

Lewisville Lake Symphony Orchestra Sept. 17 program notes – Prokofiev Piano Concerto No. 2, Schubert Symphony No. 8 “Unfinished”

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953): Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 16 (1912-13; 1923)

- 1. Andantino**
- 2. Scherzo. Vivace**
- 3. Intermezzo. Allegro moderato**
- 4. Finale. Allegro tempestoso**

Sergei Prokofiev wrote his first two piano concertos while he was still a student at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory in Russia. He quickly became bored and disillusioned with the stodgy school atmosphere, and he did poorly in his classes with Rimsky-Korsakov and Liadov, the two most distinguished teachers at the conservatory. He had already established himself as something of a rebel with his brilliant and original First Piano Concerto; with his second he sought to explore greater depth and virtuosity. The result is one of the most technically difficult and fascinating piano concertos in the repertoire.

Prokofiev was a pianist of exceptional brilliance and power during his conservatory days, and he wrote both concertos to perform himself. The composer played the complex, wide-ranging solo part of his Second Piano Concerto at its premiere in September 1913, in the small town of Pavlovsk, near Saint Petersburg. The concert drew curious music lovers from the surrounding areas, and the critic for the Saint Petersburg Gazette noted that his fellow passengers on the train to Pavlovsk were talking of nothing but Prokofiev.

It was not well received. The public did not know what to make of it. One couple got up and scurried to the exit: “Such music can drive you mad!” Some audience members fled the concert hall. The young pianist ended his concerto with a relentlessly discordant combination of sounds. The remaining audience was scandalized. The majority hissed. With a mocking bow, Prokofiev sat down again and played an encore. People were heard to exclaim, “We came here for pleasure. The cats on the roof make better music!” Prokofiev’s piano concerto proved as scandalous as Igor Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, which had premiered only four months earlier.

Five years later, when he came to the United States in 1918 due to the Bolshevik takeover of Russia, Prokofiev left the score of his Second Piano Concerto in his Petrograd apartment where, his friends later informed him, it was used by the new tenants as fuel for cooking. In 1923, then living in Paris, Prokofiev decided to reconstruct the score from memory. “I have so completely rewritten the Second Concerto that it might almost be considered the Fourth,” he wrote to a friend that year. We’ll never know how different the original 1913 concerto is from the one he introduced in Paris in May 1924.

The Second Piano Concerto has four movements, unconventionally arranged—the last three offer little variety of tempo and there’s no “slow movement” at all. The first movement begins with a delicate, lyrical theme in the piano; it’s the only one of its kind in the work. Prokofiev ingeniously transforms much of the standard development and recapitulation sections into a monumental, unabashedly virtuosic cadenza for solo piano. By the time the orchestra reenters, the movement is practically over. The second movement scherzo has the pianist playing nonstop sixteenth notes in unison octaves throughout. (The orchestra adds brief, colorful comments, but stays out of the soloist’s way.) The subsequent Intermezzo, which doesn’t offer the relief its title traditionally suggests, is a fierce and sometimes grotesque march over a repeating bass line. The finale is more of a battle between piano and orchestra, the former resorting to full-fisted chords to gain the upper hand. Prokofiev makes room for a leisurely interlude with a simple folklike melody and another florid cadenza before the “relentlessly discordant” chords that, according to one critic, left the Pavlovsk audience, apparently unaccustomed to new contemporary sounds, “frozen with fright, hair standing on end.”

Franz Schubert (1797-1828): Symphony No.8 “Unfinished” D.759 (1822)

I. Allegro moderato

II. Andante con moto

“Why? Why didn’t he finish it?” Scholars disagree, but the reason is certainly *not* because Schubert died while working on it. He was 25 and lived another six years. During that time, he composed a tremendous amount of music, including masterworks like his Ninth Symphony, his three greatest song cycles, the three final string quartets, his C-major Quintet, and stacks and stacks of piano and vocal music. But a look through his catalog also will find that there are fragments aplenty, numerous other pieces he left incomplete. Since he wasn’t dead, why didn’t Schubert write more of the symphony, apart from 30 orchestrated bars of a fragment of the third movement scherzo? The short answer is that no one knows, but of course there are many theories:

- The infamously absent-minded composer was badly organized so he did finish it (mostly), he just never put the paperwork together. Under this theory, it’s believed that another work by Schubert was originally composed as the fourth movement. The work was used as incidental music he wrote for a play; an Entr’acte piece, also in B minor, that’s similar in style and instrumentation as the Unfinished.
- Schubert was preoccupied. In 1822, he was also composing what he considered his most complicated work to perform, the *Fantasia in C major, Op. 15 (D.760)*, a four-movement solo piano composition also known as the *Wanderer Fantasy*. This was also the year he contracted syphilis, which would eventually kill him in 1828.
- Musically, there was nowhere else to take the first two movements. The Unfinished Symphony is considered by many to be the first Romantic symphony because of its dramatic development and lyrical melodies. It’s unusual in that both movements are written in triple meter. The first movement is in $\frac{3}{4}$ time and the second movement is in $\frac{3}{8}$ time. Even the scherzo of the third movement is written in $\frac{3}{4}$ time. This rare meter composition for a symphony coupled with what many feel is the scherzo’s poor quality, especially when compared with the sheer paired perfection of the first two movements, have led some to conclude Schubert simply had nothing more to add. He quit while he was ahead.
- Another theory, related to Schubert’s absent-mindedness, is that he simply forgot about it. He sent what he’d completed of the composition to his friend and then moved on to another work. In his correspondence and writings, we see Schubert regularly discuss other symphonies he wrote, but never the Unfinished.

Whatever the reason, it all adds up to say that the Unfinished Symphony wasn’t premiered until 1865 in Vienna. When Schubert began writing his Symphony in B minor in the autumn of 1822, the 25-year-old Viennese composer was charting new musical terrain. Schubert found in this symphony a way of shaping time and tonality that no other symphonic composer up to this point had managed. The music is unique from the very beginning. Instead of a self-confident theme, statement, or energy that classical and early romantic symphonies start with, this symphony opens with a ghost, with music that sounds like a remnant of a dream. In terms of the history of the symphony, this music is unprecedented.

Schubert was awarded an honorary diploma from the Graz Music Society in 1823. As a thank you, he dedicated this Symphony to the Society and sent the two completed movements to Anselm Hüttenbrenner, Schubert’s good friend and member of the Society. For some reason, Schubert’s good friend held on to the pages and never told anyone about them until 42 years later, in 1865. Hüttenbrenner gave the work to his friend and conductor, Johann von Herbeck. The first two movements, all that Schubert had given Hüttenbrenner, were premiered on December 7, 1865 in a

concert given by the Society of Music Friends in Vienna. The two movements were finally published in 1867.

Since Schubert's early death, there have been numerous attempts by composers to finish his Unfinished Symphony. On the 100th anniversary of his death in 1928, Columbia Records even held a worldwide contest for the best composition finishing it. However, a recent discovery may change everything we know about this work. In 2017, a six-page fragment of a musical score, written in Schubert's hand, was found in the attic of a house in Vienna undergoing renovations. The house is near the Schubert Museum, which is housed in Schubert's final home. The fragment, which has been verified by Schubert scholars, fills out the third movement orchestration, ending it in D major, the relative major of the work's home key of B minor. We may find that the Unfinished is more accurately called the "Yet Undiscovered."