

Schubert's Great C Major

Biography of a Symphony

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by

Mark DeVoto

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To Lewis Lockwood

Preface

I first heard Schubert's Symphony in C major, the one then usually numbered 9, in the spring of 1954, at a performance by the Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Charles Munch. It made an unforgettable impression on a boy of 14, whose familiarity with Schubert's music up to that time had been limited to *Impromptus* and *Moments musicaux* for piano, the famous *Marche militaire* in D major (D 733, no. 1), and the song *Du bist die Ruh*, D 776.

Since then I have studied the score of the Great C major in detail, given analytical papers, and spent many classroom hours dedicated to it, in addition to hearing various live performances and even playing it in arrangements for piano four hands and two pianos eight hands. Most of all, I have had the opportunity of increasing my understanding of the symphony by placing it historically and analytically in the context of Schubert's immense corpus of other works. Some of that effort is captured in this monograph, which I hope will be useful to the student and the general music lover as well as to the professional musician, whether performer, composer, or musicologist.

Chapter 6, in its original form, was a paper delivered at a meeting of the New England Chapter of the American Musicological Society, at Mount Holyoke College in September 1980.

Chapter 4 is adapted from a presentation at a symposium on the Great C major under the auspices of the American Schubert Institute, held at Brandeis University in 1996. To my fellow symposiasts from that occasion, Walther Dürr, Hali Fieldman, and Michael Griffel, I offer my thanks for their stimulating colloquy on that occasion, and trust they will also regard with affection the extent to which I have paid homage to their ideas in other chapters. This book comes too late for recognition by Henny Bordwin, founder of the American Schubert Institute and organizer of the symposium, who died in 2009; but my warm memories of her tireless efforts are still vigorous, and ratified by many others who were her friends and supporters.

I am ever aware, even years later, of the contributions of my graduate students who explored the Great C major with me. My work has been inspired by all of them. Here I particularly wish to mention Susan Grzesnikowski, Charlotte Lehnhoff, Patricia Mash, Joyce Moran, Robert Onofrey, S.J., and Judith Van der Weg, who helped me to increase my understanding of different layers of tonal structure that permeate the work.

Lois Grossman has been my faithful editor and critic for 37 years as I write this. She has driven me toward greater clarity and precision through any number of written enterprises, and this one especially. I am ever grateful for her

ongoing efforts. Despite all the technical jargon in this book, she has not been deterred in her pursuit of a symphony which she loves very much.

Ben Korstvedt of Clark University provided an opportunity to present a different part of this research at a meeting of the American Musicological Society, New England Chapter, a little more than thirty years after the first one. He also located some hard-to-find recordings which were very valuable for my work.

My daughter, Emily DeVoto, and her husband, Andrew Achenbach, have given me valuable and ongoing Schubertian encouragement. My other daughter, Marya, sings mostly French repertory but also knows and loves Schubert.

Otto Biba, director of the Archive at the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna, provided me an unforgettable opportunity to examine the autograph score of Schubert's Great C major, when I visited in 1980 while I was studying the newly-accessible manuscripts of Alban Berg, another lover of Schubert.

For assistance in various matters I am grateful, as always, to old friends who are loyal Schubertians, and among these I especially name Robert Bailey, Paul-André Bempéchat, Gregory Biss, Martin Chusid, Peter DeLafosse, Charles Fisk, Joel Lazar, Lewis Lockwood, Janet Packer, Sam Rechteris, Joshua Rifkin, Janet Schmalfeldt, Harro Stammerjohann, and Roland Vasquez.

Once again I am happy to acknowledge the cooperation and assistance of Claire Brook and Bob Kessler, who have supported my efforts and contributions in Pendragon Press now into a third decade.

George Nelson, my friend for more than 60 years, introduced me to the Great C major Symphony. I remember how he said, as we waited expectantly in Symphony Hall, "This symphony begins with a solo horn." We were both surprised that it turned out to be two horns in unison, but very much a solo. The melody rings in my ears as I write this.

