervent Catholic composers of his time. His oeuvre includes seven masses, two requiems, motets, pieces with texts from the Psalms and other church pieces. The first wedding chorus (1865) is similar in musical language to the Mass in D minor, composed in 1864.³

One could say that church music was the "mother tongue" of Bruckner's compositions, surrounding him as he grew up at home and in church as a choir boy.⁴

Bruckner's choral works are also rooted in the Austrian traditions of male choruses.⁵

During his time, Bruckner's symphonism was compared to that of Brahms, with each of the two composers being regarded by their respective supporters as Beethoven's

¹ Although the two pieces (catalogued as WAB 49 and WAB 54) were composed and performed independently, we have chosen to present them together due to their similarities in content and musical language. See Grasberger, *Werkverzeichnis Anton Bruckner (WAB)*.

² Marktgemeinde Mattsee – Leben inmitten der Seen, "Heinrich Wallmann"; Wikipedia, "Heinrich Wallmann".

³ Zamazal, "Trauungs-Chor (WAB 49) «O schöner Tag, o dreimal sel'ge Stunde»". His father was the church organist, and his mother sang in the choir. He was orphaned from his father at the age of 13.

⁴ Based on an epistolary statement by the composer; Wald-Fuhrmann, "Geistliche Vokalmusik", 224-225.

⁵ Rentsch, "Weltliche Vokalmusik", 291.

successor.⁶ However, not only Bruckner's symphonism but also his ability to compose music with text was weighed against Brahms.⁷

His musical language and compositional techniques are heavily influenced by the style of Richard Wagner, whom he greatly admired.⁸

Returning to church music, we need to consider its socially cohesive role, along with the variety of occasions that gave rise to the unique characteristics of each of Bruckner's pieces.⁹ But it was precisely the broad basis of occasional religious music composed by the multitude of known and unknown authors of the time (even if they also benefited from an active editorial market) that caused Bruckner's pieces, like those of others, to sink into oblivion. Even though his pieces were increasingly refined – or perhaps for that very reason.¹⁰

Both selected pieces were written with the intention to resonate at the wedding ceremonies of some friends¹¹ – in Linz, in 1865, and in Klosterneuburg, in 1878, respectively. However, since the latter ceremony did not take place (due to the groom being Protestant and the bride Catholic), it remains unknown if, where and when the latter piece was performed at the time.

3. Analytical and subjective notes

Bruckner's compositional style in music with text does not illustrate the singular moments but expresses the unity of the affect¹² – which is also true in these miniatures.

However, the composer also uses repetition and fragmentation of the text to give key functions to certain poetic images and expressions, such as the priest's blessing of the "sacred covenant" (in both pieces), the "heavenly message", and the blessing prayer

⁶ Brüstle, "The musical image of Bruckner", 248-249.

⁷ Rentsch, "Weltliche Vokalmusik", 290.

⁸ Bruckner's first strong impression of Wagner came while listening to the "Pilgrims' Chorus" in *Tannhäuser*. Bruckner's 3rd Symphony (the first version: 1873) was dedicated to Wagner, who accepted the dedication. In the 7th Symphony (1883), Bruckner integrated the Wagner tubas into the orchestration, marking their first use in a symphonic work. The second movement, "Adagio", which he was working on when he received news of Wagner's death, is a funeral music. The Wagner tubas are also used in Symphonies Nos. 8 and 9 (Vazsonyi, *The Cambridge Wagner Encyclopedia*, 69-70).

⁹ Wald-Fuhrmann, "Geistliche Vokalmusik", 224.

¹⁰ Wald-Fuhrmann, "Geistliche Vokalmusik", 225. A situation somewhat similar to that of Franz Liszt's late church music.

¹¹ Offering such wedding gifts was a typical custom of the time. A famous example is Brahms's "Rhapsody for Alto, Male Chorus and Orchestra", based on a poem by Goethe, composed (1869) for the marriage of the Schumanns' daughter, Julie. Brahms composed another similar work: *Kleine Hochzeits-Kantate (Little Wedding Cantata)*, for Four Voices and Piano (1874; published posthumously, 1927).

¹² Rentsch, "Weltliche Vokalmusik", 291.

(in the latter piece). One can only sense that these pieces also hide the pain of a man – Bruckner himself – who was turned down at every marriage proposal he illusively made to very young ladies.

The timbre of the male vocal ensemble – combined with the organ and a *cappella*, respectively – gives the pieces a ritual-like solemnity. The writing style of the two works follows the tradition of the Romantic choruses for equal voices, using isorhythms as the predominant structural principle. However, there is a noticeable difference in the complexity of the discourse between the two pieces: while in *Trauungschor* WAB 49, bass 2 only occasionally detaches itself from the choral body, *Zur Vermählungsfeier* WAB 54 features much more prominent polyphonic moments, with separations between the voice pairs appearing right from the beginning and involving no longer only bass 2, but also tenor 1, for more variety, and with the peak of polyphonic density being reached during the imitative passages between the lower and higher voices, on the text “*auch mein Gebet ruft heute laut*” (in our translation: “also my prayer calls today loudly”).

