



Revisiting Schubert's *Mass No. 6 in E-flat Major*, D. 950

by

Sean M. Burton

This great work shows such a depth of subjective thought...that no sensitive listener can fail to be deeply moved.¹

—Eva Badura-Skoda

Introduction

The chance to reconnect with former mentors and attend myriad events at ACDA's 2011 Chicago National Convention rekindled this author's interest in revisiting some beloved choral/orchestral masterpieces first discovered during graduate studies. Opportunities to program one work in particular, Franz Schubert's *Mass No. 6 in E-flat Major*, D. 950, continue to present themselves but paradoxically this conductor

has not chosen to do so yet. Inspired by the complete magnificence of Schubert's *Mass in E-flat*, this article serves to provide a practical introduction to the work,² explore the piece's performance history by selected professional symphonic organizations in the United States, and urge colleagues to consider programming what is perhaps an overlooked masterwork.

Mass No. 6 in E-flat Major, D. 950

Franz Schubert (1797–1828) composed the *Mass in E-flat* during the summer months of 1828.³ While the work enjoys acclaim for its "Romantic concern for sublimity,"⁴ and as an opus of "artistic maturity,"⁵ which, according to the late Robert Shaw, offers "page after page of extraordinary beauty and textual illumination,"⁶ uncertainties belie its genesis. The *Mass in E-flat* may have been composed for the Minorite church in Vienna, as indicated by Otto Erich Deutsch⁷ and subsequently Ronald Stringham,⁸ or for the church of the Holy Trinity in Alsergrund, as mentioned by Brian Newbould⁹ and John Reed.¹⁰ Nick Jones cites another impetus, namely, the composer's potential application for a vacant appointment at the Imperial court as assistant to the *Kapellmeister*.¹¹ Newbould sums it up best:

It is not known what prompted Schubert to compose his *Mass in E-flat* in the summer of 1828 less than six months before his death.

Nor do external reasons for its composition have to be sought. The inner compulsion to compose accounts for a weighty fraction of the life's work, and a mass was by now as credible an outlet for that urge as was a symphony, a sonata or song. He had shown his commitment to the genre by his extended labours on the *Mass in A flat*, and through that work had brought the mass into that group of media in which he could reveal his mature creative personality as truly—if in different directions—as in the orchestral, chamber, keyboard and other vocal genres that excited his pen.¹²

Schubert scored his *Mass in E-flat* for SATB choir, SATTB soli, and an orchestra comprised of two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two trumpets, two horns, three trombones, timpani, and strings without flutes or organ (Table 1). Badura-Skoda asserts the composer's decision to dispense with the organ does not corroborate any theory eschewing overt secular influence, refuting that perspective as follows:

One can read in an otherwise commendable book [Walter Vetter's *Schubert*, Potsdam, 1934] that Schubert's last Mass reveals its secular character through the simple fact that he renounced the organ. This idea is characteristic of the Protestant view. The North

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Europeans considered the organ indispensable for church music, an attitude not necessarily prominent in the Catholic South during the Classical era. Conversely, the idea that sacred music implies the use of polyphony was clearly fixed in

Schubert's mind: He introduced more contrapuntal devices in his E-flat Major Mass than he did in any other work.¹³

Be that as it may, while the considerable size of the orchestra requires substantial funds to produce a performance of the *Mass in E-flat* with professional instrumentalists, the additional absence of tuba, contrabassoon, percussion, and other auxiliary instruments places it in a somewhat affordable category for many performing organizations.

In concert with his conservative orchestration, Schubert employs vocal soloists sparingly throughout the *Mass in E-flat*,¹⁴ but without ever compromising his unique compositional craft. Strimple agrees, praising the solo passages which imbue "the easygoing naturalness of his lieder,"¹⁵ especially "the 'Et incarnatus est' trio for soprano and two tenors ... the only instance where Schubert varies the SATB solo configuration."¹⁶ (A noteworthy aside, Johannes Brahms himself anonymously edited the first edition of the vocal score for Breitkopf and Härtel.)¹⁷

Table 1
Orchestration Chart of Schubert's *Mass No. 6 in E-flat Major, D. 950*

	Kyrie	Gloria	Credo	Sanctus	Benedictus	Agnus Dei
Oboe I/II	X	X	X	X	X	X
Clar. I/II (B ^b)	X	X	X	X	X	X
Bassoon I/II	X	X	X	X	X	X
Tpt. I/II (B ^b /C)		X		X (in E ^b)		X
Hn. I/II (E ^b /B ^b)	X	X	X	X	X	X
Trombone I/II	X	X	X	X	X	X
Trombone III	X	X	X	X	X	X
Timpani		X	X	X		X
Violin I	X	X	X	X	X	X
Violin II	X	X	X	X	X	X
Viola	X	X	X	X	X	X
S soloist			X		X	X
A soloist					X	X
T soloist*			XX		X	X
B soloist					X	X
S chorus	X	X	X	X	X	X
A chorus	X	X	X	X	X	X
T chorus	X	X	X	X	X	X
B chorus	X	X	X	X	X	X
Violoncello	X	X	X	X	X	X
Contrabass	X	X	X	X	X	X

*a fifth soloist, Tenor II, appears briefly during the "Et incarnatus est" of the *Credo*.

