

FRANZ SCHUBERT

(1797 - 1828)

Symphony No. 4 in c minor, D. 417 "Tragic"

Austrian composer Franz Peter Schubert (1797-1828) wrote some 600 Lieder, seven complete symphonies, the famous Unfinished Symphony, liturgical music, operas, and a large body of chamber and solo piano music. He is particularly noted for his genius for original melodic and harmonic writing. While Schubert had a close circle of friends and associates who admired his work, wider appreciation of his music during his lifetime was limited, at best. He was never able to secure adequate, permanent employment and, for most of his career, relied on the support of friends and family. His father, Franz Theodor Florian, was a parish schoolmaster, and his mother, Elizabeth Vietz, had been a housemaid for a Viennese family prior to her marriage. Of the Schubert's fifteen children, ten died in infancy. At the age of five, Franz began receiving regular instruction from his father and a year later was enrolled at the Himmelpfortgrund School. His formal musical education also began around the same time. His genius was already beginning to show itself in his compositions, and Antonio Salieri became aware of the talented young man and decided to train him in composition and theory.

His health deteriorated in the midst of this creative activity (he had battled syphilis since 1822) and his final illness may have been typhoid fever. He died in Vienna, at the age of 31, on November 19, 1828. By his own request, he was buried next to Ludwig van Beethoven, whom he had adored all his life.

Schubert's first six symphonies were composed between 1813 and 1818, and were heavily influenced by the symphonies of Franz Josef Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart with hints of the dashing wit of Gioacchino Rossini who was the rage of Vienna at the time. The Fourth Symphony, however, stands apart as it is more serious in aim and mood, and less overtly entertaining. The Symphony was completed on April 27, 1816, the composer's 19th year, when he was becoming impatient with his life as an all-purpose teacher at his father's school in Vienna, and was beginning to feel himself overqualified for writing for the undersized, largely amateur orchestra that was comprised of his family and friends. The choice of c minor is significant. Although his primary models in his early symphonies were, as previously mentioned, Haydn and Mozart, in this symphony Schubert appears to be making a conscious attempt to emulate his hero among living composers, Ludwig van Beethoven.

The subtitle of "Tragic" was given to the symphony by Schubert himself, but since he left no written explanation for the subtitle, speculation has been rampant throughout the years as to its meaning. This work, in common with most of Schubert's other instrumental works, was not performed during his lifetime. The first public presentation took place in Leipzig in 1849, some 21 years after its composer's death.