

From Shadow to Light

Our program presents four works well established in the symphonic repertoire. The two shorter ones depict the magic of Nature through musical portraits of beautiful birds. Each of the longer pieces traces an emotional journey from darkness and shadow to serenity and light.

Schubert: Symphony in B minor, in two movements

Known universally as the “Unfinished”, the symphony in B minor differs from Schubert’s other three incomplete symphonies in that he composed a full orchestral score of two movements. Performances of those two alone have always left audiences feeling satisfied both musically and emotionally, so we might simply call it a two movement symphony.

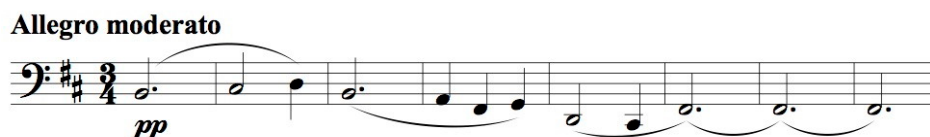
Schubert was 25 in 1822 when he wrote these movements. In appreciation of an honorary membership offered by a musical society in Graz—and perhaps in the hope that the society would have at least one of the movements performed—he sent the manuscript and two pages of a scherzo to his friend Anselm Hüttenbrenner, a member of the society. In the remaining six years of his life Schubert seems never to have mentioned the work to anyone else; Hüttenbrenner did not mention it to the Graz society either. Among the papers preserved by Schubert’s brother was a piano sketch of most of the rest of the scherzo. That is all we know for sure about Schubert’s role.

Many years later, in 1865, Hüttenbrenner showed the manuscript to Johann von Herbeck, director of the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* in Vienna. Herbeck had the work performed (“completing” it with the finale of Schubert’s earlier D major symphony); the audience reception was enthusiastic. The two finished movements were published together in 1867. In this form the work entered the symphonic repertoire, where it quickly became a staple.

Much ink has been spilled over why Schubert never “finished” the piece. Biographical facts, such as that in 1822 he was diagnosed with syphilis, have been brought in. Why Hüttenbrenner kept the manuscript secret has been thoroughly analyzed. An entr’acte in B minor from the incidental music to *Rosamunde* has been suggested as originally intended for the final movement of the symphony. Music historians love such puzzles. But none of their speculations are supported by more than circumstantial evidence at best. We just don’t know what Schubert decided about the work, or why.

This has been called the first truly romantic symphony, those of Beethoven up to that time being more firmly rooted in the classical tradition. It is also the first major symphony to make full use of three trombones, which provide a depth to the sound that Schubert seems to have loved.

The first movement opens with a brief plainsong, played by cellos and basses, which sets a somber mood and then disappears until the development:



A soft rustling figuration in the strings, over which the oboe plays a plaintive melody, is the first subject. This builds to a climax, ending with a fortissimo chord in the home key of B minor. Schubert evades the usual transition passage to the relative major, D. Instead, horns and bassoons simply hold the middle note, D, of the B minor triad, which is also the fifth tone in G major, and they slide smoothly into that key for the second subject:

The syncopation in the last two bars introduces one of the most famous of all symphonic melodies, played by the cellos. After some repetition in the strings, the music comes softly to a complete stop. The whole orchestra returns, the famous melody is developed briefly, the tonality returns to B minor and the exposition is repeated. The development is based on the plainsong and the syncopated figure above. The rustling pattern in the strings opens the recapitulation; the tonality moves to F# minor from where the same transition leads to D major for the second subject. After a reprise of the soft stop the section ends in the home key, leading to a short coda based on the first two bars of the plainsong. The final chord, with a quick diminuendo from fortissimo, is an early use of a favorite device of romantic composers, conveying a sense of tragic resignation.

A gently moving *Andante con moto* in the bright key of E major, the second movement is in ABAB form. A marching bass line setting the tempo introduces a chorale theme in the strings, at the end of which is a pattern which plays an important part in the rest of the movement:

The whole orchestra takes up the marching bass; the chorale theme appears again in the woodwinds. Then the passage above, passed back and forth between winds and strings, ends the first A section. In another abrupt Schubertian modulation, the violins alone play a line starting on the third tone of the scale, G#, which becomes the fifth tone in the related key of C# minor:

The clarinet enters gently, as only a clarinet can, with a simple melody. When it is handed off to the oboe the tonality changes to the major. The full orchestra enters in the minor for an extended marching section, after which a transition leads back to E major for a reprise of the A section. Violins play their solo line again, leading to a varied B section, the oboe and clarinet reversing their roles. There follows a coda based on the two patterns quoted. This fades slowly away as the marching bass returns one last time. A final shimmering E major chord closes the work.

It is fair to say that the scherzo sketches are not up to the standard of the finished movements, and to guess that Schubert knew it. Perhaps he was simply unable to resume at that inspired level and gave up. Conductors and others have made orchestrations of the sketches; a few have “completed” the work by adding the *Rosamunde* entr’acte. None of these attempts have caught on with the public. And for good reason. Adding anything less sublime to these two beautiful movements would be like trying to “finish” the incomplete slave statues by Michelangelo in the *Accademia* in Florence.

Vaughan Williams: The Lark Ascending

George Meredith published in 1881 a paean to the song of the skylark, called *The Lark Ascending*. It achieved a critical success second only to that of Shelley’s famous ode, *To a Skylark*.

