

The Riddle of Schubert's Unfinished Symphony

A Contribution to the Psychology of Musical Creative Work

BY

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IN No. I of THE MUSIC REVIEW, February, 1940, Otto Erich Deutsch, the distinguished scholar and Schubert biographer, has given a comprehensive account of the history and the adventures of a masterpiece, the riddle of which consists in the fact of its having remained a torso. Unfinished works, generally, have been cut off by death, as for example Bach's *Art of Fugue*, Mozart's *Requiem*, Bruckner's Ninth and Mahler's Tenth symphony. But Schubert wrote these two glorious movements in 1822, six years before his early death, and practically all his great masterpieces of instrumental music were composed afterwards. There cannot be any doubt that he was conscious of the momentous importance of that torso, his greatest achievement until then: why did he abandon it?

The answer to this question flashed into my mind, many years ago, when I first set eyes on an appendix to Schubert's manuscript, a sketch of a scherzo, unmistakably destined to be the third movement of the symphony in B minor, and mentioned also by O. E. Deutsch in his essay. This sketch was published in the editor's commentary on the complete edition of Schubert's works, and it rules out once and for all the absurd idea of the symphony having been intended to consist of only two movements. When I added it as a supplement in a new miniature score, published in 1923 by the Vienna Philharmonic Edition, I was convinced no further commentary would be required, since to my mind that sketch itself reveals the solution of the riddle.

The sketch comprises a complete draft of the scherzo and the first part of a trio. One page of a full score, containing the first nine bars, gives a definite impression of its whole character. I cannot imagine a musician reading the sketch who would not feel amazed by the emptiness of this unfortunate piece of music, even apart from its context. But comparing it with the loftiness and the lavish wealth of that glorious *allegro* and that heavenly *andante*, one is unable to conceive how anything as poor, as narrow, as sterile could possibly grow out of the same soil. This is a riddle, no doubt! But one can, find examples of a similar kind among the works of the greatest masters, and Schubert was still on the threshold of his mastery when he wrote that music. A temporary intermission of creative power, a sudden weakness of the inventive imagination, is a phenomenon well known to the artist. There has been no musician, no poet in the world, who has not known the depressing experience at one time or another of the mysterious, undefinable motor of his invention stopping suddenly. It comes, and it passes, like an illness. Schubert's sketch gives in every detail a clinical aspect of that illness.

It opens with a theme of eight bars, the second half of which is nothing but a sequence:

(a) **Allegro**



This theme is turned over and over, is brought into the major - key, modulates, changes from *forte* to *piano*, from the tutti to solo groups. But nothing new turns up, no second theme, not the humblest little motive. Beethoven's device of constructing a scherzo by two contrasting themes or motives, as shown typically in the scherzos of his third, fifth, sixth and ninth

symphonies, was generally adopted by Schubert. But this time he seems to be unable to shake off even for a moment those obtrusive four bars. In a restricted circle he turns them round and round. None of those unique; unforgettable moments of delight occur, when with a sudden changing of the key a beautiful new tune unfolds, like an enthralling landscape at an unexpected turning of the way. It is all dry and uninspired, a desperate, hopeless struggle for a flower in the sands of the desert. The sketch, after starting in a kind of full piano setting, grows thinner and thinner; the harmony, the inner parts vanish, only a skeleton of a melody and a bass remains. When the trio starts, even the bass has shrunk off; all that is left is a lonely, unaccompanied line of sixteen bars, no better nor worse a tune than many others in Schubert's numerous sets of waltzes, but hopelessly outclassed by any one of the broad, sumptuous melodies in his mature works. It drags on to a double bar with a repetition sign, and here the sketch breaks off, even in its outward appearance the very image of ever-increasing weariness and discomfort. You can see the young composer—he was just twenty-five at the time—at his writing table with a flaring candle on an unhappy night, bored to death with a piece that is unwilling to take satisfactory shape in his mind. He continues through mere conscientiousness, more and more sleepy and uneasy, just dropping the last quavers down on his paper,—then he seizes the whole odious thing and throws it into his drawer.

Up to this moment the whole story is quite common and natural. Only laymen and novelists like to imagine a genius pouring out his music almost unconsciously, as in a trance. The artist knows no work can be achieved without the clearest, sharpest consciousness, and he knows that nothing is given to him without toil and pain. Whenever there is an opportunity of taking a glimpse into the workshop of one of the great masters—the most instructive ones have been given to us in Beethoven's sketches—one has the same impression of an ardent struggle. It is as if the pure, precious substance has to be extracted from a confused mass of raw material. The artist's conception of his work is like a hazy phantom before his eyes. Sometimes a part of its shape appears more or less distinctly, sometimes it vanishes altogether. His only guide in getting hold of it is his instinct, strengthened by technique and experience, his only control his self-criticism and his exact feeling for style and proportion. The most frequent occurrence in this situation is to lose one's way in the mist. In most cases one feels it almost instantly; one fumbles about, gets entangled, tries again, and eventually has to go back to the point where one has gone astray. To find the right path then is a question of patience, concentration, clearness of vision, or a sudden stroke of luck. I cannot explain this mysterious phenomenon, I only try to describe it as exactly as possible. You will find my observations confirmed by looking, for example, at the incredibly thrilling, adventurous story without words to be found in the sketches of Beethoven's third symphony.*

