

SCHUBERT: Mass No. 6 in E-flat major, D.950

Franz Peter Schubert was born on January 31, 1797, in Vienna and died there on November 19, 1828. He began his Mass in E-flat major in the spring or early summer of 1828 and finished it before his death that November, although the date of its completion is not documented. This Mass was first performed October 4, 1829, at the Dreifaltigkeitskirche (Trinity Church) in Alsergrund, Vienna, conducted by Ferdinand Schubert, the composer's brother. It was not published until 1865—when, at the instigation of Johannes Brahms (who prepared the piano-vocal score anonymously), it appeared in Leipzig and Winterthur under the imprint of Jakob Reiter-Biedermann. The edition used in these performances was prepared in 1996 by Werner Bodendorff for the scholarly Stuttgart Schubert-Ausgaben. These are the first performances of this work by the San Francisco Symphony. The Mass is scored for solo soprano, mezzo-soprano, two tenors, and bass singer; a mixed chorus; and an orchestra comprising two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings. The “D” numbers attached to Schubert's compositions relate to their entries in Schubert: Thematic Catalogue of All His Works in Chronological Order, published in 1951 by Otto Erich Deutsch.

Franz Schubert produced more sacred music than one might expect from a figure whose attitude toward organized religion was far from orthodox. He grew up in a church-going family in Catholic Vienna, and when he was seven he was accepted by the Viennese Capellmeister Antonio Salieri as a chorister in the Imperial Court Chapel and began to sing frequently at Court celebrations of the Mass. He went on to spend five years on a full-tuition scholarship at the Imperial and Royal City College, where the faculty consisted of Piarist monks. Even as an adult he sometimes attended Mass, although mostly only on family occasions. Eventually his belief system seems to have veered more in the direction of Enlightenment-style Deism, and many of the poems he chose for song settings glorify, or at least acknowledge, an all-embracing spiritual force that found pantheistic reflection throughout the universe.

Nonetheless, liturgical music was considered an important avenue for

a serious composer in early-nineteenth-century Vienna, and from 1812, Schubert's fifteenth year (when he wrote a *Salve Regina* and a couple of Mass fragments), through 1828, the final year of his life (the year of this final Mass plus several motets), he produced some forty sacred compositions. Most of these are relatively short—motets or stand-alone Mass movements—but his catalogue does include six full-scale Latin Masses, another Mass in German, a *Stabat Mater* (using the German version of that Holy Week text as rendered by the poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock), and almost two-thirds of what was to be a three-act religious oratorio, *Lazarus* (which he left incomplete). Then, too, one finds an ecumenical streak in Schubert's output, quite unusual for his time, in the setting (D.953) of Psalms 92—in Hebrew—which he composed four months before his death at the behest of the New Jewish Synagogue in Vienna and particularly its cantor, the baritone Salomon Sulzer.

The first four of Schubert's Mass settings, composed between 1814 and 1816, are short and straightforward—charming pieces well worth hearing. The remaining two are of an entirely different order, big-boned expressions of deep, personal substance: the Mass in A-flat major, composed between 1819 and 1822, and then revised several years later; and the Mass in E-flat major, from 1828.

In 1827 Michael Leitermayer, a friend of Schubert's since childhood, had been named choirmaster at the Minorite (Franciscan) Dreifaltigkeitskirche (Trinity Church) in the Viennese suburb of Alsergrund. That was a notable year for the Dreifaltigkeitskirche, in music-historical terms, since it was there, on March 29, that Beethoven's funeral was held and from which began a cemetery-bound procession that attracted some 20,000 people. The church's largest bell had cracked more than two decades earlier and was finally recast. For the ceremony marking its re-installation, on September 2, 1828, Schubert composed his motet *Glaube, Hoffnung und Liebe* ("Faith, Hope, and Charity," D.594), which begins with the apposite text "*Gott! Lass die Glocke glücklich steigen*" (God, let the bell soar up in joy). Almost certainly such an occasional work would have resulted from a

commission.

Scholarly opinion remains unsettled about precisely when or why Schubert set about composing his last Mass. Some musicologists have maintained that he wrote it for Leitermayer and the Dreifaltigkeitskirche as part of a commission, extended in the spring of 1828, that also gave rise to his motets *Intende voci* in B-flat major (D.963), *Tantum ergo* in E-flat major (D.962), and *Hymnus an den heiligen Geist* (D.948); others have been less willing to allow that this was in fact a commission. The pioneering Schubert scholar Otto Erich Deutsch states that Schubert began the Mass in June, but some later historians have held that he actually “copied out” the score in June, and that it may have been started a bit earlier. On July 4 his friend Johann Baptist Jenger reported that Schubert was just then “working hard on a new Mass,” which is the last firm documentation we have about the work’s chronology.

The idea that Schubert envisioned this Mass for liturgical use is itself problematic. Commentators have long stressed an idiosyncrasy of Schubert’s Masses, which is that none of them include the line “*Credo in unam Sanctam catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam*” (I believe in one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church). This omission from the Credo section has sometimes been interpreted as a Schubertian swipe at organized religion in general, which is conceivably the case. Still, Schubert is hardly the only composer to have departed from the official Mass text, and this deviation certainly didn’t prevent his early Masses from being sung at his own parish church in Liechtental. (In the Mass in E-flat Schubert also excises three other phrases from the approved Credo: “*Patrem omnipotentem,*” “*genitum, non factum consubstantialem Patri,*” and “*Et expecto resurrectionem,*” each of which contains considerable theological import. The Gloria, too, is short one sentence: “*Suscipe deprecationem nostram, qui sedes ad dextram Patris.*”) A far greater problem for liturgical performance is the nature of the work itself. Running at about an hour, it would seem too imposing for normal church use. What’s more, this is an inherently symphonic Mass, and although it certainly has been performed with the instrumental parts reduced to a keyboard accompaniment (indeed,

to a piano accompaniment prepared by no less an eminence than Johannes Brahms), doing so misses a critical aspect of the piece.

