

EIR Reviews

On understanding Franz Schubert

by Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr.

Schubert's Ninth Symphony

Columbia Symphony Orchestra, with Bruno Walter conducting, 1959
CBS/Odyssey CD, \$6.99

Schubert's Ninth Symphony

Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra, with Bruno Walter conducting, 1950
AS Disc, includes the Eighth Symphony, \$13.99

Franz Schubert is probably the most underrated of the major classical composers. The failure of the musicologists on this account is perhaps most easily addressed by reference to typical appreciations of Schubert's song settings of strophic poetry.

I've recognized this problem of appreciation of Schubert's strophic settings over some years and have had occasion to attack the problem of appreciation with some of my friends in relevant connections. But the correctness of my views on this matter was brought to the fore recently by reading a book by Johannes Brahms's composition student Gustav Jenner,* and particularly passages in the book which reference Brahms's own comments on the subject of the setting of strophic poetry with references to Schubert in particular. My reaction to the Brahms commentaries, as transmitted by Jenner, was strengthened by hearing a broadcast

of a performance of the Schubert C Major Symphony, the so-called Great C Major, by the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra.

I should just briefly comment on the chamber orchestra's performance and then work my way backwards to the obviously musicological point, and then to a deeper point bearing upon the musicological point.

The Great C Major Symphony

My affiliation with the Schubert Great C Major Symphony began, as perhaps for most people in my generation, with the famous performances of this work by the late Bruno Walter, relatively a student of Gustav Mahler in conducting.

I think that perhaps Walter's tempi, particularly in the second movement, were slightly too slow, but in the performance by the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra [from an Oct. 20, 1989 live broadcast, conducted by Christof Perick—ed.], the tempi for the first two movements were significantly too fast. And I think the conductor in choosing those tempi, made precisely the kind of mistake which I'm addressing; that is, the underappreciation of the depth of Schubert's work. Although there were points when I thought that his reading of the score was coming close to this deeper truth, the choice of tempo made it difficult to convey that deeper truth.

Brahms's point, which I think is fairly obvious to any musician or musicologist who has worked through the performance of these scores carefully, note by note, so to speak, is that Schubert obviously does not set a simple accompaniment which is constant, or to be performed in a constant manner for the singing of each of the successive verse(s) of the strophic

poem. Rather, what Schubert does, as Brahms points out, according to Jenner's report, is to anticipate the variation which must occur in the treatment of each strophe by the singer, and to choose an accompaniment which is adapted to the performance of all the strophes, rather than simply setting it to the first strophe and having the others follow.

That is, Schubert, as many singers and accompanists have noted, will sometimes take something away, it seems, from what might have been done with the setting for the first strophe, and in fact, this is done in a manner which anticipates something which is coming in the later strophe, or which anticipates a need for some variability.

One of the best examples of this in symphonic works is, of course, the famous Great C Major Symphony and particularly the second movement, the slow movement of the symphony, which gives us precisely the same kind of problem in composition. This is not an atypical problem for appreciation of Schubert. Many have thought that Schubert overdoes the length of some of his compositions, and many think it is because of Schubert's lack of the great facility of counterpoint which Beethoven had.

It's true that Schubert's counterpoint is not as impressive, by any means, as that of Beethoven, but nonetheless, Schubert is no dummy in music. And if we look at this strophic problem as Jenner cites Brahms's allusion to it, then we see that perhaps the problem in some of these longer compositions of Schubert, which have been criticized as being overly long, is that the performer perhaps has missed the point, has missed some very important subtleties of variation. I wish to address that and then turn directly to my principal contribution on this subject.

Strophic poetry and lieder

In a strophic form, in poetry itself, and therefore also the lied setting of the strophic poem, there is a progression, so that one is in a sense holding back in the performance and in the composition, in order to bring the thing to a conclusion, so to speak, in the proper manner. The most important thing in any musical composition is the unity of effect of the composition as a whole, as applied to movements and, of course, to sonata forms, symphonies, and so forth.

But each subsection must have a sense of completeness; it must convey a sense of not being too long, or too short, of having said what it must say, and then becoming silent and bringing on the next movement or next composition. The same is true in a strophic setting, a lied setting of a strophic poem; that the poem should be recited, in the first place, in a manner such that every verse is necessary and every foot in that poem is necessary to bring this to the conclusion which must be clearly the artistic pinnacle or peak of the composition.