11 May 2011

Medford, Massachusetts

Introduction

In contrast to the stern, challenging, beetle-browed visage that stares out from most portraits of Beethoven painted during his lifetime (1770-1827), surviving portraits of Franz Schubert (1797-1828) reveal him as a short, bespectacled, modestly bemused figure with a slightly chubby face, curly hair, and receding hairline, sometimes seated at a piano, where he might appear to be the unobtrusive accompanist in one of his own songs. For a century and more, standard histories of music identify Schubert totally with the Romantic *Lied*, or solo song with piano accompaniment, assigning him a central role in the growth of the art song, a genre that hardly existed before Beethoven. All the histories note that Schubert wrote some 600 songs before his death at the age of 31, and this vast corpus includes dozens of what are universally recognized as among the finest songs ever written.

Yet as a composer of instrumental music, Schubert is traditionally relegated to a lesser position, remaining always in the shadow of Beethoven's towering accomplishment after surviving him in life by little more than a year. Writers too numerous to count were content for more than a century to consider Schubert as a composer who constantly struggled with the problems of instrumental music and who failed to solve them more often than he succeeded¹—what better evidence than the B minor Symphony, with its soaring melodies like beautiful songs, assembled in a work that Schubert was unable to finish composing?

Especially since the publication of the first Schubert collected edition in the 1880s and 1890s, and more often since the more developed standards of criticism and analysis following the 1914-1918 War, it has become possible to establish a more balanced critical view of Schubert's instrumental music, one that substantially ratifies the admittedly effusive judgment of Robert Schumann, who more than any other individual of his time was responsible for extending a general appreciation and understanding of Schubert's art beyond his native Vienna. It was Schumann who, ten years after Schubert's death, visited Schubert's brother Ferdinand and obtained a score of the then almost unknown Symphony in C major that Franz Schubert had rightly regarded as one of his greatest accomplishments; it was Schumann who arranged for the C major Symphony to receive its first public performance anywhere, by the Gewandhaus Orchestra

¹E.g., G. B. Shaw, reviewing a London concert on 23 March 1892: "...[I]t seems to me all but wicked to give the public so irresistible a description of all the manifold charms and winningnesses of this astonishing symphony [the Great C major], and not tell them, on the other side of the question, the lamentable truth that a more exasperatingly brainless composition was never put on paper." *Music in London 1890-1894*, vol. 2, London, Constable and Company Limited, 1932, p. 53.

of Leipzig under the baton of Felix Mendelssohn;² and it was Schumann who wrote lovingly of the discovery of the new work in his own *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in an essay that has remained a model of critical esteem ever since.³

The main premises of this book are that Schubert wrote symphonies—not 104 of them, not 41, nor even just nine—that were at the center of his composer's imagination no less substantively than the abundance of his songs; that he developed his approach to the symphony simultaneously with his understanding of orchestral technique and style generally; and that his Great C major symphony, the climax of his effort in this genre, must be considered on an aesthetic and technical level with the greatest symphonies ever composed before him or since. It goes without saying that Schubert the song composer was the same man of genius as Schubert the symphonist, but it is just as important to recognize that symphonies are not songs, and that uninformed critical opinion has it all wrong in saying that Schubert, as a composer of symphonies, could do no better than string song forms together. And it is worth noting that Schubert, composing his last and greatest symphony at age 28, was two years younger than Beethoven had been when, twenty-five years earlier, he composed his *first* symphony.

Historians are fond of pointing to Schubert (as to Berlioz and Chopin, and many others) as an archetypal Romantic composer, especially because of the character of the man himself as presumably reflected in his 600 songs. But these same historians always point to Beethoven, above all, as the Romantic *artist*—as the composer who first made his career as a performer, like all other composers of his time and before, but who was compelled by advancing deafness to gradually give up performing, and who thereupon demanded that society support him exclusively as a composer. What is historically remarkable is that this demand was met. Not that Beethoven earned his living from selling copies of his compositions—rather, that his daily activity as a musician consisted of composing, and that he could sell the fruits of this activity to publishers, and—perhaps especially—that he could be exhibited to the world, and eventually honored by the world, as one who created original music. And because of this, enough money sooner or later came to Beethoven to provide a modest living, from aristocratic patronage, from concert proceeds, and even from publishers of music.

Schubert's case was mostly similar, but at a much more modest level. His training as a working musician was elementary. He was not a virtuoso performer.

