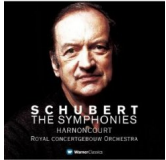


Schubert – The Symphonies (Harnoncourt) [2005]

Written by bluesever

Friday, 16 July 2010 12:56 - Last Updated Tuesday, 29 April 2014 15:24

Schubert – The Symphonies (Harnoncourt) [2005]



CD 1 [75:21] *Symphony No. 1 in D major, D82 (1811-13) [27:47]* *Symphony No. 4 in C minor, D417 'Tragic' (1816) [31:16]* *Overture in the Italian Style in D major, D590 (1817) [08:12]*
Overture in the Italian Style in C major, D591 (1817) [07:59] CD 2 [69:01]
Symphony No. 2 in B flat major, D125 (1812) [33:58] *Symphony No. 6 in C major, D589 'Little C Major' (1818) [35:00]*
CD 3 [77:43]
Symphony No. 3 in D major, D200 (1814) [24:26] *Symphony No. 5 in B flat major, D485 (1816) [26:49]* *Symphony No. 8 in B minor, D759 'Unfinished' (1822) [26:25]*
CD 4 [58:23] *Symphony No. 9 in C major, D944 'Great' (1828) [58:23]* Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra Nikolaus Harnoncourt – conductor Recorded at performances at the Concertgebouw hall, Amsterdam, Holland during May and November 1992.

These four CDs, comprising Schubert's entire symphonic output and the two Overtures 'in the Italian style,' were recorded live in concert in 1992.

Nikolaus Harnoncourt is convinced that Schubert's early symphonies in particular are misunderstood. He performed them as a cellist in the Vienna Symphony Orchestra and felt at the time that he knew them intimately. But later he began to study them – as they were written, not as they are usually performed – and he also studied the early songs. He came to the conclusion that Schubert was not trying to write in a brilliant style to imitate composers like Rossini but that he had made a conscious decision to write music in his own way. "In his early symphonies, as in the early songs, Schubert is already Schubert." (Harnoncourt)

The first six symphonies were composed between 1813 and 1818, when Schubert was in his late teens and early 20s. During the period from 1818 to 1822, he composed a few symphonic fragments including the Symphony in B minor, the so-called 'Unfinished.' It was in 1822 that he

composed two movements and sketched the third but only orchestrated its first nine measures. The score was left unfinished and unpublished for many years, resurfacing in 1865, some 37 years after the composer's death. Schubert's "Great" C Major Symphony, composed in 1828, the last year of his life, was submitted to the Musikverein in Vienna but was deemed too difficult to play. In 1839, Robert Schumann came across the complete, yet unknown, score, which he sent to the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. They performed it the same year and it was "rapturously acclaimed." --- mdt.co.uk

Schubert seems to be particularly well served in the CD catalogues at the moment and I for one am most happy with the extensive choice available across his broad range of genres. The Warner Classics label have re-released this four disc box set of recordings that were originally available at full-price on Teldec 4509-91184-2. The only difference from the acclaimed 1993 Teldec set that I am aware of is the inclusion of the two seldom heard D major and C major Overtures in the Italian Style, from 1817. Several of the original Teldec recordings have also been released on Warners' Elatus and Apex labels.

I understand that Maestro Harnoncourt has studied Schubert's own manuscripts and has removed many of the inauthentic amendments that have ended up in the printed editions. Readers may well be aware that musicologist Stefano Mollo undertook a similar exercise for Claudio Abbado on his complete set with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe on Deutsche Grammophon. Some of Harnoncourt's corrections are consistent with Abbado's, such as the deletion of the eight bars that were added to the first movement exposition of the Fourth Symphony. However, there is little consistency as Harnoncourt does not make the same corrections as Abbado to the andante and the scherzo of the Ninth Symphony. The otherwise excellent Warner booklet notes are rather unhelpful in this area, offering no information about the methodology or the actual corrections made.

Schubert's close friend Johann Vogl said of him shortly after their first meeting, "There is not enough of the charlatan about him." These words perhaps suggest that Schubert was less than a streetwise character, a sort of innocent abroad who took his style of musical integrity too seriously, for Schubert's undoubted gift was for spontaneous and lyrical melody. He turned out melody after melody inspired by his contact with everyday scenes and the emotions of real life. Schubert was strongly influenced by the music that he was studying and hearing: firstly the operas of the Italian masters, which had been recommended to him by Salieri. He then advanced to the music of Haydn, Rossini, Mozart and latterly some Beethoven.