Performance Context

For the most part, the choral writing in the *Mass in E-flat* is straightforward though compelling. Shaw describes the *Kyrie* as bearing witness to "the sweet and gentle sorrows of human existence."¹⁸ Further, he highlights "the startling emotional effect" of the composer's harmonic modulations throughout the first movement as "quieting, ruminative, somehow inward and retrospective."¹⁹ Note Shaw's employment of the word "retrospective" versus "introspective" and the essence of elegiac heroism encountered in the *Kyrie* (Figure 1). Likewise, the extroverted settings of "Quoniam" and "Cum Sancto Spiritu" in the *Gloria*, fervent declarations in the *Credo*, majesty of the *Sanctus*, sprightly "Osanna" fugues in the *Sanctus* and *Benedictus* movements, and the fugato that commences the *Agnus Dei* (Figure 2) unite to exploit the full drama inherent within the liturgical text.

Similar to some of his other Mass Ordinary settings, Schubert chooses to omit specific texts in the *Mass in E-flat*. Concerning the ramifications of these alterations specific to the Mass, Newbould states:

As usual, the reference to 'unam



sanctam catholicam Ecclesiam' in the Credo is gone. So is 'Patrem omnipotentem', 'genitum, non factum', and 'consubstantiallem Patri'. These deviations—whether the result of religious conviction, oversight, or artistic strategy—have caused more problems for ecclesiastical posterity than they probably did in the liberal atmosphere known to Schubert in Biedermeier Vienna. At any rate, they did not stand in the way of a church performance at Holy Trinity in the Viennese suburb of Alsergrund within the year after Schubert's death.²⁰

In his landmark volume *Choral Repertoire*, Dennis Shrock calls attention to this anomaly, germane to text-setting encountered in Schubert's masses, in a more general sense:

[P]ortions of the Gloria and Credo texts in all the masses are varied: individual words are repeated, the standard order of phrases is interchanged, and most striking, some words and phrases are deleted. The deletions ... are intriguing and inexplicable. Scholars conjecture that they were oversights, local liturgical traditions or reflections of Schubert's beliefs (or lack thereof). The first two suppositions are unlikely in that Schubert made textual deletions in all his masses, and no masses by other composers of the time delete any text. The idea that Schubert deleted certain phrases because he did not believe in them has merit...²¹

In spite of the strengths and apparent controversies surrounding Schubert's *Mass in E-flat*, an archival survey²² of the work's performance history by selected professional symphonic organizations in the United

States reveals a scattered reception (Table 2). This researcher designated more than twenty-five reputable symphonic organizations from different regions in the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii, for the

The image shows a page of a musical score for Franz Schubert's Mass No. 6 in E-flat Major, 'Kyrie,' Vocal Score, mm. 1-18. The score is written in E-flat major and 3/4 time. It includes piano accompaniment and vocal parts for Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The tempo is 'Andante con moto, quasi allegretto'. The lyrics are: 'Ky - ri - e, e - lei - son, e - li - son, ky - ri - e e - lei - son, e - li - son.' The score includes dynamic markings such as *pp*, *fp*, and *Tutti p*. The piano part features a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the left hand and chords in the right hand.

Figure 1. Franz Schubert, *Mass No. 6 in E-flat Major*, "Kyrie," Vocal Score, mm. 1 – 18.

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study. Large, predominantly long-established, and generally recognized symphonic organizations were chosen, as distinct from college or community choral organizations, primarily due to availability of reliable archival information. Another rationale for surveying symphonic organizations exclusively lies in the composer's conception of the musical material itself within Schubert's *Mass in E-*

flat. Newbould concurs, insisting:

It has to be said from the start that anyone who has been introduced to this work through membership of a choral society which performed it with organ or piano accompaniment is at a singular disadvantage. The choral writing can only 'breathe'

through its orchestral setting, which is the core of the work's being as much as anything else is. That truism applies to most music for choir and orchestra, of course, but what is at risk in this mass is exceptional. Parts of the work, including its opening, can sound sentimental, and others can fall flat, if the sonic panoply that was in Schubert's ear is not transmitted

to the listener's. Even an E-flat chord is something specially vibrant with the mix of orchestral and choral sound he could impart to it.²³

Performance History in America

The somewhat mixed results of the study yield intriguing insight into the work's American performance history. First, while three of the organizations surveyed, the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Hartford Symphony Orchestra, and Seattle Symphony Orchestra, strongly indicate an account of zero performances of Schubert's *Mass in E-flat*, definitive records were unavailable, therefore, none of these three organizations is listed in the final summation (Table 2) due to the lack of verifiable data. Likewise, the Honolulu Symphony Orchestra's recent demise precludes inclusion of any Hawaiian perspective.

