

## Franz Schubert's Symphony No. 8 ("Unfinished")

### Program Notes

Few works in the orchestral repertoire are as beloved—or as intriguingly incomplete—as Schubert's "*Unfinished*" Symphony. Composed in 1822, when Schubert was just twenty-five, the symphony consists of only two fully orchestrated movements (with fragments of a third). Why Schubert abandoned it remains one of music's enduring mysteries.

What makes the "Unfinished" so enduring is precisely the quality that its nickname implies: a sense of yearning that is never resolved. Schubert had a gift — unrivaled among his contemporaries — for harmonic motion that creates longing rather than satisfaction, that moves *toward* rather than *arriving*. In these two movements, that quality achieves something close to pure expression. The symphony does not feel truncated; it feels suspended, held in a state of beautiful, unresolved reaching.

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#### i. Allegro moderato

The symphony begins in near-silence: cellos and basses intone a low, murmuring theme beneath the threshold of comfort — an atmosphere of unease established before a melody has even been heard. From this unsettled ground, the oboe and clarinet introduce one of Schubert's most achingly beautiful themes, gentle and songlike, but shadowed. The development section unleashes considerable violence, with stabbing accents and harmonic wrenching that make the eventual return of the opening material feel hard-won rather than reassuring. Throughout, Schubert's orchestration is masterly — the instruments speak with a chamber-music intimacy even at full force.

#### II. Andante con moto

The second movement moves to E major, and the emotional temperature shifts from anxiety to something more like consolation — though never quite peace. The cellos again open proceedings, now with a pizzicato accompaniment beneath a hymn-like melody in the violins. A more dramatic central episode intrudes, but the movement ultimately subsides into quiet, the strings dissolving into a hush. The final bars do not so much conclude as recede — the music retreating into a stillness from which it does not return.

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### Background

The question of *why* Schubert left the symphony unfinished has occupied musicologists ever since. He was not ill at the time of composition — that would come later. He was not distracted by failure; 1822 was a productive and relatively successful year. One persistent theory holds that the two completed movements were so self-contained, so perfectly

balanced against each other, that Schubert intuited no further continuation was possible. Another suggests the work was offered as a gift to the Graz Music Society, passed along to a friend named Anselm Hüttenbrenner, and simply forgotten in the shuffle of Schubert's chaotic life.

When it was finally premiered in Vienna in 1865, forty-three years after its composition, audiences were overwhelmed. The conductor Johann von Herbeck had tracked down the manuscript through Hüttenbrenner himself, now an old man. The symphony entered the repertoire immediately and has never left it.

There have been completions — several composers have attempted to construct a third and fourth movement from Schubert's sketches. None has supplanted the original two. The "Unfinished" symphony, it turns out, was finished all along.