

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Franz Schubert – Symphony No. 8 in B Minor, D. 759 (*Unfinished*)

*Born January 31, 1797, Himmelpfortgrund northwest of Vienna, Austria.
Died November 19, 1828, Vienna, Austria.*

Symphony No. 8 in B Minor, D. 759 (*Unfinished*)

The manuscript of Schubert's B minor symphony is dated October 30, 1822. The first performance was given on December 17, 1865, in Vienna. The score calls for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, and trumpets; three trombones; timpani; and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-two minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Schubert's *Unfinished* Symphony were given at the Auditorium Theatre during the Orchestra's first season, on October 30 and 31, 1891, with Theodore Thomas conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performance was given at Orchestra Hall on February 14, 2006, with Daniel Barenboim conducting. The Orchestra first performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival on July 5, 1936, with Ernest Ansermet conducting, and most recently on July 1, 2001, with Christoph Eschenbach conducting.

We don't know why Schubert never finished his B minor symphony. This has been one of music's great unanswered questions for more than a hundred years, and, despite some intelligent speculation, we still come up empty-handed today.

At least we *know* that he didn't finish it. For many years, music lovers persisted in believing that the missing movements sat, forgotten, in some Viennese attic. On the other hand, scholars no longer suggest that Schubert intended to write a two-movement symphony, giving the composer credit for a bold stroke that, for all his daring, is not his.

The facts are scarce and mysterious, which has only heightened the intrigue over the years. There was no mention of this symphony made during the composer's lifetime. It lay buried, like hidden treasure, in Anselm Hüttenbrenner's cluttered study until the 1860s—more than thirty years after Schubert's death—when it was dusted off to take its place as no. 8 among the known Schubert symphonies.

The full score, clearly written in Schubert's own hand, is dated 30 October 1822, Vienna, and signed, with his characteristic flourish, Franz Schubert. The manuscript, headed "Symphony in B minor," includes two movements: a wonderful, singing Allegro moderato and a heartbreaking Andante con moto—both so sublime that the *Unfinished* nickname is all the more frustrating. On the back of the final page of the Andante are nine measures of a scherzo, fully scored, followed by four blank pages. In the 1960s, Christa Landon discovered a missing leaf that ought to have come before the empty pages, containing measures ten through twenty and then stopping abruptly, as if Schubert had been interrupted midthought. (A piano sketch of the symphony shows that Schubert had planned the entire scherzo and the beginning of a trio.)

We don't know what interrupted Schubert, but a number of theories have been proposed. This was, after all, a time of many unfinished instrumental works: from February 1818 to November 1822, he started and set aside three—possibly four—different symphonies. Late in 1822, Schubert contracted syphilis and began to suffer from depression and failing health. He also was nearly paralyzed by a growing awareness of Beethoven's extraordinary symphonic work—music that blazed new paths in an area in which Schubert felt the least assured. (Schubert often struggled with the compositional process, even though it's true that a song once came so easily to him that he jotted it down, fully formed, on the back of a menu.)

Perhaps Schubert was trying to face down the giant using the language they both understood best. He was always too shy to contact Beethoven, even though they lived in the same city for years. (When Beethoven was so deaf that he provided books for visitors to write down what they wanted to say, his nephew Karl mentioned, in August 1823: "They greatly praise Schubert, but it is said that he hides himself.") The two men met only once, when Schubert went to visit Beethoven on his deathbed with Josef and Anselm Hüttenbrenner, the brothers who already had Schubert's unfinished symphony in their possession.

When Schubert abandoned work on the B minor symphony, he gave it to Josef Hüttenbrenner, probably in 1823, after ripping out the unfinished scherzo. (The first nine measures remained simply because they were written on the back of the Andante.) At some point Josef gave the manuscript to his brother Anselm, who shoved it in the back of a drawer. (A Schubert score that

remained in Josef's possession—music for Goethe's *Claudine von Villa Bella*—was used by his servants as kindling sometime in 1848.) On March 8, 1860, in a letter to Johann Herbeck, an influential Viennese musician, Josef casually mentioned that Anselm “possesses a treasure in Schubert's B minor symphony, which we rank with his Great C major symphony, his instrumental swan song, and with all the symphonies of Beethoven—only it is unfinished.” Herbeck would never forget the morning some five years later when he actually held the manuscript in his hands.

The attempts to round off Schubert's score—as if two polished, magnificent movements were somehow unsatisfactory—began with the very first performance on December 17, 1865, when the finale of Schubert's Third Symphony was tacked on to ensure a rousing finish. Over the years, other endings have been proposed. (In 1928 the Columbia Gramophone Company even considered hosting a competition for the best completion of the *Unfinished* Symphony.) There have always been those who claimed that Schubert actually finished the symphony, and, as recently as 1942, it was suggested that Anselm Hüttenbrenner had lost the manuscript of the last two movements. Today, convinced by the evidence that Schubert's *Unfinished* Symphony was, in fact, never finished, we are more willing to accept the brilliance of what we have rather than long for what we do not.

Imagine the joy of uncovering one of music's true masterworks. Even Eduard Hanslick, as demanding (and sometimes as nasty) as any critic in the nineteenth century, quickly turned to butter when he reviewed the first performance in 1865:

When, after the few introductory measures, clarinets and oboes in unison begin to sound their sweet song above the peaceful murmur of the violins, then each and every child recognizes the composer, and a half-suppressed outcry “Schubert” buzzes through the hall. He has hardly entered, but it is as if one knows him by his step, by his manner of lifting the latch.

We now know Schubert perhaps best of all by that sweet song, and there are generations of schoolchildren who may never forget those unfortunate words—“This is the symphony that Schubert wrote and never finished”—that eager music teachers have added to the lovely cello melody that follows. The pathos and beauty of this entire stretch of music is extraordinary, but even more remarkable is the way Schubert sustains the spell throughout the movement and on into the second. Schubert's sketches show that he originally wanted to end his first movement in B major—which would have broken the mood—but he thought better of it, leaving us instead in the dark recesses of B minor.

The slow movement—and it is only relatively slow, for Schubert specifies *Andante con moto* (with motion)—is in the unexpected key of E major, where he would again uncover great riches in the *Adagio* of the C major string quintet. In this lovely movement, a few especially eloquent details stand out: the high-flying clarinet solo that gently sails over shifting chords, and a wonderful moment of total stillness, disturbed only by the octave call of the horn, just before Schubert leads us back to the opening.

And it is here, with this perfect *Andante*, that we must stop. Schubert's plans for the third-movement scherzo look promising—it begins with a strong theme, first played in octaves by the full orchestra. There is no telling what might have emerged had he polished this raw material into something as fine as the two movements we know so well.

For the Record

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Schubert's *Unfinished* Symphony in 1975 with Daniel Barenboim conducting for Deutsche Grammophon, in 1976 with Carlo Maria Giulini conducting for Angel, and in 1985 with Sir Georg Solti conducting for London.

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