

Franz Schubert

Symphony No. 4 in C minor, D.417, “Tragic”

FRANZ PETER SCHUBERT WAS BORN IN LIECHTENTAL, A SUBURB OF VIENNA, ON JANUARY 31, 1797, AND DIED IN VIENNA ON NOVEMBER 19, 1828. HIS SYMPHONY NO. 4 WAS COMPLETED BY APRIL 27, 1816, AND PROBABLY HAD ITS FIRST PERFORMANCE THAT YEAR IN VIENNA UNDER OTTO HATWIG, WITH AN AMATEUR ORCHESTRA THAT HAD DEVELOPED FROM THE SCHUBERT FAMILY STRING QUARTET. THE SUBTITLE “TRAGIC” IS SCHUBERT’S OWN AND WAS ADDED AT A LATER DATE. THE FIRST DOCUMENTED PUBLIC PERFORMANCE WAS GIVEN AT LEIPZIG ON NOVEMBER 19, 1849, WITH AUGUST FERDINAND RICCIUS CONDUCTING.

THE SCORE OF SCHUBERT’S SYMPHONY NO. 4 CALLS FOR TWO EACH OF FLUTES, OBOES, CLARINETS, AND BASSOONS, FOUR HORNS, TWO TRUMPETS, TIMPANI, AND STRINGS.

After the *Unfinished* and the *Great C* major, the Fourth and Fifth of Schubert’s symphonies are the ones most often played, but even then not all that often. Schubert’s first three youthful and energetic symphonies—the First composed while he was a student, the Second and Third during his years of schoolmastering—are infrequently heard, while the appealingly inventive Sixth remains pretty much a rarity on concert programs.

Schubert’s Fourth Symphony, the *Tragic*, was completed in April 1816, the same month that he unsuccessfully applied for the post of music master at a training school in Laibach (Ljubljana). As a child, his strongest and most natural inclinations had always been toward music. He’d had his first real piano lessons from his eldest brother Ignaz, and his father taught him violin. In the family string quartet, the violinists were Ignaz and another brother, Ferdinand; Franz was violist, and their father played cello. Like his brothers, Schubert was sent to Michael Holzer, organist at the Liechtental parish church, for lessons in voice, organ, and counterpoint. Holzer recognized the boy’s abilities and later recalled that “if I wished to instruct him in anything fresh, he already knew it. Consequently I gave him no actual training but merely talked to him, and watched with silent astonishment.”

When Schubert was eleven he was accepted as a chorister in the Imperial court chapel and took up residence at the Stadtkonvikt, a communal boarding school that also housed the Choir School. There he sang and studied under the direction of Hofkapellmeister Antonio Salieri (best-known today, courtesy playwright Peter Schaffer, for his alleged rivalry with Mozart and for the unfounded story that his poisoning of Mozart caused the latter’s early death). There, too, he played in the school orchestra as first violinist and was occasionally trusted to lead rehearsals. The repertory regularly included symphonies of Haydn and Mozart, Beethoven’s First and Second symphonies, overtures, and other works. It was this orchestra that played Schubert’s First Symphony, which he completed in October 1813.

1813 was also Schubert’s last year at the Stadtkonvikt. His voice had broken the previous summer, ending his time as a chorister, and he left there that November, turning down a fellowship, perhaps over a disciplinary matter. Now he was at a crossroads. In accordance with his schoolmaster father’s expectations, he entered a teacher’s training school and, after a year there, began assisting his father. He did this for two years, and the hours spent in front of the classroom were not happy. But during this time Schubert managed to produce his Second and Third symphonies, as well as piano and chamber music, several operas, his first Mass, in F major, which he successfully conducted himself at the 100th-anniversary celebrations for the Liechtental church, and, in 1815, about 145 songs, including *Erlkönig*. (The song *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, which supposedly elicited from Salieri the comment that Schubert was a genius who could do anything, was written on October 19 the year before, when he was seventeen.) Despite this, the break from schoolmastering came only several years later, after attachments with friends like Josef von Spaun, eight years Schubert’s senior, who had helped organize the Stadtkonvikt orchestra, and who provided the needy Schubert with much-appreciated music paper during his time there, and Franz von Schober, a law student who came to Vienna having heard some of Schubert’s songs and urged him to abandon teaching for a musical career, finally won out over the young composer’s uncertainties.

In the slow introduction to his first three symphonies, Schubert had already demonstrated the ear for orchestral color that is immediately apparent in the opening measures of the *Tragic* Symphony, where a unison C for full orchestra gives way to a somber passage for strings, with emotional heightening provided

by the addition of woodwinds. This is Schubert's first symphony in the minor mode—a hint, perhaps, as to the origin of its subtitle—and it may be viewed as something of a study in mood and color, as well as exemplifying a new approach on the composer's part to symphonic weight, a concern to be taken up again with considerably broadened perspective (along with woodwind colorations perhaps suggestive of a Rossini craze then sweeping Vienna) in his Sixth Symphony of 1817-18. (The intervening Fifth Symphony, Schubert's only symphony besides the B minor *Unfinished* to lack a slow introduction, and also his most lightly scored, is marked primarily by lightness, grace, and economy of means.)

The dark chromaticism, sighing woodwinds, portentous drumstrokes, and dramatic breadth of the Fourth Symphony's introduction give way to an Allegro that is driving and grim in its first theme, clearly suggesting Haydnesque *Sturm und Drang*. The second theme is more lyric, but melancholy despite its major-mode leanings. The joyful exuberance with which the exposition closes comes as something of a surprise and serves to anticipate the C major close of the movement as a whole.

The first statement of the Andante's main theme, in A-flat major (reflecting Schubert's inclination for key areas a third or sixth away from home base, A-flat being the sixth degree, or submediant, of the symphony's home C minor scale), is made poignant by the presence of the solo oboe. The contrasting material of this movement, first forceful and then wistful, is presented against a background of restlessly pulsating strings. The third movement contrasts a jagged, downward-thrusting, minor-mode minuet against a major-mode Trio of rising lines and a more legato, folklike character.

In his finale Schubert is successfully able to combine drama, grace, pathos, melancholy, good humor (in the rollicking second theme), and even grandeur (in the fanfare-like material that closes both exposition and recapitulation) with the relaxation over long musical stretches—again through use of third- and sixth-related key areas—that represents a hallmark of Schubert's style in so many of his works. The symphony ends in unbridled, if chromatically colored, C major, on a threefold repetition of the same unison note with which it began.

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