Whether Schubert intended it or not, what we seem to have here seems at heart a "concert Mass" --a concept that dated at least to the premiere of Beethoven's *Missa solennis* in Saint Petersburg in 1824 and to the first Vienna performances of extended portions of that piece the same year. Still, when the Mass in E-flat finally received its premiere, it did take place in a church, and in fact in the Dreifaltigkeitskirche. It was not, it appears, during a liturgical celebration of Mass, but instead in a concert performance featuring the Alsergrund Church Music Association, which Leitemayer had founded a year earlier.

Leitemayer prepared the musicians through the rehearsals, but the performance itself was conducted by the composer's brother Ferdinand. The date was October 4, 1829, ten and a half months after the composer's death, and a review in the *Wiener Theaterzeitung* (on October 22) reported that it was Schubert's own request that the Mass be performed at the Dreifaltigkeitskirche, thereby confirming some intended (or at least hoped-for) connection between that church and the Mass in E-flat. "It is [Schubert's] last and greatest work," the *Theaterzeitung* stated, "and, as many experts maintain, his finest." Still, that was not a unanimous opinion.

We can appreciate that the Mass in E-flat would have been baffling to many listeners; it departs from certain norms of its genre quite as much as do Schubert's late masterworks in other areas, such as the symphony, the string quartet, the piano sonata, and the song cycle. The opening section, the Kyrie, is a fully symphonic movement, distinctive in its sound right from the wind chords of its outset. Very often composers set the central text ("*Christe eleison*") in a more relaxed and gracious mood than the statements of "*Kyrie eleison*" that surround it. Schubert does the opposite here, imbuing the "*Christe eleison*" with a sense of nervousness, even urgency, through the repeated triplets of the strings. (This "*Christe*" section is a re-composition of music Schubert had written in May 1828 in his little-known *Lebensstürme* for piano four-hands.) By the movement's end we

may feel as if we have entered a vast musical world that is also inhabited by Schubert's late symphonies—the *Unfinished* and, even more so, the *Great C major*.

Schubert apportions the Gloria in three large sections, beginning with the choral outburst of "*Gloria in excelsis Deo*." It's a splendid opening phrase: After three measures of unaccompanied chorus, the violins spring into action with an arpeggiated chord rising upwards through two octaves, landing on the pitch where the choral sopranos take up the second half of the phrase. As the phrase ends the chorus immediately essays a bit of imitative counterpoint, but it proves to be a false start and the chorus sinks back into a homophonic texture. In the "*Laudamus te*" section, trombones add otherworldly tones, and the strings' rising arpeggios develop into an obbligato against the massive texture of the four-part chorus. In the lyricism of "*Gratias agimus tibi*" we have no trouble spotting Schubert the peerless song-composer, magically expressing much through the slightest means. The tempo relaxes for "*Domine Deus*," a strongly etched section where brasses impose octaves against forceful shivers in the strings. An unnerving roll in the timpani heralds a return of the opening Gloria music, now set to the text "*Quoniam tu solus Sanctus*" and curtailed into a brief transition to the "*Cum Sancto Spiritu*."

The "*Cum Sancto Spiritu*" text was traditionally set as a fugue, and here Schubert turns in a fugue in four parts, ending with a grand conclusion.

Quietly rolling timpani begin the Credo, leading to the chorus's recitation of various points of belief, again with short-lived bursts of imitative counterpoint enlivening the texture. Schubert finds himself completely on home turf with the arrival of "*Et incarnatus est*." This is often an expanse of exceptional beauty in Mass settings, and Schubert summons his extraordinary lyric gifts to the task in this andante. Here the soloists make their first appearance: a tenor singing a long-lined melody in lilting 12/8 rhythm, then joined by another tenor, and then both joined by a soprano. The music swerves into the minor mode and the chorus enters with "*Crucifixus*," a section of high drama in both the

dynamic contrasts and the orchestration; the soprano and two tenors return, and then the choral "*Crucifixus*" again. The tempo picks up for the choral "*Et resurrexit*," another movement with a timpani roll for an introduction. At the words "*et vitam venturi*" Schubert launches into another fugue, working it out over the impressive length of 224 measures.

Awe infuses the opening of the Sanctus, with its juxtaposition of harmonically distant chords sounding vast and visionary, as though it were a premonition of Bruckner or Vaughan Williams. Another fugue follows, at "*Osanna in excelsis*." This fugue, though short, is unflagging in its energy and creative in its chromaticism. Soloists return for the pastoral "*Benedictus*," now as a standard quartet of soprano, contralto, tenor, and bass in alternation with the chorus, after which we revisit the "*Osanna*" fugue. The "*Agnus Dei*" opens with more fugal writing, this time derived from the C-sharp-minor Fugue from Book One of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, in angular contours and a spirit of gloom that seems more inspired by "the sins of the world" than the taking away thereof. The C minor tonality of the "*Agnus Dei*" yields to the overriding key of E-flat major for the serene "*Dona nobis pacem*," although almost until the end the more menacing emotions of the "*Agnus Dei*" remain in play, leaving the listener in a state of general ambivalence, torn between minor and major, between anguish and calm, between grief and hope.

In the end, the finest moments of Schubert's Mass in E-flat embody greatness absolutely, and they point the way down the path that Schubert would have continued to pursue had he not been cut off at the age of thirty-one.

—James M. Keller