I am in agreement with the view that Schubert's orchestration is superbly warm and colourful, rarely at fault technically. There may occasionally be ill-judged effects of balance but this is seldom experienced. Music writer Warwick Thompson describes Schubert's music as having the qualities of, "simplicity, a great sense of vision, and a total lack of pretension ... Schubert's mature work is never less than a miracle of concision; there is nothing wasted; nothing superfluous; nothing padded or palmed off. " Musicologist Eric Bloom refers to Schubert as the most transparent of composers and has written about his conspicuous and repeatedly used trademark procedure of distributing harmonic light and shade in his scores by his free and frequent use of interchange of the major and minor keys.

Schubert's early symphonies are soundly classical in form and not surprisingly they are highly influenced by Haydn and Mozart in form and style, scarcely foreshadowing the greatness that was to come. Schubert's two symphonic masterworks, the Symphony No. 8 'Unfinished' and the Symphony No. 9 'Great' contain his unmistakable musical fingerprints; his wonderful lyricism; engaging personal charm and his special Viennese *gemutlichkeit*.

In the first three Symphonies: D major D82; B flat major D125 and D major D200, composed between 1811 to 1814, Harnoncourt superbly directs the Concertgebouw in performances faithful to the Viennese classical tradition. Maestro Harnoncourt never tries to plumb imaginary emotional depths; yet there is an innate sense of discovery from the first bar to the last. The slow movement's rhythmic pulse is strongly emphasised and the tonal richness of the Concertgebouw strings is memorable. There is a touch too much weightiness given to the minuettos; an observation that has been levelled at other versions.

Between composing his Third and Fourth Symphonies Schubert became acquainted with Beethoven's music. The Symphony No. 4 in C minor, D417 'Tragic' from 1816 betrays the influence of Beethoven. The four-note rhythm that pervades virtually the whole of the score is not unlike the one that dominates the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. The 'tragic' pretensions of Schubert's Fourth, the only one in a minor key, are not cut from the heart-on-sleeve cloth of Tchaikovsky and the world-embracing epics of Mahler. It has been said that the 'tragedy' that Schubert was now infusing into some of his writing was an attempt to produce another 'Eroica'. The subtitle of 'Tragic' it appears was appended by the composer to the some time after the work's completion.

The popular second movement andante of the 'Tragic' is given an especially fine performance accentuating the buoyant melodies. In the finale Harnoncourt brings out the strikingly original

harmonies of a true Romantic character. As an alternative I am impressed by the intensity of the account from Carlo Maria Giulini and the New Philharmonia Orchestra, recorded live at the Edinburgh Festival in 1968, on BBCL 4093-2 c/w Beethoven Missa Solemnis.

The Symphony No. 5 in B flat major from 1816 is generally acknowledged as one of Schubert's three most loved symphonies. Although the classical structure and style of Haydn and Mozart are present, neither could have composed the B flat major score owing to Schubert's remarkable facility for individual expression.

The first and final movements of the B flat major Symphony are buoyant and light-hearted and here display appropriate measures of Haydnesque wit, Mozartian grace and lightness of touch. Harnoncourt is patient and controlled throughout the inordinately long and sentimental slow movement, with the Concertgebouw strings and woodwind in outstanding form. I would not wish to be without the beautiful performance from Karl Böhm and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra on a Deutsche Grammophon 'The Originals' series 447 433-2, c/w Beethoven Symphony No.6 'Pastoral'.

Schubert's Symphony No. 6 in C major, D589 dating from 1818 is sometimes known as the 'Little' C Major' to distinguish it from the later, larger and greater C major Symphony No. 9. The 'Little' C Major' score, which just predates his famous chamber masterwork the 'Trout' Quintet D667, is generally one of the least regarded of Schubert's Symphonies. Musicologist David Ewen states that, "It is one of the least interesting of Schubert's symphonies. Nor does fresh lyrical invention compensate for an overall monotony of style." In this 'Little' C Major Symphony Schubert for the first time moves away from his usual third movement menuetto and clearly marks the movement a scherzo.

