## **Bruckner on the Terraces**

ONE EVENING, one of those odd coincidences that come to us often occurred when I had just had a cause to look up a piece about Elias Canetti, the novelist who was interested in the study of crowd behaviour (See his *Crowds and Power*), when a Brucknerian acquaintance telephoned to say that whilst watching some European football matches he heard the chanting of the main Allegro theme of the first movement of Bruckner's Fifth Symphony. As I am not a football person I hadn't seen the matches and so had not heard this, and I can't recall

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any reference by any Brucknerians to such chanting in the past.

A simple theme it is but it seems there is no coincidence here. Indeed, there are numerous internet sites telling the story! And Bruckner may now even be one of the most popular, most played and most sung of composers around the world! The theme was a direct inspiration (from the symphony as far as one can tell) of the brother and sister rock duo, The White Stripes, and the tune is on the first track on their album called *Elephant*, released in 2003. The track is titled *Seven Nation Army* (Semi-acoustic guitar player, Jack White, states that Seven Nation Army is what he used to call the Salvation Army as a child.) When released as a single it reached #1 on Modern Rock Tracks, and it has been placed #8 by Q magazine in its list of 100 Greatest Guitar Tracks! Elsewhere it has been placed as #5 on the list of 50 Greatest Tracks of the Decade; also #21 on a list of the 100 Greatest Guitar Songs of All Time. Other accolades include the Best Rock Song of 2004. (One of the websites describes Bruckner as an Austrian giganticist!)

The song has an underlying riff, playing throughout, sounding like a bass guitar, but, it seems, actually created by running a semi-acoustic guitar through an octave pedal set down an octave, something like this:.



This is the Bruckner theme, here transposed to compare:



The White Stripes' riff is most reminiscent of Bruckner at the point when Bruckner repeats the opening two bars of his theme on woodwind seven times in the first movement coda (bar 455). Seven Nation Army became popular as a 'pump-up' song in American football and basketball as well as becoming popular at soccer games in Europe, then spreading around the sports world. By time the massed crowds are chanting it, the rhythm is simplified.

Who said the Fifth was never popular? But the story does bring up some interesting questions. Where did Bruckner himself find the theme? Was it a simple thought, quite arbitrary, or some inspiration from the subconscious? (We recall the theme in the Seventh Symphony which was supposed to have inspired by hearing it in a dream.) Or a derivation from a folk theme? If Jack White knew Bruckner's symphonies what led him to use this particular theme? (Any feedback welcome.)

It's quite astonishing to realise that this theme from the Fifth must have become, in recent years, one of the best-known and most sung and played themes from all classical music, being reflected in the world of popular rock music and in football crowds. Crowds have in some way visited one of the most powerful, yet at the same time most reflective, of symphonic works by default. And maybe not an insubstantial number have proceeded from the Seven Nation Army, to listen to the Bruckner's Fifth for themselves.

Raymond Cox

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Paul Dawson-Bowling, contributor and subscriber to The Bruckner Journal, has written

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