

Franz Schubert

Symphony in B minor, D.759, "Unfinished"

FRANZ PETER SCHUBERT was born in Liechtenthal, a suburb of Vienna, on January 31, 1797, and died in Vienna on November 19, 1828. The score of the two movements of his unfinished B minor symphony is dated October 30, 1822. A scherzo exists in fairly complete piano sketch; the first nine measures of the scherzo, fully scored, are on the reverse of the last page of the second movement, and there is an additional page of score containing eleven measures. The first performance of the "Unfinished" was given under the direction of Johann von Herbeck on December 17, 1865, in Vienna, with the last movement of Schubert's Symphony No. 3 in D, D.200, appended as a finale.

THE SCORE OF THE "UNFINISHED" SYMPHONY calls for two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings. Though long identified as Schubert's "Symphony No. 8," the work was renumbered as "7" in the 1978 revised edition of Otto Erich Deutsch's Schubert Thematic Catalogue (from which come the "D." numbers used to identify Schubert's works); to avoid the confusion this has engendered, we use no number at all, opting just for what you see at the top of this page.

Schubert's most popular symphony—the last of his eight symphonies to reach performance—is also the most mysterious. The fact of the work's incompleteness, combined with the expressiveness of the two completed movements, gave rise to endless speculation: why did Schubert abandon a work with so splendid a beginning? By the time he died in 1828, the manuscript was no longer even in his possession; it remained concealed for more than thirty-five years. The rediscovery and first performance of the *Unfinished* in 1865 was a revelation to all present.

The riddle of the *Unfinished* may seem less mysterious once we know that, following the completion of his Symphony No. 6 in C major, D.589, in February 1818, Schubert left a number of works incomplete, among them two attempts at symphonies that never grew larger than sketches or fragments. At some point after composing six symphonies, he seems completely to have changed his view of the expressive and technical requirements of the genre. Surely encounters with Beethoven's music left him dissatisfied with the kind of work he had written earlier. The fact that a majority of the uncompleted works are in minor keys suggests, too, that Schubert had difficulty finding a suitable ending to such works—especially after the example of such symphonies as Beethoven's Fifth, which seemed to struggle from C minor to its triumphant conclusion in C major.

The history of the manuscript is tied up with Schubert's friends Anselm and Josef Hüttenbrenner of Graz. Anselm had been a fellow student of Schubert's in the composition classes of Antonio Salieri in 1815. They remained warm friends, even after Anselm returned to Graz in 1821, while Josef, whose view of Schubert verged on idolatry, remained in Vienna. In April 1823 the Styrian Musical Society in Graz awarded Schubert a Diploma of Honor, probably engineered by Anselm. When the diploma was actually delivered to Schubert in September, he responded with a letter of thanks and the promise to send "one of my symphonies in full score." In the end, it was a torso—just two movements—of the B minor symphony that he gave to Josef for transmission to Anselm, Schubert having finished the manuscript of those two movements the previous October.

By 1865 the existence of the symphony was an open secret. All of Schubert's other symphonies (including the long-overlooked *Great C* major) had been performed; admirers of Schubert scoured Vienna, looking for lost pieces and finding many. Johann von Herbeck persuaded Anselm to part with the manuscript for a performance (partly by promising also to play one of Anselm's own pieces); the originality of the score, composed more than forty years earlier and never heard except in its composer's imagination, captured all hearers. The two movements are rich in Schubert's characteristic melodic expressiveness, bold in harmonic adventure, warm in orchestral color. In fact, the first movement contained an idea of such pungency that no less a musician than Johannes Brahms, who edited Schubert's symphonies for the Brietkopf edition of his complete works at the end of the nineteenth century, couldn't believe that Schubert intended it, so he edited it out of existence! (It has since been restored.)

The movement opens with a mysterious whisper in the low strings, soon made still darker by the soft tremolo of the violins' melody over the plucked *ostinato* in the basses. Soon oboe and clarinet sing a keening, lonely melody. At first the listener might take this for a slow, minor-key introduction to a symphony, but it soon becomes apparent that this is the very body of the work, establishing an entirely new kind of symphonic mood. The second movement brings in a bright E major, striking after the darkness of the first movement's B minor. Here, especially, the wonderful flexibility of Schubert's harmony leads us on a poignant musical journey that ends in mystery, with a sudden final skewing to a distant harmonic horizon left unexplained (though if Schubert had found a way to complete the score, the harmonic adventure would certainly have been clarified before the end).

When Schubert died so prematurely, the poet Grillparzer noted, "Music has here entombed a rich treasure, but still fairer hopes." Schubert never achieved his fairer hopes with the B minor symphony, but scarcely a richer treasure can be found anywhere.

Steven Ledbetter

THE FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCE of Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony was given by Theodore Thomas at a Thomas Symphony Soiree at New York's Steinway Hall on October 26, 1867, the first Boston performance following on February 26, 1868, at a concert of the Orchestra Union with Carl Zerrahn conducting.

THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCES of the "Unfinished" Symphony were given by George Henschel in February 1882, during the orchestra's first season, subsequent BSO performances being given by Wilhelm Gericke, Arthur Nikisch, Emil Paur, Karl Muck, Max Fiedler, Henri Rabaud, Pierre Monteux, Serge Koussevitzky, George Szell, Victor de Sabata, Charles Munch, Carl Schuricht, Robert Shaw, Erich Leinsdorf, Leopold Stokowski, Gunther Schuller, Eugen Jochum, Joseph Silverstein, Mstislav Rostropovich, Seiji Ozawa, Sir Colin Davis, Kurt Masur, Marek Janowski, Bernard Haitink, Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos (the BSO's most recent Tanglewood performance, on July 25, 2003, though Frans Brüggen led a more recent performance there on August 21, 2007, with the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century), and Christoph von Dohnányi (the most recent subscription performances, in April/May 2006).