Symphony in C major ("Great")

Franz Schubert
Born in Vienna, January 31, 1797
Died there, November 19, 1828

The popular image of Schubert as a shy, neglected genius who tossed off immortal songs on the backs of menus is finally beginning to crumble. Given the rather limited professional opportunities available to a young composer in Vienna during the 1820s, Schubert’s career flourished and was clearly heading to new heights when he died at age 31, just 20 months after Beethoven. The first of the great Viennese composers actually born in the city, Schubert enjoyed the best musical education available, was a member of the Vienna Boys’ Choir, studied with Antonio Salieri, and gradually found his music being championed by leading performers of the time.

Yet the older picture of the neglected Schubert did register some realities. He composed many works, especially smaller ones, at amazing speed, and as a teenager might write four, five, six, or more songs in a single day. And although his music was widely published, performed, and praised, this considerable exposure was generally limited to domestic genres, such as songs, dances, and keyboard music. Only near the end of his life did Schubert’s piano sonatas and substantial chamber compositions begin to reach a larger public and audiences beyond Vienna. With some justification on either account, therefore, one can tell a happy story or a sad one about Schubert’s career. One can speak of a brilliant young composer whose fortunes were clearly ever on the rise, or of a pathetic genius who never received the full recognition he deserved before his untimely death.

Learning His Craft So, too, one can tell differing tales about his symphonies. None of them was performed in public during his lifetime. Very sad indeed. On the other hand, Schubert heard his symphonies played—it was not left for his inner ear simply to imagine what they would sound like in real time and space. If this situation seems paradoxical, it is because Schubert wrote most of his symphonies as part of a learning process and specifically to be played by small private orchestras at school or in middle-class homes.

His First Symphony dates from 1813, when he was 16, and the next five followed at the rate of about one a year. Schubert later discounted these initial efforts, as he did many early compositions. Around 1823 he was asked to supply a work for performance, but responded that he had "nothing for full orchestra that [he] could send out into the world with a clear conscience." Yet by this point he had written all but his final symphony, the one we hear today. Five years later, in a letter to a publisher, Schubert mentioned “three operas, a Mass, and a symphony," as if all his earlier pieces in those genres did not exist or matter. And in many ways, they did not.

Rivaling Beethoven And so the Ninth, one might say, is Schubert’s only complete symphony, the one he felt was fully mature and intended for the public. It was meant to be judged in comparison with Beethoven, the only living symphonic composer of real
consequence and the figure who dominated Viennese musical life throughout his career. Schubert revered him above all other composers.

Schubert prepared a long time to write his last and longest symphony, and not just by producing the six earlier ones (as well as various unfinished symphonies, including the “Unfinished” of 1822). In 1824, after more than a year of serious illness, Schubert wrote an anguished letter to one of his closest friends in which he lamented his personal and professional state. Near the end, however, the tone turns more optimistic as he discloses his career plans. Having failed in the world of opera, completely dominated by Rossini at the time, Schubert decided to turn with new determination to the Beethovenian realm of instrumental music—chamber, keyboard, and orchestral:

I seem once again to have composed two operas for nothing. Of songs I have not written many new ones, but I have tried my hand at several instrumental works, for I wrote two string quartets and an octet, and I want to write another quartet; in fact, I intend to pave the way towards a grand symphony in that manner. … The latest in Vienna is that Beethoven is to give a concert at which he is to produce his new symphony, three movements from the new Mass, and a new overture. God willing, I, too, am thinking of giving a similar concert next year.

The symphony he is paving the way for we hear today. The symphony of Beethoven’s that was about to be premiered in Vienna was the Ninth, a work that would leave its mark on Schubert’s own symphony.

During the next year Schubert continued to write chamber and keyboard music leading to his grand symphony, and he began to enjoy real professional success at the highest level in Vienna. Beethoven’s own chamber musicians, most importantly the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, took up Schubert’s cause and performed his works alongside the master’s in high-profile concerts. Then, in the summer of 1825, Schubert made the lengthiest, longest, and happiest excursion of his life. Together with Johann Michael Vogl, a famous opera singer who was the foremost interpreter of his songs, he went to Steyr, Linz, Gmunden, Salzburg, and Gastein.

Schubert informed friends that he was writing a symphony, undoubtedly the grand project for which he had been preparing. One of the most famous of Schubert legends is that this symphony is lost. Yet the so-called “Gastein” Symphony is none other than the “Great” C-major Symphony, which is traditionally thought to date from 1828. Not only is there considerable stylistic and circumstantial confirmation to support this claim, but also scientific evidence of the handwriting and watermarks of the manuscript. The issue is important because it shows that the generally optimistic and extroverted “Great” Symphony came from one of the happiest times of Schubert’s life and not from his darker and more introspective last year, shortly before his death.

“This, My Symphony” Friends report that Schubert had a “very special predilection” for his “Grand Symphony” written at Gastein. Certainly the scene of its composition was ideal. In
the longest letters he ever wrote, intended for his brother Ferdinand but never sent, Schubert described the inspiring beauty of his surroundings, particularly near the mountains and lakes of Gmunden, a vast expanse and majesty that is heard in the Symphony. Only Beethoven had written a longer and more ambitious symphony before this, the mighty Ninth, whose “Ode to Joy” theme Schubert briefly quotes in his own last movement. Although never performed in public during his lifetime, Schubert most likely heard the piece in a reading by the Conservatory orchestra. The Symphony was not premiered until 10 years after Schubert’s death, when Robert Schumann recovered the work from the composer’s brother and gave it to his friend Felix Mendelssohn to present in Leipzig.

A Closer Look The sights Schubert devoured during his extended summer trip in the Austrian lakes and mountains resonate with the majestic horn call that opens the first movement’s introduction (Andante). Schumann stated that “it leads us into regions which, to our best recollections, we had never before explored.” Lush string writing follows and leads seamlessly into the movement proper (Allegro, ma non troppo), which has more than a touch of Rossinian lightness. The opening horn theme majestically returns in the coda, presented by the full orchestra.

The magnificent slow movement (Andante con moto), in the somber key of A minor, opens with a lovely wind melody—first heard from the solo oboe—over one of Schubert’s characteristic “wandering” accompaniments. The theme is contrasted with a more lyrical one in F major. As in many of his mature compositions, Schubert eventually interrupts the movement with a violent outburst of loud, dissonant, agonizing pain, what musicologist Hugh Macdonald calls “Schubert’s volcanic temper.” Such moments, usually placed within contexts of extraordinary lyric beauty, may allude in some way to the broken health that intruded so fatefuly in Schubert’s life and that would lead to his early death.

The Scherzo (Allegro vivace) reminds us that, in addition to his songs, Schubert was one of the great dance composers of his day. (He wrote hundreds of them, some of which, in 1827 and 1828, were published in collections together with dances by Johann Strauss, Sr.). The vigorous opening contrasts with a middle section waltz before the opening is repeated. The finale (Allegro vivace) is a perpetual motion energy that only builds in intensity near the end, concluding what Schumann famously remarked is a piece of “heavenly length.”

—Christopher H. Gibbs

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