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

Symphony No. 5 in B-flat Major, D. 485

Schubert completed this symphony on October 3, 1816, and it was privately performed later that fall in Vienna. The first public performance was given on October 17, 1841, in Vienna. The score calls for flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-seven minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Schubert's Fifth Symphony were given at Orchestra Hall on January 21 and 22, 1943, with Hans Lange conducting.

The first surviving entries in Schubert's diary date from mid-1816, just weeks before he began his Fifth Symphony. Schubert mentions Beethoven, Goethe, and Schiller; "the magic notes of Mozart's music"; the pleasures of a walk in the country on a hot summer's evening; and a party honoring Salieri. But there's only one passing reference to writing music—the uncharacteristic, pecuniary admission: "Today I composed for money for the first time." No doubt writing music was so commonplace for the young composer—so much a natural part of his routine—that it didn't demand further comment. By 1816 the nineteen-year-old Schubert had already written a lifetime's music, including 145 songs (many of them now considered classics) in 1815 alone. What Schubert did call attention to was the unusual fact that for once he was paid for what he did daily, and did with a consistency and brilliance that rarely accompanies such prodigality. Generous remuneration, however, was not steady in Schubert's life, and when he died only twelve years later—music's youngest tragic loss—he had little more than clothes and bed linens to leave behind.

Schubert began his Fifth Symphony in September 1816. He knew the orchestra from the inside—he began playing in the student ensemble of the Imperial and Royal City College at the age of twelve, and occasionally conducted as well. He wrote his first symphony for this orchestra in October 1813, at the same time he left the college to begin teaching in his father's school. (He was later accused of trying to evade military conscription; in fact, he was rejected for service because he was shorter than the minimum height of five feet.)

The symphony was finished in early October; unlike most of Schubert's orchestral works, it was performed almost at once by a private orchestra that met in the house of a friend. It's hard to imagine that the crowd that night didn't find it an enchanting work. It is, certainly, the best of the six so-called early symphonies—preceding only the Unfinished and The Great—although as Donald Tovey pointed out, "every work Schubert left us is an early work." It has always been popular, and it was known throughout the nineteenth century as the symphony without trumpets and drums (although it omits clarinets as well).

If you wanted to demonstrate the essence of Schubert's distinctive gifts, the opening of the B-flat symphony would serve perfectly, for its sunny woodwind chords, tripping violin line, and unforced melody demonstrate a natural talent that has never been surpassed. Yet for all the apparent ease and simplicity of its beginning, Schubert's first movement builds to a brilliant and complex development section, marked by a bold harmonic design and masterful polyphony.

In the slow movement, Schubert manipulates the tonal plan in a way that is totally his, dropping into a new key a major third lower for his second theme, to magical effect. If this music seems Mozartean, at least in its elegant theme, the third movement (labeled a minuet, but more of a scherzo) reminds us that the student orchestra in which Schubert played knew not only Mozart and Haydn, but also the first two
symphonies by Beethoven. The quick finale is unabashedly merry, a fitting conclusion to a work that admits darker thoughts but continually keeps them at bay.

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