

Schubert: Humble musical genius

By TED SEMEYER

On Thursday, Nov. 2, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, under the baton of Antal Dorati, will open the "Schubert and Vienna" festival, patterned after the successful Beethoven series last year.

It will mark the 150th anniversary of the Austrian composer's death at 31 in Vienna.

Franz Schubert, one of the world's most melodic geniuses of song, whose music is noted for its amazing beauty and purity, was a romantic classicist along with Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven.

Beethoven was visionary, Mozart introspective, and Schubert poetic. Schubert was a master of the "lied" (German art song). Two external factors contributed to its rise at that time—the emergence of the pianoforte and the flowering of German lyric poetry.

Some of Schubert's greatest songs were composed for the works of Goethe, Schiller and Heine.

Schubert, a native of Vienna, was born Jan. 31, 1797, in Himmelpfortgrund, now Alsergrund, Vienna. He was the 12th child of 19 children of schoolmaster Franz Theodor Schubert. The family was musical, but did not believe music was economically feasible as a career.

While not a child prodigy (as Mozart had been), Schubert at seven showed a natural talent for music and was instructed in singing (he had a fine soprano voice), organ playing and counterpoint.

His father and older brother, Ferdinand, gave him lessons in violin and piano.

VIENNA AND AUSTRIA were in a constant state of unrest during Schubert's time. It was the Napoleonic and post-Napoleonic era. Francis II, last emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and first Emperor of Austria, was on the throne. The city was full of intrigue, conspiracy and controversy. Twice Napoleon marched into Vienna. In 1808, when Schubert was eight, he took up residence in Schonbrunn Palace.

Vienna also became the center of European focus when Emperor Francis was host to the Congress of Vienna, Sept. 1814-June 1815.

It was one of the most important international conferences in European history, called to remake the continent after the downfall of Napoleon, and in which Austria, after all its humiliations, emerged as the leading power in Europe.

The Congress opened with a round of magnificent balls and entertainments. Notables include Czar Alexander I of Russia, Emperor Frederick William III of Prussia, Prince Metternich nego-

tiating for Austria, Lord Castlereagh and later the Duke of Wellington representing England, and Count Talleyrand for France.

All the European states that had long existed before the Napoleonic upheaval were there, represented by an army of delegates and agents.

The problems confronting the Congress were difficult and complex, for the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars had swept away the entire structure of Europe.

But little of this seemed to bother Schubert, who devoted his life to his art. Physically he was unimpressive. He was short, only five feet one inch in height—round, awkward, peasant-type, near-sighted and wore steel rimmed spectacles.

He was simple, good-natured, and somewhat neglectful of outward appearances.

He had none of the heroic stature, in a Byronic sense, that would appeal to Emperor Francis' conspirators for use as cannon fodder to save the Austrian Empire from the onslaughts of Napoleon. Thus he survived the tumult and the strife.

When Schubert was 13 he composed his first work to be preserved, "Fantasia," a duet for the pianoforte consisting of more than a dozen movements, each varying in character from the other.

However, his father wanted him to follow in his footsteps and become a teacher. He was more financially stable in that as a career.

In one instance, his father forbade him the use of the house because he was neglecting his ordinary studies for the practice of music. Nevertheless, Schubert began composing at 14.

He matriculated at the Imperial and Royal Seminary and its musical director, Antonio Salieri, was the first to recognize his musical ability. Salieri was responsible for seeing that Wenzel Ruzicka, a noted teacher and piano and organ master at the seminary, gave him lessons in composition.

When Ruzicka reported that "the boy knows everything he has been taught by God," Salieri himself took over Schubert's lessons, and Schubert continued with Salieri after leaving the seminary.

SCHUBERT'S MOTHER DIED when he was 15, never to know that she had produced a genius. One year later his father remarried a woman just 13 years older than the young man.

When Schubert was 17, he entered his father's school as an assistant, but hated teaching. His father's colleagues said, "You'll never make a schoolmaster out of Franz." And they were right.

It was at this time that Schubert set

Goethe's poem, "Gretchen am Spinnrade" to music, for which he is credited with creating the German lied.

In 1815, Schubert, then 18, composed in a few hours in the Little Black Horse schoolhouse on the last day of the year the ballad for Goethe's "Erlkönig."

In 1822, Rosa Ponselle, Metropolitan Opera dramatic soprano, appearing in recital at Detroit's Masonic Auditorium, sang it as an encore. The full house was stirred to the core, for just the night before, March 1, America's hero at the time, Charles Lindbergh's first born son had been kidnapped.

When Schubert was 21 he was employed as a domestic music teacher at the country seat in Zseliz of the Hungarian noblemen Count Johann Karl Esterhazy of Galantha.

Here, he gave piano lessons to the Count's daughters, Marie and Karoline. He was housed in the servants' residence near the castle.

It was at this time that he is thought to have contracted a debilitating illness that contributed to his death 10 years later.

Schubert typified the middle class Viennese of his time, except he cut no public figure.

Yet, he gained little recognition during his life. He seemed to be self-conscious of his humble origin. And though he, through his music, encountered people in more elevated society, he lacked the perseverance of Beethoven to demand recognition.

He roomed with friends and had no home of his own. He originated the Schubertiads—a group of friends who met at each others' homes for informal evenings to perform Schubert's music and recite poetry.

Schubert's friends were primarily poets, painters and composers.

Among them were musician Josef von Spaun, poet Johann Senn, painter Moritz von Schwind, opera singer Johann Vogl, poet Franz von Schober, writer Eduard von Bauernfeld, poet Johann Mayrhofer, musician Anton Holzapfel, painter Leopold Kupelwieser, pianist Josef von Gahy and playwright Franz Grillparzer.

Schubert loved to go to the Viennese coffee houses with his friends. Between 1825 and 1827 he could generally be found at the Green Anchor

daily. He was there in the afternoon.

He was always there in the evening and there was plenty of beer drinking. He was also fond of new wine and "took with his friends long walks into the woods of Grinzing, listening to the nightingales, dropping in at any of the taverns they came across."

He was unique among composers in that much of his music was written down by hand while he was with a crowd of people.

Schubert's symphonies are the final extension of the classical sonata form. Three often ranked with the finest in orchestral music are: Symphony No. 5 in B flat (1816); Symphony No. 8 in B minor (the "Unfinished," 1822); and Symphony No. 9 in C major (the "Great," 1828).

Some of his best known chamber works are Quintet in A Major (the "Trout," 1819); and Quartet in D Minor ("Death and the Maiden," 1824).

HIS GREAT SONG CYCLES include "Der Schone Muller" (1823) and "Die Winterreise" (1827). Schubert also composed music for the stage, overtures, choral music, masses, and much piano music, including 21 sonatas and shorter waltzes, scherzos, and impromptus.

He composed the opera "Alfonso und Estrella," which will be performed at Ford Auditorium on Nov. 11, starring soprano Elisabeth Soderstrom.

Two months before the death of Beethoven, Schubert reached his 30th year and was writing "Winters Journey." Beethoven is reported to have said, "Truly in Schubert is the divine fire."

Schubert was one of the 38 torch-bearers who escorted Beethoven to his grave at Währing cemetery.

On the way home from the funeral he and some friends stopped at an inn for some wine. Schubert raised his glass, "To him we have just buried." Then Schubert called for another bottle and drank. "To him who will be next"—little knowing that he had just toasted himself.

The only public concert Schubert ever gave, featuring his own work, took place in Vienna on March 26, 1828, and he made 900 guilders from it.



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