On a harmonic level, the relationship of the third governs the two pieces, both pieces having a ternary form with recapitulation (massively varied and completed by a coda in the latter piece), in which the tonal centres of the sections circumscribe this relationship: in *Trauungschor* F major – D \flat major – F major, and in *Zur Vermählungsfeier*, D major – F# major – D major (the same interval – the major third – but in opposite direction).

<i>Trauungschor</i>	Text	1	2	2	1
	Music	A	B	evolution	A
		F	D \flat	enharm. D \flat	F
Male chorus, with organ	<i>tutti</i>	<i>solì</i>	<i>solì</i>		<i>tutti</i>

Table 1. Anton Bruckner, *Trauungschor* (tonal structure)

<i>Zur Vermählungsfeier</i>	Text	1	2	3
	Music	A	/B	//A \vee
		D	~ D \flat ~	F# D
Male chorus, <i>a cappella</i>				

Table 2. Anton Bruckner, *Zur Vermählungsfeier* (tonal structure)

The numerous text repetitions and subdivisions in the latter piece lead to musical expansions, which result in its division according to the *sectio aurea* principle (marked in Table 2 by / and //).

While the former piece is tonally more stable, with the only unstable moment occurring during the enharmonic modulation from D \flat major (while also briefly touching

on the key of E \flat) to F major at the end of section B (see Table 1), the latter features several tonal shifts, establishing its tonal centres over much smaller segments.

The choral unison is also prominently used in both pieces, with the former using it at the very beginning, perhaps evoking a sense of nostalgia for communal religious singing, and the latter using it to connect the end of the first section (D \flat major – already in a very tense tonal relationship with the initial D major) to the tonal pole of the middle section, F \sharp major, through an ascending chromatic scale (see Table 2).

Another observation is that, while in *Trauungschor*, Bruckner fully embraces the harmonic reflections of tonality (diatonic harmony, more restrained chromatic elements, typically in the form of secondary dominants and passing inflections), in *Zur Vermählungsfeier*, in addition to a bolder chromaticism, modal and neo-Renaissance colours, which Bruckner particularly values, make occasional appearances. A first tonally stable example would be the succession of triads in root position in D major I – IV – I – II – VI – III – IV – V – VI – V – I (measures 54-61), and, in a modulating harmonic context, the sequence of root positions A \flat – E \flat – F – C – G – C (measures 14-16). The “retro” inspiration is also evident in the use of 4-3-2-3-3 delays, adopted from the Renaissance style by later composers, and especially notable in the final cadence of the piece, as well as in the final plagal cadence, which is also rooted in earlier religious traditions.

Although *Trauungschor* has organ accompaniment and *Zur Vermählungsfeier* is performed *a cappella*, the musical content of the former piece is much more transparent, with the organ only providing the harmonic context for the initial unison moment, some harmonic punctuations and the transition to the middle section, while substantial musical passages are also handled entirely by the choir. Therefore, the organ appears to be more of a tuning support, especially during certain more problematic modulating moments.

4. Contemporary echoes

Bruckner’s reception in the early half of the 20th century was contradictory, with some perceiving the composer as “conservative” while others viewing him as “progressive”. Paradoxically, both opinions were justified, both technically and aesthetically.¹³

Like Wagner, Bruckner was promoted by the Nazi regime as an exponent of Germanness.¹⁴

As for the two choral pieces, they enjoy little popularity today, even in the German-speaking cultural space. Causes? – the decline of the male choral ensembles, as well as

¹³ Brüstle, “The musical image of Bruckner”, 259-260.

¹⁴ Brüstle, “The musical image of Bruckner”, 255-259.

the intonational and harmonic difficulties, particularly those in the latter piece. It can also be performed by solo voices, as demonstrated by *The Hilliard Ensemble*.¹⁵

In performances – especially in ceremonial settings – the pieces may be preceded and/or continued by organ improvisation. One such example – in which organist Philipp Sonntag integrates Richard Wagner’s famous “*Tristan chord*” as a symbol of love – can be heard in the former piece, alongside the “Bruckner” Male Choir conducted by Thomas Kerbl.¹⁶

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¹⁵ Zamazal, “Zur Vermählungsfeier (WAB 54) «Zwei Herzen haben sich gefunden»”.

¹⁶ Available on youtube.com.

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Scores

Anton Bruckner– *Trauungschor* (WAB 49)

https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/1/1c/IMSLP425610-PMLP691088-WAB_49_Trauungslied-Bruckner-TTBB-Org.pdf

Anton Bruckner – *Zur Vermählungsfeier* (WAB 54)

https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/6/60/IMSLP425611-PMLP691090-WAB_54_Zur_Verm%C3%A4hlungsfeier-Bruckner-TTBB.pdf

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