

Symphony No. 9 in C major, D. 944, “The Great”

FRANZ SCHUBERT

B. January 31, 1797, Vienna

D. November 19, 1828, Vienna

Premiered on March 21, 1839 by the Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestra, with Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy conducting.

Scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings. (approx. 50 minutes).

By the late 1810s, Schubert’s correspondence began to show frequent references to his desire to write a so-called “grand symphony.” Mozart’s Symphony No. 41 (“Jupiter”) is the acknowledged model for this “grand” style: a large-scale heroic symphony in C or D major that, in the words of musicologist Maynard Solomon, contains “resolute, irresistible motion toward an exalted goal.” By the time Schubert set his sights on such a composition, much of his music had already begun to take on these characteristics. This period includes the C-Major Symphony No. 6 (1818), sometimes called the “Little Great” to distinguish it from its later cousin, the C-Major Symphony No. 9. Both symphonies seem to have aspirations as “grand” symphonies, but Schubert clearly grew much as a composer between 1818 and 1826, the year he is thought to have completed the Ninth: only in the latter work did Schubert undoubtedly achieve his goal of a grand symphony. Schubert’s Ninth eventually cemented his reputation as Beethoven’s successor, although it was not until after his death that the work was first heard and gradually established a place in the symphonic repertoire.

A slow introduction to a sonata-allegro first movement was by this time a relatively common feature of symphonies, including Schubert’s own. In the Ninth, Schubert seems to have realized that such an opening could serve not only a rhetorical purpose, but a functional one as well: here, it serves as a springboard for the rest of the movement, establishing rhythmic and melodic contours that form the basis of what follows. The first theme initially appears as a “typical” eight-measure phrase, but rather than a four-square division into two sections of 4 measures each, Schubert constructed a theme that is slightly asymmetrical, divided instead into a group of three and five, with the final two measures simply a repetition of the sixth measure with the note values doubled. The artistic profile of this theme gives the rest of the movement its essential direction and allowed Schubert to derive an extraordinary depth of structure from a single melody of apparent simplicity.

This theme is spun out in a series of variations before finally building to a bold, sunny arrival at the allegro. The remainder of the movement is an extraordinary expansion of traditional sonata form, much of it built on transformations of material from the introduction. Few of the formal sections are arrived at traditionally; Schubert evades endings and moves quickly away from resting points, and the powerful rhythmic drive almost never lets up. This culminates in a re-statement of the introductory theme, this time *fortissimo* and with full orchestra - a grand presentation that balances the impressive scale of the movement.

The oboe melody that opens the second movement has a slightly exotic flavor, its lyricism contrasting with confident march-like sections that alternate between major and minor.

The middle section features a violin theme, gradually winding down until a soft horn calls for a return of the oboe theme. At the end of the movement, insistent *tutti* octaves played by every player are met with quiet responses from the winds, which manage to draw the movement quietly to a close.

Even the third movement Scherzo of this symphony is quite large in scale, though not heavy in character. The dance-like, triple-meter scherzo develops a variety of themes, from jolly staccato ones to more lyrical passages. It is connected to the first movement through a section in A-flat major, and to the second movement by A major, the key of its gorgeously lyrical Trio section.

The scale of this movement sets up the finale, another sonata-form movement propelled by a relentlessly cheerful rhythmic drive. The movement opens with two short motives - a dotted figure and a triplet - that will play an important role throughout the movement, appearing separately and together. A bit later, a clear statement of four repeated notes in the unison horns become another important thematic foundation. This four-note gesture becomes hugely important in the coda, where it begins to resemble a pared-down, turned-up version of the dotted figure that opened the allegro of the first movement, creating the kind of symmetry that unifies and thus makes successful a work of this colossal scale.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Schubert's Symphony No. 9 on Jan. 4-5, 2002, with Günther Herbig conducting.

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