

Mick Anderson  
Music 959.01  
Final Paper  
14 December 2016

Franz Schubert's 'Great' Symphony:  
Schumann, Mendelssohn, Discourse, and Reception

A discussion of the music of Franz Schubert outside the context of lieder—a genre he cultivated with an output of more than six-hundred selections—is somewhat derelict. To discuss his instrumental music in isolation is to discuss Rossini's output without regard to opera or to discuss the work of J. S. Bach without regard to the keyboard—there is quite a bit of material for a conversation, but it is to converse in a room shared with a large elephant. Nevertheless, we do consider Franz Schubert—posthumously—a symphonist. Even so, this hesitant nomenclature is evidenced through the struggle we see in the story of his *Symphony No. 9 in C Major* (1825), the so-called “Great” *Symphony in C Major*.

Robert Winter says of Schubert and his Ninth:

Having failed to complete four successive symphonies, Schubert might have given up on symphonic ventures. Yet Schubert's travels in Upper Austria in the summer of 1825 seem to have unleashed an astonishing creative energy and optimism that found expression in the 'Great' C major Symphony (d944). Few works have such unquenchable rhythmic vitality or seem more expressive of their direct surroundings, from the opening horn call, which returns as a triumphant apotheosis in the coda, to the brisk step of the stoical, marchlike *Andante con moto*, from the joyous *alfresco* dance of the vast sonata-form *Scherzo*, saturated by its opening motif, to the surging triplets of the gargantuan finale. Having found his symphonic voice – a voice at once lyrical, colouristic and expansive – Schubert was understandably eager to undertake more symphonic projects.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Winter, "Franz Schubert: Works," in *Grove Music Online (Oxford Music Online)*, accessed December 14, 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/25109pg2>.

We thank Robert Schumann—founder and editor of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*—for nostalgically visiting the late composer’s brother Ferdinand, who showed him a collection of manuscripts he inherited, consequently relinquishing the *C Major Symphony* manuscript to Schumann that he might submit it to Maestro Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, who then premiered it with Leipzig’s Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig on March 21, 1839.

Peter Mercer-Taylor relates:

“[Mendelssohn’s] commitment to supporting what he considered the worthiest of newer compositions—Ignaz Moscheles, Ferdinand Hiller, and Niels Gade were among those most enthusiastically promoted—yielded an especially impressive crop of symphonic premieres, including the newly discovered C major symphony of Schubert, and Schumann’s First, Second, and Fourth.”<sup>2</sup>

Herr Schumann wrote glowingly of the work in his famous essay on the subject:

But everyone must acknowledge that the outer world, sparkling today, gloomy tomorrow, often deeply stirs the feeling of the poet or the musician; and all must recognize, while listening to this symphony, that it reveals to us something more than mere beautiful song, mere joy and sorrow, such as music has ever expressed in a hundred ways, leading us into regions which, to our best recollection, we had never before explored. To understand this, one has but to hear this symphony. Here we find, besides the most masterly technicalities of musical composition, life in every vein; coloring down to the finest gradation; meaning everywhere; sharp expression in detail; and in the whole a suffusing romanticism such as other works by Franz Schubert have made known to us.

And then the heavenly length of the symphony, like that of a thick novel in four volumes, perhaps by Jean Paul who also was never able to reach a conclusion and for the best reason—to permit the reader to think it out for himself. How this refreshes, this feeling of abundance, so contrary to one’s experience with others when one always dreads to be

---

<sup>2</sup> Peter Mercer-Taylor, “Mendelssohn and the Institution(s) of German Art Music,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Mendelssohn*, edited by Peter Mercer-Taylor, 11–25. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

disillusioned at the end and is often saddened through disappointment.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, the symphony's length was not appreciated by all. *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* noted that the premiere received a monstrous applause had the composer still been living he might have considered trimming the Symphony's length in favor of further accentuating its most notable parts. However, the report also commended Dr. Mendelssohn on such a "masterly" interpretation that it seemed as though the work had been performed many times before rather than only just premiered, and that, in the end, all were pleased to hear the new work, "which was a sure and beautiful gift."<sup>4</sup>

Schubert's gift was not originally perceived as such. The work was scheduled to premiere twelve years earlier in 1827 (a year before Schubert's death). The composer submitted his score to the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, which had it prepared for performance only for the Gesellschaft orchestra to find the work much too long, and much too difficult. They opted, instead, to premiere a less arduous C Major Symphony—what we now know as Schubert's *No. 6*. The composer gifted *the Symphony No. 9* score to the Gesellschaft at a time when he was under terrible financial duress. The directors, already aware of the composer's misfortune, had recently decided to award him a financial prize for his interest in the Society over the years. With some misunderstanding in bookkeeping regarding these two transactions, as well as a confusing date on the score's cover page, the composition was for 150 years known as the "Gastein Symphony" with a general

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert Schumann, Konrad Wolff, and Paul Rosenfeld, *On Music and Musician* (New York: Pantheon, 1946), 110-11.

