



Concert

**Canongate Kirk
Saturday December 8th 2018
7:30pm**

**Franz Schubert
Symphony no. 8 (9) in C major D.944
*"The Great"***

Conductor: Andrew Lees

Retiring Collection

Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

Symphony no. 8 (9) in C major “The Great” D.944

I. Andante – Allegro, ma non troppo – Più moto

II. Andante con moto

III. Scherzo: Allegro vivace – Trio

IV. Allegro vivace

How to describe music of this calibre? In the first movement, a unison horn theme develops into an introduction which in its length and variation presages the scale of the work as whole. A dotted rhythm will prove significantly pervasive throughout the movement and expands into the main section, full of descending and ascending scales and rhythmic vigour. A folk-like theme on oboes and bassoons is followed by a variant of the horn opening, now softly and magically transformed on the trombones, a musical colour employed for the first time in this work, and which gradually develops ever more powerfully. The opening horn theme recurs *fortissimo* for the whole orchestra in the coda imparting a feeling of returning home after an epic journey.

The second movement starts as a measured march that underpins a lengthy oboe solo (again full of dotted rhythms), but the movement builds to a massive and dissonant climax, the reverberation from which is followed by a bar of silence, stunned string pizzicatos, and then an enchanting soft dialogue between cellos (in their high register) and the solo oboe.

The Scherzo third movement starts with pounding unison strings, reinforcing the power characteristic of so much of this work as a whole. The energetic theme skips around each instrument and instrumental group in turn. In contrast, the Trio sounds like a bucolic Viennese dance or song, its long-breathed woodwind theme accompanied by rhythmical strings.

The Finale is launched by a simple soaring fanfare for the whole orchestra. The music quickly develops an irresistible drive and exhilaration. After it climaxes, the horns, in unison (once again), repeat the same note four times to usher in a more rustic theme, but this, in turn, expands to immense proportions culminating in the C major jubilation of the coda...

...So far, so *un-revealing*. You have been told almost nothing that Schubert’s music does not articulate and communicate far more clearly, even at a single hearing. As discussed by Alan Walker (*A Study in Musical Analysis*, 1962), George Bernard Shaw set out to ridicule this type of writing in his spoof ‘analysis’ of Hamlet’s soliloquy ‘To be or not to be: that is the question’:

“Shakespeare, dispensing with the customary exordium announces his subject in the infinitive, in which mood it is presently repeated after a short connecting passage, in which, short as it is, we recognise the alternative and negative forms on which so much of the significance of repetition depends. Here we reach a colon; and a pointed pository phrase in which the accent falls decisively on the relative pronoun, brings us to the first full stop.”

For just such a useless descriptive ‘analysis’ of a major classical work, see for example Saint-Foix’s description (in *The Symphonies of Mozart*, 1947) of the opening of Mozart’s G minor Symphony:

“With no introduction of preparation, the composer plunges into his subject, hasty and uneasy. The theme is stated by violins alone, accompanied by *divisi* violas. On the second statement, the woodwind add some sustained chords; and the sequel to the first subject – really a second subject already in B flat – reaches the forte level ... the true second subject, indisputably ‘Mozartean’ in its chromaticisms, is in fact stated, by strings alone, after a complete bar’s rest.”

Contrast that with Leonard Bernstein’s riveting analysis of the same passage (which elucidates, on a deep structural level, not only how the music is put together but informs how it should be performed), delivered as part of *The Unanswered Question*, his Norton Lectures at Harvard (1973), just reissued on CD to mark Bernstein’s centenary.

I am, of course, not remotely competent to analyse Schubert’s ‘Great’ C major Symphony ‘à la Bernstein’, so please, if you wish, stop reading here and simply enjoy one of Schubert’s (and music’s) greatest masterpieces. Those of you who would like to know more of the background to the Symphony’s creation, please read on.

Schubert’s autograph for the ‘Great’ C major Symphony in the archive of the Vienna Philharmonic Society shows that the work was originally sketched in the form of a continuous outline score, only leaving the detailed scoring to be completed later. Schubert’s use of different coloured inks for different sections of the score and modern techniques for identifying different music papers make it possible to date the alterations (particularly radical in the outer movements and Trio) to between the summer of 1825 and spring or summer 1826.