In the 'Little' C Major Symphony the excellent woodwind section of the Concertgebouw have significant roles, especially in the opening movement and are to be congratulated for their pleasing mellow tone. There is particularly fine playing in the fleetness of the third movement scherzo in which mainly energetic material is interspersed with contrasting episodes of calm and sobriety in the trio. The interpretation of the sober finale is most successful, superbly moulding both the capricious first subject and the second subject which is presented in a perpetual-motion style. Harnoncourt and his players crank-up an impressive head of steam to the score's conclusion.

Schubert's orchestral masterwork the 'Unfinished' Symphony No. 8 in B minor, D759 remains

one of the most perennial mysteries of classical music. Intended as a gift to the Graz Music Society to show his gratitude for his honorary diploma, no one knows for certain why Schubert failed to complete the Symphony leaving only two sublime and almost perfect movements and a nine measures of an intended scherzo.

The work is a moderately paced symphony in triple-time and there is often a temptation by conductors to lose control and flex their muscles inappropriately. In this case Harnoncourt provides an impressively poignant mood throughout and Schubert's ravishingly beautiful themes are performed with considerable affection. The interpretation ensures the impact of the dramatic climaxes and the effect of the dynamic contrasts. The Concertgebouw woodwind do their level best with their rich and velvety tone to demonstrate the accuracy of Julius Harrison's belief that Schubert's woodwind writing in the 'Unfinished' Symphony was, "sheer inspiration". This is a superbly performed account with most attractive, highly stylish and restrained playing.

I remain impressed with the recording of the 'Unfinished' Symphony that John Pritchard made with the London Philharmonic Orchestra in 1975 at Watford Town Hall, available on Classics for Pleasure 5748852, c/w Symphony No. 9 in C major, D944 'Great'. I still have my original vinyl version of the Pritchard on Music for Pleasure label CFP 40370. Those who have a penchant for historical recordings may wish to search out a recently released 'Unfinished' from Wilhelm Furtwängler and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, that I am informed was recorded in January 1950. It is available on the budget Ermitage label 12054-2.

The score of the 'Great' C major Symphony No. 9, D944, dated March 1828, was discovered by Robert Schumann amongst numerous manuscripts held by Schubert's brother Ferdinand. In a letter to his wife, Clara Schumann, he penned these immortal words: "I have found a symphony of heavenly length". Of the many accolades given to this wonderful symphony, Mendelssohn described the score as, "Bright, fascinating and original throughout, it stands at the head of his (Schubert's) instrumental works." Musicologist David Ewen has described the score as containing, "monumental power, profound emotional content, great complexity and individuality." It should be noted that older publications will refer to the 'Great' C major Symphony as the Symphony No. 7 owing to the original order of publication.

Harnoncourt, with impressive bite and energy maintains a seemingly unstoppable forward momentum in the vast opening movement; the longest Schubert ever wrote in a symphony. The second movement andante is described by musicologist Brian Newbould as a, "not-very-slow slow movement (like that of Beethoven's seventh)". The extremes of lyricism and dynamism are expressively and compellingly interpreted and in the vast scherzo there is tremendous weight and considerable vigour. Unlike many readings Harnoncourt refuses to take the stupendous

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climax at a tremendous speed preferring to concentrate on maintaining a controlled intensity and tension.

I have a particular fondness for the acclaimed account of the 'Great' C major from the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra under Eugen Jochum which I believe was recorded in 1958. It is available on Deutsche Grammophon 477 5354, c/w Symphony No.5 in B Major, D485. Some readers will recall this Jochum recording being available on Pickwick's Contour Red Label on vinyl CC 7512, back in 1981.

On this critically acclaimed set Harnoncourt directs wonderful playing from the Concertgebouw and displays impressive sensitivity allowing the listener to appreciate nuance and detail. The main competition is the award winning 1988 set from Claudio Abbado and the Chamber Orchestra of Europe on five discs (Deutsche Grammophon 423 651-2). Although I marginally favour Harnoncourt for the extra element of control neither of these wonderful sets will disappoint. I also admire the complete set from the experienced Haydn conductor Sir Colin Davis and the Dresden State Orchestra on RCA 09026 62673-2. Another worthy of consideration is from Karl Böhm and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, on Deutsche Grammophon 417 307-2.

The Teldec engineers for Warner Classics have provided a wonderful sound quality throughout and musicologist Brian Newbould's scholarly essay is outstanding. A highly recommendable set. ---Michael Cookson, musicweb-international.com

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