In terms of the survey results, thirteen of the twenty-five re-

The image shows a page of a musical score for Franz Schubert's *Mass No. 6 in E-flat Major, "Agnus Dei,"* measures 1 through 12. The score is arranged in two systems. The first system (measures 1-6) features vocal parts for Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B), along with piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked "Andante con moto." The lyrics for the vocal parts are: Soprano: "A - - gnus"; Alto: "A - - gnus"; Tenor: "A - - gnus. De - i, qui"; Bass: "A - - gnus De - - i, qui tol - lis pec-". The piano accompaniment includes dynamic markings of *fz* and *f*. The second system (measures 7-12) continues the vocal parts and piano accompaniment. The lyrics for the vocal parts are: Soprano: "A - - gnus De - - i,"; Alto: "De - - i, qui tol - - lis pec - ca - - ta"; Tenor: "tol - lis pec - ca - - ta mun - di,"; Bass: "ca - ta, pec - ca - - ta mun - di, a - gnus. De - -". The piano accompaniment continues with *fz* and *f* markings.

Figure 2. Franz Schubert, *Mass No. 6 in E-flat Major, "Agnus Dei,"* Vocal Score, mm. 1 – 12.

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Table 2
Performance history of Schubert's *Mass No. 6 in E-flat Major, D. 950*
by selected symphonic organizations in the United States

Organization	Dates Performed	Conductor
Anchorage Symphony Orchestra	None	N/A
Atlanta Symphony Orchestra	April 20, 21, 22, and 23, 1978 February 23, 24, and 25, 1989*	Robert Shaw Robert Shaw
Baltimore Symphony Orchestra	None	N/A
Boston Symphony Orchestra	July 10, 1964** July 23, 1989**	Erich Leinsdorf Charles Dutoit
Charlotte Symphony	None	N/A
Chicago Symphony Orchestra	April 3, 4, and 5, 1975 July 3, 1980***	Carlo Maria Giulini James Levine
Cincinnati Symphony	May 20, 1977****	James Levine
Cleveland Orchestra	March 19 and 20, 1930***** April 10 and 11, 1997 April 12 and 13, 1997	Nikolai Sokoloff Garath Morrell Robert Shaw
Detroit Symphony Orchestra	None	N/A
Florida Orchestra	November 3, 4, and 5, 2006	Stefan Sanderling
Houston Symphony Orchestra	November 7, 8, and 9, 2008	Hans Graf
Los Angeles Philharmonic	None	N/A
Louisville Orchestra	None	N/A
Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra	None	N/A
Minnesota Orchestra	None	N/A
Nashville Symphony	None	N/A
National Symphony Orchestra	February 14, 15, 16, and 19, 1985	Erich Leinsdorf
New Haven Symphony Orchestra	None	N/A
New York Philharmonic	None	N/A
North Carolina Symphony	November 16, 17, and 18, 2006	Grant Llewellyn
Philadelphia Orchestra	October 9, 10, 11, and 14, 1997	Wolfgang Sawallisch
Phoenix Symphony	None	N/A
San Diego Symphony	February 11, 12, and 13, 2011	Jahja Ling
San Francisco Symphony Orchestra	June 10, 11, 12, and 13, 2009	Michael Tilson Thomas
St. Louis Symphony Orchestra	March 9 and 10, 1984 October 22 and 23, 2010	Robert Shaw Nicholas McGegan

*These performances immediately preceded recording sessions on February 27 and 28, 1989 for the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's 1990 Telarc compact disc

**Performance for the Tanglewood Music Festival

***Performance for the Ravinia Festival

****Performance for the Cincinnati May Festival

*****Kyrie and Gloria only for a performance on tour in Hamilton, Ontario

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spondents cited in Table 2 have performed Schubert's *Mass in E-flat*. Only two organizations (Cleveland Orchestra and Philadelphia Orchestra) produced performances in 1997,

the bicentennial year of Schubert's birth, a particularly unexpected twist from the vantage point of this researcher. Finally, a number of performances have occurred within the last decade (Florida Orchestra, Houston Symphony Orchestra, North Carolina Symphony, San Diego Symphony, San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, and St. Louis Symphony Orchestra), suggesting a collective renewed interest in the piece.