Incontrovertibly, there is, therefore, nothing valedictory about the work. In 1924, when the Symphony was still thought to have been composed in 1828, the last year of Schubert’s life, the composer Albert Roussel had written: “That Schubert, a few months before his death could have planned and realised such a great work...seems incredible. Could it really have been an ailing man...who forged this flamboyant piece of brilliant orchestration?” Well, as we now know, it wasn’t: the ‘Great’ C major Symphony can now be seen as the culmination of Schubert’s long ambition to write a grand orchestral work comparable with those of Beethoven – Beethoven’s 9th Symphony, after a seven year gestation, had premiered in May 1824, with Schubert in the audience. Schubert sketched and wrote the ‘Great’ C major Symphony in his late twenties, certainly a ‘late work’ in terms of his short life, but by that age Beethoven was still only just beginning to contemplate writing his *First* Symphony.

There is what appears to be the date ‘March 1828’ on the first page of the score (there is no title page). However, the top of the date is cut off, so this could be a mis-reading for 1825 or even 1826 (Schubert commonly dated his scores when he started work

on them – dating them on their completion would have saved him a lot of ink over the years!). But it now seems most likely that it indeed says “1828” and was added later, perhaps at a time when, eight months before his premature death, Schubert hoped, once again, for a first public performance. As described below, this was not to be.

In contrast to Schubert’s preceding Symphony – the ‘*Unfinished*’ of 1822, intensely ‘private’ in its depiction of sadness and loneliness – the ‘*Great*’ is epic, expansive, celebratory and exalting. There are undoubted parallels with Beethoven’s 9th, not just in scale, but in the structure and energy of the Scherzo (anticipating Bruckner), the rustic Trio (again anticipating Bruckner), and in its intensification towards a last movement which (like Beethoven’s) is one of the grandest in the entire orchestral repertory. The Symphony appears to emerge spontaneously and fully formed, belying Schubert’s countless revisions (more numerous than for any other of his works), involving not just minor changes, additions and deletions but changes to some of the main themes, and a major rewriting of the coda of the first movement and the Trio.

Beethoven’s 9th is specific in the message of its finale (peace, freedom, joy, the brotherhood of man). Whilst it is probably not coincidental that the development section of Schubert’s finale begins with a woodwind theme reminiscent of Beethoven’s ‘Ode to Joy’ theme, Schubert’s Symphony is, rather, the early flowering of the Romantic ideal of Nature as the embodiment or mantle of God. The parallel is made explicit in the exactly contemporaneous Schubert song *Die Allmacht* – “Great is Jehovah the Lord, for heaven and earth proclaim his might.” The opening of Schubert’s Symphony, that noble yet haunting theme on unison horns, immediately conjures up a picture in sound of the openness of nature. Indeed, the work as a whole may be considered the first of the great Romantic ‘public’ symphonies, combining traditional form with an enlarged and enriched musical language.

Whereas, in the ‘*Unfinished*’ Symphony, the *minor* third opening to the first movement (again played in unison, but by double basses and cellos) suggests solemn melancholy and foreboding, in Schubert’s ‘*Great*’, that *major* third on the horns at the very start becomes all pervasive, appearing (rising or falling) in every theme throughout all four movements, in many accompaniment figures and, with superb effect, in many transition passages. Schubert’s skill in woodwind writing (increasingly evident from his earliest compositions) culminates in this Symphony, especially in the 2nd and 3rd movements. His marvellously romantic writing for the horns and, especially, his revolutionary use of the trombones, far surpasses that of Beethoven. Intriguingly, as the manuscript demonstrates, some of the most radical passages were the results of after-thoughts. The Finale was the last movement to be completed, the final 155 bars written on manuscript paper similar to that used for the G major String Quartet (op. 29, D.887) written down in 10 days between the 10th and 20th of June 1826 – the ‘shuddering’ opening repeated cello phrase in the first movement of the Quartet also finds its way into the cello (and double-bass) parts of the Symphony’s second movement development section.

