

Thesis of the DLA Doctoral Dissertation

Tamás Szarka

Defining Stylistic Characteristics in Anton Bruckner's  
Sacred Vocal Music

Supervisor: Salamon Kamp DLA

Doctoral School No. 28 in Art and Cultural History Studies

Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music

Budapest

2026

## **I. Background of the Research**

Just as the corpus of Anton Bruckner's oeuvre can be divided into two major parts, so too can the directions of research related to him be distinguished, both in temporal and professional terms. Upon hearing the composer's name, many people first think of his work in the symphonic genre; however, in the sacred music of the late Romantic era, he holds a role at least as significant as in instrumental music.

This emphasis is also reflected in the scholarly literature, as most studies and essays deal with the symphonies, their revisions, or the unfinished Ninth Symphony. Only a few have recognized the hidden treasures of the liturgical works; thus, during my research, I repeatedly encountered the same names when searching for information related to his vocal church music.

After discovering the oeuvre and thoroughly studying the accumulated knowledge surrounding it, I concluded that the liturgical vocal works first became the focus of greater interest at the turn of the twentieth century, shortly after Bruckner's death. After a brief hiatus, renewed attention emerged around the millennium, which continues to this day. A clear testament to this is the continuous publication of volumes and new studies. Furthermore, on the occasion of the composer's bicentenary in 2024, a Bruckner Year was declared, and in Austria numerous lectures and concerts related to him have since

been organized. During the jubilee year, several of his sacred compositions came to the fore, particularly his Masses and oratorios, but works from the core a cappella repertoire were also performed, helping to popularize this aspect of the composer's output.

In addition to the collected volumes mentioned in my dissertation, it is important to highlight the Bruckner-Jahrbücher series, which has published the latest research annually since 1980. Nevertheless, even in these volumes, literature concerning the liturgical works appears in relatively small proportion. I also found a lack of analytical studies that would examine specific compositions in depth, shedding light on phenomena that frequently occur throughout the oeuvre – in other words, elements generally employed by the composer.

## **II. Sources**

In writing my dissertation, a decisive role was played not only by the examination of original manuscripts and copies, but also by the use of editions, especially the complete editions. Since Bruckner prepared multiple versions of most of his works, it was essential to treat and distinguish carefully between sources written in the composer's own hand, copies produced by scribes, and those copies containing annotations by the composer himself – as can be seen, for example, in

the case of the Mass No. 2 in E minor. However, the final revisions presumed to represent the composer's last intentions do not always coincide with the material of the first editions, which can be traced back to the then-unclarified origins of the various available sources.

Fortunately, the composer's oeuvre is well documented. Thanks to the Internationale Bruckner-Gesellschaft and the Austrian Academy of Sciences (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften), nearly the entire body of his work is now accessible online. In addition to facsimiles and the fully categorized catalogue of works, one can access information that provides valuable context for any research related to him, whether concerning important locations, individuals, or performances of works by other composers that Bruckner himself may have heard.

I found numerous data and explanations in the collected correspondence, which, thanks to Andrea Harrant and Otto Schneider, was published in two volumes as part of the complete edition by Musikwissenschaftlicher Verlag. The same publisher issued the so-called Kitzler-Studienbuch, which helps us understand the development and importance of metric numbers, as well as the foundations of Bruckner's compositional thinking. Equally important for understanding metric numbers, structural organization, and formal design is the copy of Simon Sechter's textbook *Die Grundsätze der*

musikalischen Komposition that Bruckner annotated in his own hand, highlighting thoughts and rules he considered important.

### **III. Method**

The analytical approach formed the cornerstone of my working method. First, I collected all vocal works relevant to the topic. After thorough examination, it became apparent which compositional methods Bruckner generally employed.

This was followed by identifying the variation and application of these devices, the quotation and occurrence of musical materials he used, and their strict categorization according to different criteria. I aimed to ensure that the analysis would not be limited solely to harmonic aspects; therefore, I also considered formal elements, orchestration, the use of dynamics and articulation, and similarities in voice leading.

After defining these criteria, I broadened the scope of the analyzed works and, out of curiosity, examined compositions that are not liturgical—thus giving rise to the final chapter. In addition to selecting analytical aspects, I found it important to acknowledge that the composer's identity cannot be separated from his works; therefore, the dissertation also includes reflections and explanations that do not strictly fall under analytical methodology. This ensures a

comprehensive perspective on both the individual works and Bruckner's oeuvre as a whole. Questions arising during the analysis were often answered by these additional pieces of information and by shifts in perspective. For this reason, biographical data, excerpts from correspondence, textual interpretations and translations, as well as memoirs were included in the text to complement and support the analytical findings.

Beyond the analysis based on specific criteria, the dissertation also contains numerous comparisons. These proved essential both for clearly distinguishing between different versions of individual works and for highlighting the varied occurrence of certain aspects in other compositions, or even in works by other composers.

### **IV. Results**

The primary aim of my dissertation was to advance Bruckner research in Hungary and to present an approach that fills a scholarly gap – one that may offer valuable insights for both performers and musicologists, thereby bridging the divide between theory and practice.

In relation to the former, I found it important to draw attention to still unexplored areas of Bruckner's oeuvre. Many additional aspects remain that would allow for detailed examination of the

characteristics of his liturgical vocal music and for analytical study of the works belonging to this group.

The latter perspective may be particularly interesting for practicing musicians. Resolving anomalies such as the differentiated use of *marcato* and *martellato* accents, understanding the phrasing and shaping possibilities offered by metric numbers, and consciously constructing dynamic proportions all contribute to an authentic performance of the composition as envisioned by the composer.

To my knowledge, no study or dissertation has yet been written in Hungary that addresses this topic both comprehensively and in detail along these lines, and the international literature likewise contains relatively few works of this type. On this basis, I consider my objective achieved, and I hope that the dissertation will assist many musicians and bring them closer to Bruckner's unique oeuvre.

## **V. Activities Related to the Subject of the Dissertation**

During my many years of work as a conductor, I have had the opportunity to engage with Bruckner's vocal sacred works together with the Váci Harmónia Choir, the Budapesti Lantos Choir, and the Alma Mater Choir of the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music. I have rehearsed and performed numerous pieces from this repertoire with these ensembles