<sup>4</sup> *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* XLI, no. 13, (Den 27sten März 1839): 256-57. Based on a very loose translation by myself and Google Translate.

acceptance that any archivally referenced “*Great*” *Symphony in C Major* was lost, when in fact the two are “one and the same.”<sup>5</sup>

Herr Mendelssohn, when not in Germany, could usually be found in England, where he made ten journeys over his short life. In 1844, five years after the Leipzig premiere of Schubert’s *Symphony No. 9*, Dr. Mendelssohn, tried to facilitate a British premiere of the “Great” *Symphony*, but was met with heavy resistance by the Philharmonic Society:

. . . Mendelssohn found himself at loggerheads with the orchestra he was trying to help. He introduced several unfamiliar pieces into a rehearsal: Schubert’s *Symphony No. 9* (the ‘Great’), a *Symphony in C Minor* by the young Danish composer Niels Gade (assistant conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra) and his own overture *Ruy Blas* Op. 95. While the orchestra admired Mendelssohn’s overture, the players were unimpressed with Gade’s effort, and heaped scorn on the Schubert. A disappointed Mendelssohn was forced to withdraw both of these works from the next concert—and he also withdrew *Ruy Blas*, because he himself was displeased with it.”<sup>6</sup>

Herr Mendelssohn was persistent:

On 24 June, Mendelssohn conducted the penultimate Philharmonic concert of the season. The programme contained orchestral works by Mozart, Beethoven and Haydn, and the British premiere of Bach’s *Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D Major* BWV 1068. As well, there were vocal selections by Rossini, Méhul, Adam and Schubert (Mendelssohn was determined to overcome English antipathy towards Schubert); concertos for cello and violin by Kummer and Molique, respectively; and Beethoven’s *Piano Concerto No. 4*, played by Mendelssohn from memory. Conspicuously absent were works composed by Mendelssohn. The critics were not entirely won over by the programme—*The Maestro* remarked that Bach’s suite ‘sounded meagre’, and *The Musical Examiner* dismissed the Schubert as

---

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Norman McKay, *Franz Schubert: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 260–62.

<sup>6</sup> Colin Timothy Eatock, *Mendelssohn and Victorian England* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009), 84.

‘much ado about nothing—but Mendelssohn’s rendition of the Beethoven was well received.’<sup>7</sup>

Today, ironically, a Schubert discography search with keyword “London,” yields over 900 results.<sup>8</sup> One may wonder if Mendelssohn’s continued advocacy, as well as the writings and promotion of Robert Schumann are to credit for the appreciation Schubert’s instrumental works modernly have. One must remember that culturally Jewish Mendelssohn’s own legacy was tarnished by a disgusting smear-campaign spearheaded by the anti-Semitic Richard Wagner, despite Mendelssohn’s self-proclaimed, personally and vocationally evident Christian faith.

Perhaps one catalyst was the introduction of Franz Schubert’s music to the United States. German conductor and composer Theodor Eisfeld premiered Schubert’s *Symphony No. 9* to its first American audience with a Philharmonic Society of New York performance in 1851.<sup>9</sup> Eisfeld is also credited with exposing American audiences to some of the important European chamber works for the first time. Perhaps his sparking interest in such works—those by Mendelssohn, Spohr, Haydn, etc—opened a window of interest in the music of Franz Schubert.<sup>10</sup>

For what it’s worth, we know many reasons why Schubert was not a celebrity during his lifetime and why we may only know of him now because of the promotion of the

---

<sup>7</sup> Eatock, 87.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.discogs.com>

<sup>9</sup> James M. Keller, Program notes to Schubert: Symphony in C Major, D.944, The *Great*, performed by the San Francisco Symphony, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Bethany Goldberg and Howard Shanet, “Theodor Eisfeld,” in *Grove Music Online (Oxford Music Online)*, accessed December 14, 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2085070>.

likes of Schumann and Mendelssohn. For one, as McKay reminds us, Schubert was not a child prodigy:

... None of these early compositions, written when he was 13 or 14 years old, indicate the prodigious talent for composition of a Mozart, Rossini, Mendelssohn, or of the many other composers who wrote music of appreciably superior quality to that of Schubert at the same age, even if they had far more rigorous and distinguished instruction than the so far almost self-taught Schubert had received<sup>11</sup>