²See Otto Erich Deutsch, "The Discovery of Schubert's great C-major Symphony: A Story in Fifteen Letters," *Musical Quarterly* 38 (1952), pp. 528-532.

³Robert Schumann, "Die 7. Symphonie von Franz Schubert," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 12 (1840), pp. 81-83; reprinted in Appendix Two to this book.

During his school years and as a member of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde he played violin and viola in orchestras, but in later years he performed only occasionally as a pianist, accompanying singers in his own songs. He had some early lessons with Salieri, who encouraged him, but in every important respect he was a self-taught composer. His daily hours were principally occupied with composing music, which he wrote at high speed and with a productivity that would be regarded as astounding in any age. Time that a virtuoso instrumentalist would have spent acquiring a repertory, Schubert gave to composing, and to the company of his friends. Ferdinand Hiller, half a century after the fact, remembered Schubert saying, "I compose for several hours every morning, and when I finish one piece I begin another."⁴ If Beethoven had little choice but to be assertive on his own behalf as a composer, his own ethics and actions in dealing with publishers and patrons have been both admired and criticized ever since. Schubert, by contrast, was generally reticent about promoting his own works. He was usually content to let his friends put them forward, and to accept what was offered, which frequently amounted to the rankest exploitation. It has often been pointed out how others grew rich at Schubert's expense even in his lifetime.⁵

Of the many composers who made their careers largely or entirely in Vienna and who made the Austrian capital world-famous for music, Franz Schubert was the first to have spent his entire life there from birth to death, traveling only occasionally and briefly to other parts of the Empire. Schubert never had a popular success in the opera house or the concert hall during his lifetime, nor, it might be argued, did recognition matter much to him beyond the approval of his immediate circle of friends. His work remained almost completely unacknowledged by the other composers of his time, outside of those whom he knew personally in the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde—although there is

⁴See Ferdinand Hiller in Otto Erich Deutsch (ed.), *Schubert: Memoirs by His Friends (SMF)*, New York, Macmillan, 1958, pp. 283, 284.

⁵For instance, Ernest Hutcheson, *The Literature of the Piano*, second edition, New York, Knopf, 1949, p. 134: "The sordid behavior of [Schubert's] publishers is one of the disgraces of musical history. Too well aware of his necessity, they saw in it their opportunity, and in their bargainings beat him down without justice or mercy. As his reputation grew they offered less and less for his works. Probst bought the E flat Piano Trio for less than one pound. Haslinger gave a florin apiece for some songs from the *Winterreise*. The memory of Diabelli should be pilloried in eternal infamy. This leading publisher of the time acquired the plates and rights of a number of songs originally published by private subscription for seventy pounds, pocketed near three thousand pounds from the sale of *Der Wanderer* alone, and persisted in exploiting the unfortunate composer throughout his short life with the rapacity of a vulture. In his youth Schubert was actually dependent on friends for music paper." This fine philippic is based on various writings of Schubert's friends and biographers, but notwithstanding the indignation it probably is not a great exaggeration of the truth.

no specific reason to doubt Schindler's oft-retold story of Beethoven, in his sickbed in 1827, joyfully discovering some newly-published scores of Schubert songs.⁶ Certainly Schubert must have been grateful that he could see a significant amount of his music published; but one doubts that he had much thought for the world at large, or for posterity, at any time in his career. A full decade was to pass after his death before his music became known much beyond the Austrian border, and then it was thanks to the effort of Schumann on behalf of the C major symphony that is the subject of this book. Recognition of Schubert's total accomplishment, in all its vastness and depth, took many decades to achieve full momentum, but it has never slackened since. Among all the great composers who died in the fullness of their compositional powers, it is Schubert whose early death, more even than Mozart's or Chopin's, that the world should most regret. No one knows what heights this 31-year-old genius might have scaled had he lived even one or two years longer. Some say that his radiant Viennese spirit, and his profound melancholy as well, were partially reincarnated in the music of Mendelssohn or Brahms, even in Chopin or Mahler; but for the strength and purity of his own work, the world knows only one Schubert, an emblem of his time like no other. Schubert stands alone; and the C major symphony stands alone in his achievement.

⁶See, for instance, in Deutsch, *SMF*, p. 307.