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

Symphony No. 9 in C Major, D. 944 (Great)

Schubert began this symphony in 1825 and completed it the following year. The first performance wasn't given until March 21, 1839, in Leipzig, under Felix Mendelssohn. The score calls for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, and trumpets; three trombones; timpani; and strings. Performance time is approximately fifty minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Schubert's Great C major symphony were given at the Auditorium Theatre on December 18 and 19, 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 9, 1939, with Sir Adrian Boult conducting, and most recently on June 29, 2003, with Itzhak Perlman conducting.

The Orchestra recorded Schubert's Ninth Symphony in 1940 under Frederick Stock for Columbia, in 1977 under Carlo Maria Giulini for Deutsche Grammophon, and in 1983 under James Levine for Deutsche Grammophon.

When Franz Schubert died at the age of thirty-one, the legal inventory of his property listed three cloth dress coats, three frock coats, ten pairs of trousers, nine waistcoats, one hat, five pairs of shoes, two pairs of boots, four shirts, nine neckerchiefs and pocket handkerchiefs, thirteen pairs of socks, one sheet, two blankets, one mattress, one featherbed cover, and one counterpane [bedspread]. "Apart from some old music besides," the report concluded, "no belongings of the deceased are to be found."

Some old music, as it turned out, referred to a few used music books and not to his manuscripts. Those were with his dear friend Franz von Schober, who later entrusted them to Schubert's brother Ferdinand. No one, it appears, quite understood their value. In late 1829, Ferdinand sold countless songs, piano works, and chamber music to Diabelli & Co.—who took its time publishing them—leaving the symphonies, operas, and masses to sit untouched on his shelves at home. Finally, in 1835, he enlisted the help of Robert Schumann, then editor of the prestigious Neue Zeitschrift für Musik. The paper ran a list of "Franz Schubert's larger posthumous works" available for sale. There was little response.

On New Year's Day 1837, Robert Schumann found himself in Vienna and thought to go to the Währing Cemetery to visit the graves of Beethoven and Schubert, whose stones were separated by only two others. On his way home, he remembered that Ferdinand still lived in Vienna and decided to pay him a visit. Here is Schumann's own famous account:

He [Ferdinand] knew of me because of that veneration for his brother which I have so often publicly expressed; told me and showed me many things. . . . Finally, he allowed me to see those treasured compositions of Schubert's which he still possesses. The sight of this hoard of riches thrilled me with joy; where to begin, where to end! Among other things, he drew my attention to the scores of several symphonies, many of which have never as yet been heard, but were shelved as too heavy and turgid.
There, among the piles, lay a heavy volume of 130 pages, dated March 1828 at the top of the first sheet. The manuscript, including the date and a number of corrections, is entirely in Schubert's hand, which often appears to have been flying as fast as his pen could go. The work, a symphony in C, Schubert's last and greatest, had never been performed.

Robert Schumann was a thoughtful, perceptive man, and an unusually astute judge of music--he was among the very first to appreciate Schubert's instrumental writing--but it's difficult to know if even he, at first, understood the significance of his discovery. His well-known written account comes years later, after the symphony's first performances, but on that first day of 1837, in Ferdinand's study in a Viennese suburb, he must have been simply dumbstruck.

He knew a work of genius when he saw one, however, and he quickly sent it off to the director of the Gewandhaus concerts in Leipzig, where Mendelssohn conducted the first performance on March 21, 1839. There, in Schumann's words, it "was heard, understood, heard again, and joyously admired by almost everyone."

The facts argue that it was hardly "joyously admired," and that perhaps it was understood only by Schumann and Mendelssohn. In his boundless enthusiasm, Schumann fails to mention that it was extensively cut for the performance, but he is surely right in wondering how long it "might have lain buried in dust and darkness" if it weren't for his efforts.

Still, it was slow to conquer. When just the first two movements were programmed in Vienna later that year, an aria from Lucia di Lammermoor was wedged between them to soften the blow of so much serious music. Performances planned for Paris and London in the early 1840s were canceled after irate orchestra members refused to submit to its difficulties. The symphony reached London in 1856, but in odd installments: the first three movements were played one week and movements two through four the next.

Eventually, though, Schumann's verdict reigned, and he was recognized not only for his fortuitous discovery, but for his sharp-sighted assessment. Schumann spoke, famously, of the symphony's "heavenly length," the very quality many contemporary listeners found trying, trusting only Beethoven to stretch their patience. Schumann had an answer for that, too, insisting that Schubert "never proposed to continue Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, but, an indefatigable artist, he continually drew from his own creative resources . . . ." Like Beethoven, but in his own quite individual way, Schubert was forging ahead into music's dark unknown. Schumann demands our sympathies:

All must recognize that it reveals to us something more than beautiful song, mere joy and sorrow, such as music has always expressed in a hundred ways; it leads us into regions which--to our best recollection--we had never before explored.

The passage of time has helped audiences embrace both Schumann's enthusiasm and the extensiveness of Schubert's concept. Time and research also have put the work in its proper slot among Schubert's 998 compositions--the final count of Otto Erich Deutsch, whose indispensable catalog (1950) assigns a D number to each work. And we now know something that even Deutsch didn't realize: this is the supposedly lost symphony of 1825 (which Deutsch assigns number 849), sketched at Gmunden on a summer outing. Later, when Schubert wrote out the full score in fair copy, he dated the manuscript March 1828. To that, later generations added a subtitle, Great (to distinguish it from the shorter sixth symphony, also in C major), and Deutsch a number, 944.

As for the music, many earlier writers, including Schumann and Donald Tovey, have written eloquently and at considerable--if not heavenly--length of this symphony's greatness. Today the music more easily speaks for itself. Schubert's broad canvas is no longer thought oversized, and his peerless, ineffable way with a melody can carry the new listener through many difficulties. (Schumann is particularly reassuring in this regard: "the composer has mastered his tale, and . . . in time, its connections will all become clear.")

The first movement begins with an Andante of such weight and nobility that it's inadequately described as an introduction. That bold--yet quiet--opening horn call has a marked influence on many of the allegro
themes to come, and then returns, at the movement's end, loudly proclaiming its success. The entire Allegro reveals a sweeping rhythmic vitality unparalleled in Schubert's work.

The slow movement sings of tragedy, which later raised its voice in Schubert's Winterreise song cycle and surfaces again and again in the music of his last years. Seldom has Schubert's fondness for shifting from the major to the minor mode carried such weight; here each hopeful thought is ultimately contradicted, gently but decisively. There's a sublime moment when the horn, as if from the distance, quietly calls everything into question with the repeated tolling of a single note. And then later, Schubert, like Gretchen in one of his most famous songs, builds inexorably to a climax so wrenching that everything stops before sputtering back to life.

The scherzo and its lovely trio midsection, with their wealth of dance tunes, remind us that Schubert would gladly improvise dance music for others, while he, with his lousy eyesight and unfortunate height (barely five feet) sat safely at the piano all night.

Schubert launches his finale with the kind of energetic, fearless music that appears to charge onward with only an occasional push from the composer. But Schubert, like Mozart, is a master of deceptive simplicity, luring unsuspecting performers into countless pitfalls and allowing generations of listeners to cherish the image of the brilliant composer—all inspiration and no sweat.

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