

Schubert - Der Tod und das Mädchen (Amadeus Quartet) [1983]



Streichquartett d-moll D810 "Der Tod und das Mädchen" 1 *Allegro* 11:43 2 *Andante con moto* 14:10 3 *Scherzo, Allegro molto* 3:39 4 *Presto* 8:58

Quartettsatz c-moll D703

5 *Allegro assai* 8:40

Amadeus Quartet: Norbert Brainin, Siegmund Nissel, Peter Schidlof, Martin Lovett

As morbid as it may seem today, preoccupation with death was quite fashionable in the nineteenth century. The Romantic movement in music, drama, art, and literature embraced the idea of death as transcendent and fulfilling rather than fearsome. Medical science was still in its infancy, and the only real cure for many illnesses was the end of life. Death was gentle. Death was peace. Death was an end to suffering.

In this light, Franz Schubert's own fascination with death was neither unusual nor inexplicable. In March 1824, having endured the symptoms of syphilis for nearly two years, he wrote, "Each night when I go to sleep, I hope never to wake again, and each morning serves only to recall the misery of the previous day."

Since the still-youthful composer was not yet consigned to the grave, he continued to develop his musical genius, and in this same month he completed the original version of the String Quartet in D minor, "Der Tod und das Mädchen" (Death and the Maiden). Based on the opening theme from his song of the same name (1817), this quartet clearly illustrates Schubert's sympathy, even longing, for death. By appropriating the music of the song, Schubert also imbues the quartet with the sentiments of the original text, in which Death urges a frightened maiden to trust him: he means her no harm, and she will sleep soundly in his arms.

This work is significant for several reasons. It is considered one of Schubert's finest chamber works, and it has always occupied a favored spot in the string quartet repertory. Its frankly programmatic content connects it with later nineteenth century works, in which structural concerns yielded to extramusical and dramatic influences. Finally, the quartet is a striking reminder to those who like to pigeonhole Schubert as a miniaturist or as a "song composer": it stands alongside the "Unfinished" Symphony and the Wanderer-Fantasie as a testament to his sense of large-scale organization and to the promise unfulfilled as a result of his early death.

The work begins aggressively, with full-throated gestures that establish both the thematic and rhythmic structure of the first movement. Schubert makes use of one of his signature rhythmic devices, a quarter note followed by triplet eighths. The second theme is sweetly lyrical, joyful and upbeat, full of life and energy. The movement ends breathlessly but sweetly.

The second movement, a fourteen-minute Andante con moto, introduces the "Death" theme, which corresponds to the opening piano introduction of "Der Tod und das Mädchen." Five variations on the theme follow, all of which vary only slightly from the original, as if Death is insistent -- not swayed or deterred.

At less than four minutes, the third-movement scherzo is abrupt and puzzling, as if its only function is to serve as prologue to the driving, almost demonic finale. It is rhythmically challenging, and features unexpected accents and cadences.

In the final movement, Schubert applies his customary momentum and drive to first establish and then build an inexorable rush. The figure of a dotted eighth note followed by a sixteenth note is used throughout as the driving force, though it is frequently interrupted. In the end, Death is relentless, and the movement swirls to a massive but abrupt conclusion. ---Rovi

A distance of nearly half a decade separates the last string quartet composed during Franz Schubert's prentice years and the first he wrote as a fully mature composer. This is the String Quartet in C minor, D. 703 of December 1820, popularly known as the "Quartettsatz" because only a single movement of the piece was finished -- putting it in the same celebrated and lengthy catalog of unfinished Schubert compositions that includes the famous B minor

Symphony of 1822.

The "Quartettsatz" marks something of a coming of age for Schubert. The instrumental compositions written before the new decade all somehow lack the individuality that marks Schubert's lieder from 1815 onward; with the "Quartettsatz," Schubert begins to find ways to fuse the instrumental heritage he absorbed during his years as a pupil of Salieri with those compelling dramatic aims which, for years, he had no way of corraling without a text.

The "Quartettsatz," D. 703 shares something besides its unfinished status with the famous B minor "Unfinished" Symphony: an introduction built of fluttering, insecure string figurations. In the Symphony, these are hesitant and mysterious; in the "Quartettsatz" they boil with passion, beginning pianissimo with the solo first violin and then swelling to a massive fortissimo climax. In many ways, the rest of the piece is a series of similar swells from one dynamic extreme to another -- the music pulsates with gritty passion, nervous fury, and soaring ecstasy, and little room is made for more temperate gestures.

That the movement is an example of some type of sonata-allegro form is clear; just what the formal boundaries of this advanced sonata design are has long been a topic of considerable discussion. If we back up and take a fresh look at the piece, however, Schubert's plan is plain to see.

We can easily follow the broad divisions of sonata form: an exposition that begins in C minor and ends in G major, a development section that eventually makes its way back to a landscape that we recognize as belonging to the exposition, a retooling of the myriad thoughts of the opening, and finally a brief reprise of the introductory "fluttering." The fact that Schubert's first substantial melodic idea -- a lofty idea that spans two full octaves in the first violin -- appears in A flat major rather than the tonic C minor, and reappears first in B flat major and then in E flat major as the recapitulation begins, is a matter that only a hard-boiled formalist will lose sleep over; indeed, such intentional formal obfuscation and overlapping is something that Franz Liszt would soon pick up on and transform into a whole new style. Some measure of peace is found in the repetitive, chorale-like music that acts as a coda for both the exposition and the recapitulation, but in the end, it is the nervous wreck in Schubert that wins out. --- Blair Johnston, Rovi

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