Unable to afford the financial risk in sponsoring a performance himself (and aware of Beethoven’s many problems in that regard, not least in the concert at which Beethoven’s 9th Symphony was first performed), Schubert’s hopes for a public performance of his Symphony depended on the Philharmonic Society of Vienna. He intimated his decision to dedicate the Symphony to the Society “as a native artist...to commend it most courteously to (your) protection.” He received, in reply, an honorarium of 100 florins (perhaps equivalent to about what £500 could buy now), “not as a fee, but as a token of the Society’s sense of obligation to you.” There was no undertaking to perform the work, although some parts were copied out by the Society in apparent preparation. However, after a preliminary ‘play-through’ by the Society’s orchestra, the work was “provisionally put on one side, because of its length and difficulty.” No performance ensued and, after Schubert’s death, the score, together with most of his other unpublished manuscripts, passed into the possession of his brother Ferdinand.

There it remained for 10 years until Schumann, visiting Vienna in the hope of finding a more welcoming environment for his art than in his native Germany, not only paid homage at Schubert’s grave but called on Ferdinand. On New Year’s Day 1839, he discovered the Symphony amongst “a fabulous pile” of manuscripts. “Who knows how long it would have lain neglected there in dust and darkness, had I not immediately arranged...to send it to the management of the *Gewandhaus* concerts in Leipzig and their conductor [Mendelssohn].” It was thanks to Schumann’s encouragement that Mendelssohn conducted the first performance (albeit cut by omitting all the repeats) in Leipzig in March 1839, describing it as “bright, fascinating and original throughout...without doubt one of the best works which we have lately heard.”

The subsequent plan to perform the Symphony complete in Vienna was sabotaged by the refusal of key players to devote to it the necessary rehearsal time, and the particular objections of the violinists to the (admittedly exhausting) constantly repeated, rapid *ostinato* figures in the finale. Unfortunately this was a characteristic manifestation of what John Reed calls the “undemanding standards of taste in Vienna (at that time) ... and the general reaction against the sublime and the intellectual.” In fact, it was not until well into the second half of the 19th century that the Symphony started to be performed with some regularity, and particularly in Britain through Sir George Grove in London and Sir Charles Hallé in Manchester.

What is the ‘correct’ numbering of Schubert’s ‘late’ symphonies? As with the issues regarding the numbering of Dvořák’s symphonies – we performed his Symphony No. 5 in F major (B.54 /op.76), formerly known as his Symphony No. 3, in June – the numbering of Schubert’s symphonies has been complex and confusing, and, not just because of the motives of publishers or the vagaries of publication dates. Numbering Schubert’s ‘early’ symphonies is straightforward (Nos, 1 – 6), but it is salutary that, apart from the ‘*Great*’ C major Symphony, all Schubert’s late symphonies were incomplete and include a sketched but unscored symphonic work in E major (D.729). Breitkopf & Härtel, when preparing all Schubert’s works for publication in 1897, originally planned to publish only complete works (calling the ‘*Great*’ C major No. 7), with “fragments”, including the ‘*Unfinished*’ and the

D.729 sketch, receiving no number at all. When Brahms became general editor of that project, he continued to assign no number to the D.729 fragment but felt that the *'Unfinished'* had to be appended to the list, adding it as No. 8.

Subsequently, and logically since the *'Unfinished'* pre-dated the *'Great'*, the latter became No.9, leaving a 'vacant slot' at No.7. This was reserved, not so much for the E major (or any other) sketches, as for a "lost" but presumed complete, so-called *'Gmunden-Gastein'* Symphony of 1825, hypothesised as such by no less an authority than Grove. It was known that in July and August 1825 Schubert holidayed with the baritone Johann Michael Vogl, for whom many of Schubert's songs were composed from 1817 onwards. They spent some weeks in Gmunden and Gastein in the mountains south of Salzburg. Whilst there, Schubert started to compose a symphony. Although mentioned by Schubert's friends in letters, no trace of such a work has ever been found, although Deutsch even gave it a place in his Thematic Catalogue (as D.849).

John Reed (from whom I quoted above) was one of a number of British Schubert scholars for whom studying music was a labour of love, rather than their profession. Grove, for example, was a civil engineer, yet masterminded first performances of several Schubert symphonies, unearthed various Schubert manuscripts in Vienna and wrote the entry for Schubert for his eponymous Dictionary of Music. Reed was an English teacher and then BBC producer who, in 1959, had already published an article on the *'Gmunden-Gastein'* Symphony. After examining and carefully considering the letters, memoirs, diary-extracts and records from the archives of the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* in Vienna, his book *Schubert: The Final Years* (1972) demonstrated conclusively that the sketches made in Gmunden and Gastein in 1825 eventually became the *'Great'* C major Symphony, which undoubtedly did not originate in the last year of Schubert's life (1828).