As for the scherzo of the "Unfinished", the fatal mistake seems to have been committed at the outset, or at least after the first eight bars. The theme, although insignificant in itself, might still have had a chance of developing satisfactorily if tackled in a better and more creative mood. Schubert's incomparably rich imagination was never seriously hampered by a mere commonplace motive. Look, for example, at the scherzo of his piano sonata in D major, Op. 53. It starts with a dangerously obtrusive rhythm of rather doubtful distinction, the motive of its first bar

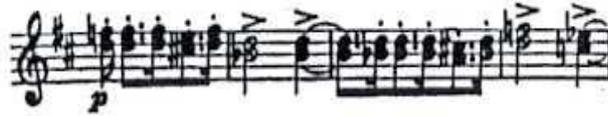
(b) *Allegro vivace*



being repeated over and over. But the composer at once finds another fragment to oppose it,

and after juggling with his obstinate first thought, succeeds finally in transforming it into the most delightful little jewel:

(c)



An episode of that kind would have saved the scherzo of the “Unfinished”. But, as actual appearances show, the composer’s imagination was paralysed. Beethoven, in the same situation, would have made the necessary surgical operation without hesitation: cut the thing down to the very root and recast the theme until he had found the right form, capable of spreading and developing. Schubert represents just the opposite type of creative artist: he was always, until he died in his thirty-second year, an improviser. Pieces of an impeccable construction, such as the *allegro* and *andante* of the “Unfinished Symphony”, are comparatively rare even among the masterpieces of his late years. At that time he seems still to have been unable to tackle the problems of composition in any but an improvising way; succeeding at once, or not at all. When dissatisfied by one of his songs, he rarely tried to improve it; generally he dropped it altogether and wrote a new composition for the same poem, tackling the problem of form or declamation in a different way. You will find an amazing example of this in comparing Schubert’s three settings of Goethe’s *Wer nie sein Brot mit Tränen ass*. He had sufficient experience of the most intricate mysteries of vocal composition, but much less self-confidence in handling the problems of instrumental form. In my opinion this scherzo-draft affords an almost exact example of this. The continuation can only be conjectured, but with a great deal of probability. As any young composer has experienced, there is nothing more difficult than getting rid of a bad start. It is amazing what suggestive power emanates from a first draft one was rash enough to write down. It is far easier to start a new piece than to put a rotten one right. But a new start, as every composer knows, would be gravely hampered by the necessity of retaining the same key. Unfortunately, a change of key—the simplest device for obliterating an obsessing idea—would have been unthinkable in the actual situation, according to Schubert’s whole conception of formal unity. The greatest of all the obstacles, nevertheless, must have been the feeling of a gigantic responsibility, incurred by the miracle of the two movements he had finished. For the first time in his life he had brought off an achievement equal to those of the greatest masters. He must have been aware of this, feeling like Icarus, lifted by wings the use of which was still more a matter of instinct than of confident mastery. Then came the miscarriage of the scherzo, conceived in an illstarred moment, perhaps too hastily, without the necessary concentration. Thereafter he may have pored a hundred times over that unfortunate manuscript; whenever he strained his imagination to find a new way, that ghastly mockery in B minor would appear before his eyes, a living monument to his failure. Whatever he tried was crushed instantly by the categorical imperative of his own work, the greatness of which must have appeared to him more and more discouraging with increasing distance. He would have needed the self-control and patience, the iron steadiness of purpose, the ruthless self-critical mind of a mature master to overcome the deadlock. Haydn, Beethoven, Brahms, Verdi, in their later years, would never have abandoned a half-finished work of such importance. Schubert, young and full of genius, had other jobs to do. He threw himself headlong into the adventures of new masterpieces. The skeleton in his cupboard may have haunted - his conscience sometimes. And it was perhaps to get rid of it, that

he eventually gave the whole manuscript to his friend Anselm Hüttenbrenner.

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I wonder whether this explanation will convince those who take a conventional attitude to the behaviour of genius. Schubert, the greatest of all inventors of melody, struggling in vain for inspiration! But look at the evidence, look at that scherzo, and I think you will have to admit that the improbable has in fact happened. You only see the result, the radiant beauty of the finished music. Nothing in it will reveal the pains and struggles, the sleepless nights, the moments of despair through which its creator may have gone before. And he himself would never reveal his secret except involuntarily, as he has done.

[From: *The Music Review* 2, 1921: 63-67.]

* Nottebohm *Ein Skizzenbuch von Beethoven aus dem Jahre* 1803.