

DRESDEN PHILHARMONIC

PROGRAM SUBJECT TO CHANGE

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Notes on the Program

By Aaron Grad

Symphony No. 8 in B minor, D. 759 "Unfinished" (1822)

FRANZ SCHUBERT

Born Jan. 31, 1797, in Vienna.

Died Nov. 19, 1828, in Vienna.

Unlike other famous unfinished pieces of music, like Bach's *Art of Fugue* or Mozart's *Requiem*, Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony was not cut short by the composer's death. Given that Schubert lived another six years after completing two movements and sketching a third of his B minor Symphony, it is tempting to speculate why he would have abandoned the project. Some scholars cite musical dissatisfaction—clearly this symphony was a major leap forward for Schubert, but he may still have felt unprepared to develop the kind of lofty (i.e. Beethovenian) symphonic statement he finally achieved three years later with the "Great" Symphony in C Major. Another compelling possibility comes from recent scholarship around Schubert's personal and physical wellbeing. Historians now believe that Schubert contracted syphilis around January 1823 (mere weeks after finishing the first movements of the B minor Symphony), and that the physical and emotional toll of the illness that would claim his life precipitated a distinct break from his previously carefree pursuits.

Regardless of the circumstances regarding its creation and dismissal, we can be grateful

that Schubert gave us enough of his B minor Symphony to preserve it as one of the great orchestral statements of the early Romantic period. The first movement reveals two slightly unorthodox choices just from a first glance at the score, namely a key of B minor (neither Haydn, Mozart nor Beethoven ever wrote a symphony in this key) and a meter of three beats per measure. As might be expected from young Schubert, the melodic invention seems to borrow heavily from lieder, like in the primary theme played by woodwinds over string accompaniment, which could easily be imagined in a setting for soprano and piano. The G Major secondary area is approached and left by the briefest transitions, but the theme itself is a relaxed delight. The development creates near-operatic drama out of an introductory theme from the low strings. All these treatments demonstrate Schubert finding his voice in the symphonic format.

The second movement, an *Andante con moto* in E Major, is again in a triplet meter (another speculation is that Schubert abandoned the project when he realized that his two completed movements and sketches of the third were all in triple meters, a construction which might have been considered gauche in classical Vienna). This movement follows a simpler structure built around alternating two main themes. Clearly the ending is not one to cap a grand symphony, but instead functions quite well for the kind of concert overture this work has come to represent.