Sensibly enough, therefore, most scholars now prefer to describe the *'Unfinished'* as No.7 and the *'Great'* C major as No. 8. The 1978 revision to the Deutsch catalogue lists them as such, and this is the order and numbering in the Bärenreiter Critical Edition from which the orchestra plays tonight. However, in the English-speaking world, by and large, the E major fragment (when it is thought of at all) is considered No.7, the *'Unfinished'* remains as No.8, with the *'Great'* C major as No.9. There is even, by this reckoning a *'Symphony no.10'*, a series of more or less incoherent D major sketches (D.936A) which have, nevertheless, been 'realised' by Brain Newbould as a 3-movement 'symphony'.

And what of its nickname? It is, of course a 'great' symphony, but that epithet is a translation of the German word *'Grosse'*, meaning, in this context, large in size, simply to differentiate it from its *'Little'* forerunner, also in C major, the Symphony no. 6 D.589, dating from 1817-1818. Ironically, Schubert had headed the manuscript of this *'Little'* Symphony *'Grosse Sinfonie'* for the first time in his symphonic output. Whilst reflecting the influence of early Beethoven, its main debt is to Rossini, whose Italian opera season had been hugely successful from its first visit to Vienna in 1816 onwards. Far from small in scale or energy, the *'Little'* C major Symphony even anticipates the later *'Great'* C major in a number of ways, not least in the prophetic hint of that work's finale in its own: the rhythmic figure occurring throughout that movement, and forming the basis of its coda, seems to have remained dormant in Schubert's mind until he could fully fulfil its potential nearly ten years later.

As well as 'discovering' the manuscript and promoting its performance, Schumann was responsible for describing the Symphony's "heavenly lengths...like a novel in four volumes". He went on to say not only that there is

"masterly power over the technicalities of musical composition, life in all its phases, colour in exquisite gradations, the minutest accuracy and fitness of expression ... deep down there lies more than mere song, joy and sorrow, already expressed in music a hundred-fold; it transports us into a world where we cannot recall ever having been before."

Schumann recognised that it would take time for the Symphony to be properly appreciated:

"The brilliance and novelty of the instrumentation, the breadth and expanse of the form, the striking changes of mood, the whole new world into which we are transported – all this may be confusing to the listener, like any initial view of the unfamiliar....(but)...there is always the feeling that Schubert knew exactly what he wanted to say and how to say it, and the assurance that the meaning will become clearer with time."

Schubert never heard a note performed of either his *'Unfinished'* or *'Great'* C major symphonies. J.B Priestley's words about the writer Scott Fitzgerald can be applied with equal force to Schubert:

"And if no rumour of his ultimate triumph has ever reached his spirit, if nothing could be known to him after his unhappy time had run out, then there is indeed no pretence of justice in the Universe."

Programme notes by Chris Kelnar

Andrew Lees is a former member of both the Hallé and BBC Philharmonic Orchestras playing viola. Since returning to Edinburgh he has taken up the violin and concentrated on solo playing, arranging, teaching and conducting. He is a member of the Roxburgh String Quartet. As well as the Open Orchestra, he has conducted many other Edinburgh-based groups including Edinburgh Grand Opera, Edinburgh Musical Theatre and Edinburgh University Savoy Opera Group. He also directs the Leader Ensemble. However perhaps his most significant achievement to date is an arrangement of Rossini's William Tell Overture for 40 violas and triangle.

The Open Orchestra (<http://www.openorchestra.org.uk/>) is an established group of amateur musicians of all ages and abilities. We meet throughout the year for rehearsals and performances, aiming to increase our knowledge and enjoyment of orchestral music in a friendly atmosphere. We aim for high standards but, as our name suggests, we are open to all, subject to vacancies, with no auditions. We meet on Wednesday evenings (7.45pm – 9.45pm) between September and June at Morningside Parish Church Hall, Braid Road (corner of Braid Road and Cluny Gardens). If you wish to find out more about the orchestra, please contact us at info@openorchestra.org