Certainly, the majority of ACDA members reading this article likely do not possess the full resources of a major symphonic organization at their disposal on a regular basis, however, many of us engage in frequent choral/orchestral collaborations with ensembles at all levels and Schubert's *Mass in E-flat* merits our consideration. With a total duration of less than one hour, an abundance of program pairings exists. Further, Badura-Skoda reminds us that the standard practice in Austria during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of excerpting selected movements from the *Mass Ordinary*, "especially the *Gloria*, but also the *Kyrie* or the *Agnus Dei*"²⁴ is an acceptable custom. Another programming possibility is the eclectic mass compilation approach, which incorporates a mix of historical and stylistic periods by several composers with movements unified by harmonic relationships.

Conclusion

To close, as James Keller proclaims, "the finest moments of Schubert's *Mass in E-flat* embody greatness absolutely."²⁵ Some of the modern era's most eminent artistic figures, including Claudio Abbado, Charles Dutoit, Carlo Maria Giulini, Erich Leinsdorf, Helmuth Rilling, James Levine, Robert Shaw, and Michael Tilson Thomas, have programmed, conducted, or commercially recorded (Table 3) Schubert's *Mass in E-flat*. When celebrated musicians of that echelon find value in this masterpiece, then we can as well.

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Table 3

Model commercial recordings of Schubert's *Mass No. 6 in E-flat Major, D. 950*

Ensemble	Conductor	Label	Year
Atlanta Symphony Orchestra	Robert Shaw	Telarc	1990
Collegium Musicum 90	Richard Hickox	Chandos	2008
Gächinger Kantorei Stuttgart/ Bach Collegium Stuttgart	Helmuth Rilling	Hänssler	1998
Vienna Philharmonic	Claudio Abbado	Deutsche Grammophon	1988

NOTES

- ¹ Badura-Skoda, Eva. "On Schubert's Choral Works," in *American Choral Review*. April-July 1982, 87.
- ² CJ readers seeking detailed analytical material about the work may consult: Knott, Joseph, "A Conductor's Analysis for Performance of Franz Schubert's *Mass in E-flat Major, D. 950*" (DM diss., Indiana University, 1988) or Stringham, Ronald, "The Masses of Franz Schubert" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1964).
- ³ Winter, Robert and Maurice J. E. Brown with Eric Sams (work-list). "Franz Schubert" in Sadie, Stanley ed. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Volume 22. London: MacMillan Publishers Limited, 2001, 674.
- ⁴ Reed, John. *Schubert*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 167.
- ⁵ Strimple, Nick. *Choral Music in the Nineteenth Century*. Milwaukee, WI: Amadeus Press, 2008, 33.
- ⁶ Blocker, Robert, ed. *The Robert Shaw Reader*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004, 317. The quote comes from a letter written by Shaw to the Atlanta Symphony Chorus dated January 25, 1989.
- ⁷ Deutsch, Otto Erich. *The Schubert Thematic Catalogue* (an unabridged, corrected republication of *Schubert: Thematic Catalogue of All His Works in Chronological Order* by Otto Erich Deutsch in collaboration with Donald R. Wakeling, originally published by W.W. Norton & Company Inc., New York, n.d. [ca. 1951?]). New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995, 467.

⁸ Stringham, 266.

⁹ Newbould, Brian. *Schubert: The Music and the Man*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997, 284.

¹⁰ Reed, 168.

¹¹ Jones, Nick. CD Notes to "Schubert: *Mass No. 2 in G Major, D. 167* and *Mass No. 6 in E-flat Major, D. 950*," Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Choruses, Robert Shaw, conductor. Cleveland, OH: Telarc International

Corporation, 1990, 5.

¹² Newbould, 285.

¹³ Badura-Skoda, 88.

¹⁴ Jones, 5.

¹⁵ Strimple, 33.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Deutsch, 467.

¹⁸ Blocker, 319.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Newbould, 285.

²¹ Shrock, Dennis. *Choral Repertoire*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 383.

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Symphony Orchestra, Ella Frederickson of the Florida Orchestra, Grant Meachum of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra, Terry Brown of the Houston Symphony Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic Archives, Lindsay Pummel of the Louisville Orchestra, Patrick McGinn of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, Paul Gunther of the Minnesota Orchestra, Jonathan Marx of the Nashville Symphony, Marcia Farabee of the National Symphony Orchestra, Marvin Warshaw of

the New Haven Symphony, Mitchell Brodsky of the New York Philharmonic, Deborah Nelson of the North Carolina Symphony, Darrin Britting of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Kevin Kramer of the Phoenix Symphony, J.D. Smith of the San Diego Symphony, Joe Evans of the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, Megan Shand of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra, and Eddie Silva of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra.

²³ Newbould, 286.

²⁴ Badura-Skoda, 89.

²⁵ Keller, James. Program Notes to "Schubert: *Mass No. 6 in E-flat Major*, D. 950," San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, June 10–13, 2009, Michael Tilson Thomas, conductor: <http://www.sfsymphony.org/music/ProgramNotes.aspx?id=38770> (Accessed March 25, 2011).



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