

# Symphony in B minor, D.759, *Unfinished*

## Franz Schubert

Incomplete works are perhaps an inevitable feature of most composers' catalogues. After all, they are no more likely than anyone else to receive advance notice of when they will die, and often the final chords of their lives arrive before they have drawn double bars at the ends of their works-in-progress. In the case of some long-lived composers the events seem to have coincided: Haydn, Rossini, Verdi, Richard Strauss, and Vaughan Williams, for example, had already shepherded their musical careers to fulfilling finishes; they give the impression of having left this world after saying what they had to say. Others have been cut off in mid-sentence, sometimes at the height of their powers, while engaged in the production of masterpieces: think of Mozart's Requiem or Puccini's *Turandot*.

Because Franz Schubert died very young, at the age of 31, popular consensus has sometimes fixed on the idea that his *Unfinished* Symphony was a casualty of this sort. Of course, it is possible that if Schubert had lived longer he might have gotten around to filling out his piece to the standard four movements that made up the typical symphony of his era, but the fact is that he had already put this score aside long before his death.

In the last decade of his life, Schubert accumulated a sizable

stack of incomplete large-scale works, including several symphonic "torsos" and aborted sonatas; the *Unfinished* Symphony, which he wrote in 1822 (more than six years before his death), is surely the most superb of them all. In October of that year he sketched out three movements of the piece in piano score, and the following month completed the orchestration of the first two movements plus a fragment of the ensuing scherzo. There it ended.

Many theories have been proposed to explain why Schubert left this work in mid-stream. Some believe (very hypothetically) that he *did* finish it, but that sections have been lost. Some suspect that the B-minor entr'acte from *Rosamunde* was intended to be the symphony's finale; after all, it mirrors the symphony's key and orchestration exactly (including the employment of a third trombone, which was somewhat unusual in the orchestral lineup at that time), and it appeared shortly after Schubert is known to have been working on this piece. Many think that he abandoned the symphony because he felt that he could not provide two final movements on the same high plane as the opening two.

---

### In Short

**Born:** January 31, 1797, in Vienna, Austria

**Died:** November 19, 1828, in Vienna

**Work composed:** 1822, in Vienna; completed – so to speak – on October 30 of that year, with orchestration carried out the following month

**World premiere:** December 17, 1865, in Vienna, Johann von Herbeck conducting the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** February 6, 1869, Carl Bergmann, conductor; this was the work's New York premiere

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** May 26, 2008, David Robertson, conductor, at The Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine

**Estimated duration:** ca. 27 minutes

## By the Numbers

The numbering of Schubert's symphonies is a matter of immense confusion. His first six pose no problem. Passing over some very fragmentary sketches, the next "completed" symphony is the one known as the *Unfinished*, and, after that, the one generally referred to as the *Great C-major* Symphony.

The *Great C-major* was long accepted to be Schubert's seventh since it grew famous before the *Unfinished* was extricated from Hüttenbrenner's desk drawer (see sidebar, bottom of page). Even after the earlier work came to light, the editors of the complete edition of Schubert's works were disinclined to reassign numbers, especially when so famous a piece as the *Great C-major* was involved. That work kept the designation of No. 7, and they identified the *Unfinished* as No. 8.

A bit later, chronologically inclined musicologists seized on the idea of calling the *Great* Schubert's Ninth as a way to convey that it had been written after the *Unfinished*. They were also hoping to unearth a so-called *Gastein* Symphony — named after a town in Austria where documentary evidence suggested that Schubert had composed a symphony — which would then be assigned the newly available "No. 7" once it was rediscovered. However, it turned out that the piece in question was actually the *Great C-major*. That is why today one continues to find the *Unfinished* Symphony sometimes identified as the composer's Symphony No. 7, sometimes as his No. 8. We prefer to avoid the issue and simply refer to this work as the *Unfinished*.

(This is doubtful. Just look at the stream of profound, large-scale masterpieces — including the *Great C-major* Symphony, the final three piano sonatas, and the two piano trios — that would still issue from his pen.) The most plausible explanation is that in late 1822, precisely when he would have moved on to the remaining movements of the work, Schubert was diagnosed with syphilis. The disease was incurable at the time, and the attendant treatments were as dreadful as they were ineffective. It seems possible (and understandable) that the news might have thrown Schubert completely out of kilter, disrupting his creative concentration.

The following year Schubert sent the manuscript to his friend Anselm Hüttenbrenner, who put it in a desk drawer; there it languished for 40 years. Four decades later Hüttenbrenner liberated the manuscript from its dark, silent recess, and presented it to the conductor and choral composer Johann von Herbeck, who oversaw its first performance, in Vienna in 1865, 43 years after it was written.

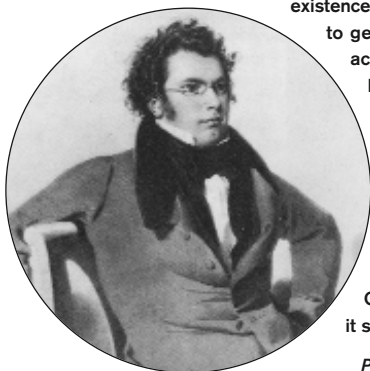
---

## A Posthumous Premiere

By the time Schubert's *Unfinished* Symphony was premiered, in 1865, it was known in theory though not in practice: Anselm Hüttenbrenner, the score's guardian, had mentioned it in a biographical dictionary in 1836, and a Schubert biographer, Heinrich Kreissle von Hellborn, had picked up on its existence (via that source) in 1864. It was the latter who started a campaign

to get Hüttenbrenner to release the work to the public — no mean achievement, since by then Hüttenbrenner had become all but a hermit, interested principally in abstract theological inquiries and in magnetism.

Hellborn owed his success to a clever ploy. Claiming that he wanted to put on a concert of three great Viennese composers of a certain generation — Schubert, Franz Lachner, and Hüttenbrenner himself — he begged the last to show him some suitable works, and then wondered aloud if perhaps a previously unperformed piece by Schubert might not be found. Out of the drawer came the *Unfinished* Symphony. At its premiere it shared the bill with an overture by Hüttenbrenner.



Portrait of Schubert by Wilhelm August Rieder, 1825

