

## Schubert - String Quartet in D Minor, *Death and the Maiden*

The music of Franz Schubert will be prominently featured in this year's concert series, most notably a complete performance of the incomparable *Winterreise* song cycle on Sunday February 10<sup>th</sup>. Today we are treated to the richly dramatic quartet *Death and the Maiden*. When Schubert penned this work in 1824, he was a young man of 27, but already a fully mature composer - and sadly only four short years from his own death. Starting in his precocious teens, Schubert worked on over twenty string quartets during his life, but it is the last three, including today's D Minor (plus the one movement *Quartettzatz*) that stand as unquestioned masterpieces. *Death and the Maiden* is an uncharacteristically dark and even fierce piece with all four movements in minor, three in the home key of D Minor and the slow movement in G Minor. This quartet takes its subtitle from a song that Schubert composed seven years earlier, which here forms the basis of the theme and variations slow movement. Consider also in passing the *Trout* Quintet and *Wanderer* Fantasy, other examples where Schubert's unmatched genius for song writing cross-fertilized purely instrumental works. In the case of the D Minor Quartet, some commentators see the varied faces of death - grim, terrifying, or consoling - as the unifying theme for all four movements. (But other experts take umbrage at the very notion, so see what you think.)

This is a long quartet, approximately 43 minutes, and the sprawling first movement lasts over 16 minutes (if the exposition repeat is honored). Schubert starts abruptly, a la Beethoven, with an urgent, arresting triplet motif, thrown out *fortissimo*. *LONG short short short long, silence; LONG short short short long, silence*. Much use will be made of this triplet idea, often reduced to just *short short short long*. After seizing our attention, Schubert suddenly reduces the dynamics to *pianissimo*, while at the same time the music seems almost to falter aimlessly. It is all the more satisfying when we finally settle into a steady clip, the texture bristling with triplet motifs. This eventually builds to a heightened repetition of the opening bars, but now the rests

are filled in with angry, exciting flourishes, as if the latent energy can no longer be contained (again reminiscent of Beethoven). The triplet music continues, but becomes more gentle as it turns to major in preparation for the subordinate theme. This arrives after a very clear pause, a gently rocking melody sung by the violins over a busily rumbling accompaniment (more triplets!). The basic dotted rhythm motif of this new tune provides the material for the extensive remainder of the exposition. The initial impression of gentleness soon gives way to agitation, drama, and even playfulness as Schubert explores the possibilities at length. Most of the ensuing development section is also preoccupied with this theme, until the main theme's triplets gradually infect the music in preparation for the recapitulation. This arrives with a stirring repetition of the intensified version of the opening call to attention. After a fairly regular, but somewhat abbreviated recap, the coda stands out as especially effective and memorable. Main theme triplets start softly and somewhat tentatively, then build with an acceleration in tempo to what will surely be a fiery ending. But no, the pace slackens and this formidable movement instead peters out in quiet melancholy.

Now for the famous slow movement which forms the heart of this quartet. Running about 14 minutes in length, this is music of great depth and dreamlike beauty. The words of the song *Death and the Maiden* are in the form of a dramatic dialogue:

*Maiden: "Go away, oh go away, you fierce skeleton! I am still young; go, my friend, and don't touch me, and don't touch me."*

*Death: "Give me your hand, you beautiful, delicate creature; I am a friend and do not come to punish. Be of good cheer! I am not fierce; you shall sleep softly in my arms."*

*(M. Claudius)*

In contrast to the girl's agitated cries, death is completely calm and suave, but also inexorable. His vocal line rarely strays from a monotone, but with the piano's haunting harmonies and steady

*long short short, long short short* rhythm, his presence is uncanny. Schubert uses only the music associated with Death for his theme. Taking the song as a starting point, he expands the material into a more regular and defined melody - phrase I (8 bars) repeated, phrase II (16 bars) repeated. The steady rhythm is like a death march or tolling funeral bell. In his book on Schubert's songs, baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (who presumably ought to know) asserts that with Schubert this rhythm always stands for "consoling death." Five variations follow, consistently observing the established phrase lengths and repeats. In the second variation, while the cello sings a lyrical version of the theme, the first violin's busy capers must surely evoke the traditional image of Death playing the fiddle. Variation four comforts us by taking us to the parallel major, after which the fifth slowly builds to an intensely throbbing return of the original theme, and then leads seamlessly to a coda of solemn peace.

After two such weighty movements, the brevity of the scherzo is refreshing. With Beethovenian syncopation and hammering rhythms, this D Minor intensity returns us to the world of the opening *allegro*. The sweet music of the trio offers a rare major key respite, but even here the busyness of the first violin's decorations keeps us somewhat on edge.

The *presto* finale is alive with an insistent and irrepressible galloping rhythm. This movement in 6/8 time is sometimes described as a minor key tarantella (a *danse macabre*?). Why does the full-throated contrasting theme in major always make me think of Tchaikovsky? At any rate, hold on for an exciting dash to the finish, at which point the tempo increases to *prestissimo* (as fast as possible!).

Lorenzo Mitchell