In 1914 Ralph Vaughan Williams composed a tone poem for violin and piano based on these lines from the Meredith poem:

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| <i>He rises and begins to round,</i> | <i>And ever winging up and up,</i> |
| <i>He drops the silver chain of sound,</i> | <i>Our valley is his golden cup</i> |
| <i>Of many links without a break,</i> | <i>And he the wine which overflows</i> |
| <i>In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake.</i> | <i>to lift us with him as he goes.</i> |
| <i>For singing till his heaven fills,</i> | <i>Till lost on his aerial rings</i> |
| <i>’Tis love of earth that he instils,</i> | <i>In light, and then the fancy sings.</i> |

The composer’s 1920 arrangement for violin and orchestra has become a concert favorite. The florid solo part is often written without bar lines to emphasize the improvisational style of the lark’s song. One imagines the bird climbing up and soaring over the countryside, singing all the while. There are suggestions in the orchestra of folk dances, presumably observed from above by the lark. At the end the violin ascends to its highest range, becoming softer and softer, as described in the last two quoted lines of the poem, until the song is heard only in the memory of the listener.

Saint-Saens: *Le cygne*, from *Le carnaval des animaux*

The suite called *Le carnaval des animaux* (Carnival of the Animals) was written in 1886 after Saint-Saens had retired to a small Austrian village following a disastrous concert tour. Feeling the need to do something for fun, he compiled a suite for two pianos and a small orchestra. It was performed only in private settings, because the composer worried that its “frivolous” nature would mar his reputation as a serious composer. He insisted that it not be published in his lifetime, but relented in the case of the number for solo cello called *Le cygne* (The Swan), of which he published a version with piano accompaniment.

This serenely beautiful melody has been arranged in many versions for many combinations of instruments. But it only sounds really right when played on the instrument for which it was written. Our version presents the cello section of the orchestra, in an arrangement with harp instead of piano, made by Garth Molyneux of our horn section.

Mozart: Concerto for piano and orchestra in D minor

The years 1784-86 saw Mozart’s greatest popular and financial success in Vienna. He still didn’t have the appointment at the imperial court that he (and especially his father) thought he deserved. But he was widely recognized as a fine composer and a great piano virtuoso. He successfully organized a series of subscription concerts (called “academies”) featuring himself playing new piano concertos. These continued until the presentation of the C minor concerto in 1786, after which the fickle Viennese connoisseurs found new artists upon whom to shower their temporary praise. During this period Mozart completed *Le Nozze di Figaro*, the last three string quartets dedicated to Haydn, and the “Prague” symphony, among other notable works. Never one to hoard his good fortune, Mozart moved his family into a fashionable apartment near St. Stephen’s cathedral in the center of Vienna; it is now a tourist exhibit.

During this time his father Leopold came for a visit and was present at the premiere of the D minor concerto, writing about it to his daughter Nannerl back in Salzburg: "I heard an excellent new piano concerto by Wolfgang, on which the copyist was still at work when we got there, and your brother didn't even have time to play through the rondo because he had to oversee the copying operation." Despite this last minute panic the performance went well, he said. (One wonders, given the high standards we now expect, what a modern critic would have said.)

The form of a concerto first movement was well established by the time Mozart wrote this one. The orchestra presents the thematic material, then the soloist enters and, along with the orchestra, goes over pretty much the same ground. Development and recapitulation sections follow, at the end of which there is a sustained chord with the fifth tone of the scale at the bottom. The soloist alone plays an improvisational development of the material (a *cadenza*), usually with a trill to let the orchestra know it is ending, and then the whole group plays a short coda to finish the movement.

The D minor concerto mostly follows this pattern. With upper strings in their lowest registers playing a restless syncopation over insistent pedal notes in the bass, the opening statement sets a dark and foreboding mood:



A second theme in the relative major is presented by the winds, but it doesn't sound much brighter, and gives way to the minor again. The soloist enters, responding to the orchestra with a yearning *arioso* theme; this response is played several times by the soloist, in both minor and major modes, but never by the orchestra. The second exposition proceeds, offering in the middle a new theme in the major, a rare bright spot in the movement. But in the recapitulation everything is in the minor. After the *cadenza* the coda, built on the menacing bass line quoted above, dies away softly. A darker sounding concerto movement may never have been written.

How to follow that? The *Romanza* begins with the soloist alone, playing eight bars of an innocently wistful melody, repeated by the orchestra. Another eight bars by the soloist, also repeated by the orchestra. Then a longer section by the soloist accompanied by strings, leading to a reprise of the earlier material. It amounts to a lovely song without words.

A stormy section follows in which the soloist, accompanied only by sustained chords in the winds and crisp chords in the strings, spins out an elaborate excursion in the minor mode. This gradually leads back to a shortened version of the opening material, after which a brief coda ends the movement gracefully.

[At the end of the movie *Amadeus* this movement is played while the credits run on the screen. In the theater where I saw the movie the audience sat in rapt silence, listening and watching the names go by, simply unwilling to get up and leave as long as the music was playing.]

In Mozart's time it was traditional for pieces in the minor to end up somehow in the major. The last movement of a long work might be set in that mode (Beethoven's 5th symphony). A shorter piece might just end on a major chord (some Bach fugues). Here Mozart chooses a middle ground.

The *Rondo* opens with an upward D minor rush by the soloist, introducing the stormy main subject. A brief calmer second subject, also in the minor, gives way to the main subject again. Then a transition to the relative major leads to this jaunty little tune:



The stormy subject returns, with interplay between it and the second subject. The little tune returns in the minor, sounding rather wilted. Mozart seems intent on carrying the minor mode to the end, but suddenly the soloist stops on an ambiguous diminished seventh chord. The winds break out into the little tune, now in D major, and start a procession toward a happy ending.

After all that has gone before, the happiness seems a bit unconvincing, but darkness has indeed yielded to sunlight.