

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Symphony No. 4 in C minor, *Tragic*, D.417

Franz Schubert

Franz Schubert celebrated his 19th birthday shortly before he embarked on his Fourth Symphony. He had begun to hit his stride as a composer, but it was not yet his profession, strictly speaking. He unhappily endured his working hours as “sixth assistant teacher” at his father’s school in the Säulengasse in Vienna, where his responsibilities focused on educating and disciplining the youngest pupils. He was overqualified for the job. Schubert had spent five years on full scholarship, including room and board, at the Kaiserlich-königliches Stadtkonvikt (Imperial and Royal City College), which offered the best education available in Vienna to youngsters from non-aristocratic families.

After that he enrolled at St. Anne’s Normal School for a ten-month course (six days a week) leading to certification as a school-teacher — a move that conveniently exempted him from military service. Following his certification, he followed his father’s footsteps into the classroom. In April 1816, just as he was completing his Fourth Symphony, he applied for a teaching job in Laibach (now Ljubljana, Slovenia), possibly in the hopes of earning a decent enough living to let him propose marriage to the current apple of his eye; but he neither got the job nor proposed marriage. Schubert consistently disliked the teaching profession and in autumn 1816 he left it in favor of a financially perilous existence as a freelance musician-composer.

It is hard to imagine how Schubert balanced his teaching duties with his passion for composition. During two years as a teacher, he wrote 382 pieces of music, including his Second, Third, and Fourth Symphonies; four *Singspiels* (plus considerable portions of two

further operas that remained unfinished); great quantities of dances for solo piano; a fair amount of chamber music, including two string quartets and his much-loved String Trio in one movement; lots of sacred music, including three complete Masses; and an abundant stream of songs, including such enduring favorites as *Erlkönig*, *Heidenröslein*, and *Litanei auf das Fest Aller Seelen*. Then, too, he was enjoying a full social life and was taking composition lessons twice a week from Antonio Salieri.

Many of Schubert’s pieces were unveiled in at-home musicales. These had begun, in about 1814, as Sunday afternoon family string-quartet sessions at the Schubert home, with the composer playing viola, his

In Short

Born: January 31, 1797, in Lichtental, then a suburb of Vienna, Austria, now incorporated into that city

Died: November 19, 1828, in Vienna

Work composed: completed in April 1816

World premiere: probably in 1816 by a private musical society at the Vienna home of Otto Hatwig, shortly after the piece was completed. The first public performance took place posthumously on November 19, 1848, with A.F. Riccius conducting, at the Buchhändlerbörse in Leipzig.

New York Philharmonic premiere: February 7, 1935, Werner Janssen, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: April 17, 2010, Riccardo Muti, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 32 minutes

older brothers (Ferdinand and Ignaz) on violins, and his father (Franz Theodor) taking the cello part. Friends started sitting in on the sessions, and by autumn 1815 the group had progressed from a mostly amateur assemblage to include a number of professional players. Its somewhat steady membership swelled to include seven first violins, six second violins, three violas, three cellos, and two double basses, plus whatever wind instruments could be brought in; as the group expanded it moved from the Schuberts' living room to larger venues.

The ensemble stayed together for about three years, eventually performing for themselves and a small audience at the apartment of the concertmaster, Otto Hatwig, a Bohemian-born violinist in the Burg Theatre orchestra and a composer of modest talent. That apartment, on the Schottenhof in the Gundelhof district of Vienna, provided a great service to the young Schubert. The ensemble was accomplished enough to tackle the more

difficult symphonies of Haydn and Mozart, and it gave Schubert almost all the opportunities he would ever have to hear his symphonic music played by an actual orchestra. Three of his symphonies received their first performances from this group, which possibly may have served as midwife for his first six.

Schubert was drawing inspiration from Haydn and Mozart — perhaps a bit from Beethoven's stormy C-minor compositions, too — when he wrote his C-minor Symphony, and specifically from their works in the *Sturm und Drang* tradition. He cited Mozart's Symphony No. 40, a pinnacle of that style, as one of his favorite pieces, and one may hear echoes of that work's hair-raising emotional terrain in this symphony, which strikes a far more personal tone than Schubert's three prior efforts.

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.

What's in a Name



Portrait thought to be of a young Franz Schubert, by Josef Abel, ca. 1814

The nicknames attached to symphonies are usually appended after the fact by persons other than the composer. Schubert's Symphony No. 4 is an exception, at least in part. The sobriquet *Tragic* was his own. It stands on the first page of the manuscript, inscribed in his hand, although scholars believe that he added it to the autograph score at some later date.

It is not clear precisely what Schubert had in mind when he titled this work *Tragic*. Notwithstanding its obeisance toward the emotive *Sturm und Drang* style, it hardly seems what most people would consider tragic: no Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* here. The title has spurred some interpreters to seek heartrending wretchedness in these pages, but the piece ends up on the losing end.