Carl Engel echoes the sentiment explaining why prodigy cultivation was an impossibility: “Nevertheless, Schubert was not a *Wunderkind* of the Mozart stamp. Nor did he have a Leopold Mozart for father, to act as a martinet and travelling impresario. The fifteen-year-old freak Mozart, under his paternal thumb, had been more of a European celebrity than the thirty-five-year old master at his death.”<sup>12</sup>

In Schubert’s defense, his parents were likely too distracted managing their family affairs in a global sense—having birthed fourteen children, with only five surviving infancy—to focus undivided attention on the talent promotion and professional development of young Franz. Further complicating the nest, Schubert’s mother died when he was fifteen and his father soon remarried adding four additional children to the fold.<sup>13</sup>

As for advocacy from elsewhere, Engel relates:

“Robert Schumann, unfortunately, was born too late to have done for Schubert what he did for Chopin’s Opus 2 and Brahms’s Opus 1. There was no one similarly competent and enthusiastic to introduce Schubert to the musical world. And he was the last person to court public attention. Schubert lacked Beethoven’s eccentricities, Chopin’s mundane graces, Liszt’s virtuosity, Wagner’s showmanship. He was simple, a trifle uncouth, honest, and rather shy.”<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Norman McKay, *Franz Schubert: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 22.

<sup>12</sup> Carl Engel, “Schubert’s Fame,” *The Musical Quarterly* 14, No. 4 (Oct 1928): 458.

<sup>13</sup> Engel, 460–62.

<sup>14</sup> Engel, 467.

Frankly, I am not convinced we would know a Franz Schubert if he had not produced the core of German art song. Those who had an intuitive feeling of Schubert's greatness—Schumann, Mendelssohn; and also Franz Liszt who regularly performed Schubert's piano works<sup>15</sup>—seemingly had to justify Schubert's greatness by manually directing the public's attention to his orchestral works. Walter Gray recaps the widely-held beliefs of that era, especially perpetuated by E.T.A. Hoffmann, that the symphony was *the* iconic form, the most prized symbol of compositional greatness.

...it was generally accepted that the highest expression of music was purely instrumental, particularly orchestral music, and the heights were to be scaled only in the symphony. In nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, one often finds stated or implied that song is a "little" form; and though it may be beautiful and admirable, it could not be "profound" in the way that a symphony could. To such critics, Schubert was merely a song composer, and thus could have little claim to preeminence. Buttressing this view was the idea that if song could be truly great, then the unsurpassable Beethoven would much in this form. Such a view overlooked Beethoven's considerable achievement as the composer of *An die ferne Geliebte* and other major songs. These opinions rest on double ignorance: ignorance of the nature of song and ignorance of Schubert's achievements as an instrumental composer.<sup>16</sup>

Even if that is the case, what holds our attention on all things Schubertian today? I ask this questions in a symphonic and otherwise instrumental context—without regard whatsoever to vocal literature, if that is even possible. Though Wagner and others who were permitted to dictate the musical climate of the late Romantic-Era were not interested in classical ideas as the basis of composition as Schubert and his contemporaries, they

---

<sup>15</sup> Engel, 460.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Grey, "Schubert the Instrumental Composer," *The Musical Quarterly* 64, No. 4 (Oct 1978): 483–84.

could not deny what those like Schumann and Mendelssohn saw in the 'Great' C Major Symphony. As Leon Botstein relates: "Schubert's recently discovered works lent him a requisite if not exquisite expressive modernity. Wagner himself recognized Schubert as rising from the dead to challenge him."<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Leon Botstein, "Schubert in History," in *Franz Schubert and His World*, ed. by Christopher H. Gibbs and Morten Solvik (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 305.

## Bibliography

*Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* XLI, no. 13, (Den 27sten März 1839): 256–57.

Botstein, Leon. "Schubert in History." In *Franz Schubert and His World*, edited by Christopher H. Gibbs and Morten Solvik, 299–347. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.

Eatock, Colin Timothy. *Mendelssohn and Victorian England*. Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009.

Engel, Carl. "Schubert's Fame." *The Musical Quarterly* 14, No. 4 (Oct 1928): 457–472)

Goldberg, Bethany and Howard Shanet. "Theodor Eisfeld." *Grove Music Online* (Oxford Music Online). Accessed December 14, 2016.

<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2085070>.

Grey, Walter. "Schubert the Instrumental Composer." *The Musical Quarterly* 64, No. 4 (Oct 1978): 483–94.

<https://www.discogs.com/>

Keller, James M. Program notes to Schubert: Symphony in C Major, D.944, *The Great*. Performed by the San Francisco Symphony, 2009.

McKay, Elizabeth Norman. *Franz Schubert: A Biography*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

Schumann, Robert, Konrad Wolff, and Paul Rosenfeld. *On Music and Musicians*. New York: Pantheon, 1946.