This must be achieved by the music; and thus, as Brahms implies, in my view in what Jenner reports, that in choosing the accompaniment for the song line, the composer should

anticipate this, and thus choose a piano accompaniment, for example, that is designed to facilitate this progressive process of bringing a composition conceptually to what is obviously a conclusion, a complete statement, which would be incomplete without that conclusion. Now, that's obviously true if one looks closely at the fine texture of the second movement of the C Major Symphony. There is not simply repetition, not simply redundancy; there is important development occurring, but in a very subtle way, in the same way that we would look for development, or should look for development, in a Schubert strophic song setting.

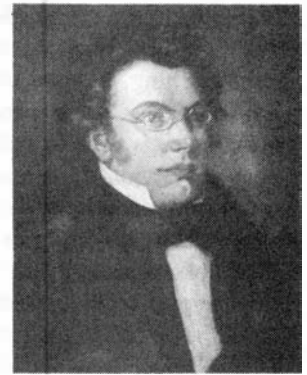
It is obvious from the recorded literature, which is most helpful, as well as often unhelpful, in accessing the problem of interpretation, that many of the great accompanists and singers have been quite well aware of this, and, while some have lent themselves to the abominable practice of arbitrary variation, others have sought for, successfully, the composers' and poets' intended line of variation, to bring us to what I've indicated as the satisfactory conceptual conclusion as coinciding with the last note of a movement, song, or a symphony or sonata.

What I would like to address more emphatically, to bring this all into focus, is that what is done, when done successfully, in a strophic setting, as by Schubert in a song, is precisely what I've indicated as the relevant process to be considered in such writings as my recent *In Defense of Common Sense* and also in the *Project A* appendices to that afterthought to *In Defense of Common Sense*.**

Transfinite ordering

All musical thought is essentially located in that kind of transfinite ordering, a process of development which is not merely a development in the sense of a succession that we can map out: B following A; and C, B; and D, C; and E, D. But rather, that the ordering of A, B, C, and D, as variations and development, itself is clearly a unified conception, an indivisible conception, a "one" so to speak, and that "one" is the essence, i.e., in musical composition, of the idea of the composition.

It is not the sameness of the composition which is the composition throughout, but rather the slight variation, the differences. So we're recognizingly dealing with something that is almost the same as, but not quite, and the succession of "not quites" and how these "not quites" are integrated and ordered is the thing which ought to occupy our attention; and from understanding how these things are ordered to be slightly different from one another, there arises a unifying



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conception of the composition as a whole.

That is the particular genius of a well-performed Schubert strophic setting. It is not colored by wild, arbitrary, romantic variation for color or effects; but rather the apparatus of performance is used to make these very slight distinctions, which never violate the rule. But yet in this degree of variation, it is an underlying dynamic in going from one strophe to the next which becomes at the conclusion a very special quality of excitement, an excitement of something in the presence of something ghostly from the standpoint of ordinary sense perception: a ghostly presence behind the ordering of sense perceptions, a ghostly presence with a personality, so to speak.

At the end we recognize the face of this ghostly presence, a metaphor for the composition as a whole. We associate that ghostly face, that presence, with a name of the composition, named for the metaphor, and that metaphor is the concept of the composition. That is precisely what Schubert usually does. That is his genius in these compact strophic songs and also the same principle in other forms of composition: to give us this clear image of this face, this face as a name for the metaphor, this ghostly presence, which becomes fully obvious to us at the end of a well-performed composition.

The same thing is true, in particular, of the second movement of the Great C Major Symphony. I loved the Bruno Walter performance, despite my criticisms of it from the outset of the first hearing, and it has always become for that reason the standard of comparison whenever I hear the C Major performed, even to the present day. In the recent hearing of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra's performance, I was pleased that the bodies involved had the good sense to recognize the validity of using a chamber orchestra for this composition. I was not uncomfortable with the tempo of the third or fourth movement; I thought that some improvement in transparency was achieved—the clarity of the composer's intent in the third and last movement was clear enough to me—but I thought the excessively fast tempi in the first and second movement tended to trivialize the meaning of the movements and the composition as a whole by playing down, through the concern for speed, the shaping of tone which is necessary to bring forth in the fullest measure these variations which are the carryover of Schubert's approach to composition of a strophic composition into symphony.

This is true in the first movement, the tempo was a bit too fast. A bit slower, with more articulation, more shaping of tone, more phrasing, more subtlety; and then, of course, above all, in the second movement. I was happy to hear it, happy enough that it provoked me to emit this observation, which I think is a useful one.

**Johannes Brahms als Mensch, Lehrer und Künstler*, second edition, by Gustav Jenner, N.G. Elwert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, G. Braun, Marburg and der Lahn, 1930.

***In Defense of Common Sense*, 1989, published by the Schiller Institute, Washington, D.C. *Project A* is a recent, unpublished manuscript by LaRouche.

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