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## **Schubert Quartet D. 810, “Death and the Maiden”**

Schubert was a poet of unfulfillable longing, of human vulnerability, of the excruciating sweetness of the yearning to be at peace. He famously said of himself

I feel myself to be the most unfortunate, the most miserable being in the world. Think of a man whose health will never be right again, and who from despair over the fact makes it worse instead of better, think of a man, I say, whose splendid hopes have come to naught, to whom the happiness of love and friendship offers nothing but acutest pain, whose enthusiasm (at least, the inspiring kind) for the Beautiful threatens to disappear, and ask yourself whether he isn't a miserable, unfortunate fellow.

My peace is gone, my heart is heavy,  
I find it never, nevermore...

so might I sing every day, since each night when I go to sleep I hope never again to wake, and each morning merely reminds me of the misery of yesterday.

In no other composer's work, with the possible exception of Shostakovich, do we find such stark and shattering juxtaposition of the human and the inhuman. Stony, unforgiving musical elements with no sense of malleability demand to be acknowledged, setting up a drama of the vulnerable individual in the clutches of destiny. Schubert's celebrated lyricism has at its core the suffering of recognizing that which can not be had. The most tender passages very often have a quality of distance, of a vision of that most dearly hoped for and yet felt to be ungraspable. For the qualities of splendid hopes, of the happiness of love and friendship, of enthusiasm for the Beautiful which Schubert mentions are far from absent from his work. But they appear only in the guise of dreams, representing a wounding optimism. In many ways the traveler of the Winterreise, a lonely soul wandering through a barren, icy landscape, is emblematic of much of this composer's output.

One of Schubert's most beloved chamber music works, written when he was 27, the d minor String Quartet is characterized quite strongly by these qualities. Its opening measures could hardly be more stern and forbidding, and are immediately answered by tremulous whispered versions of the same motif, reacting with fear and filled with questioning. It is reminiscent of the casting out of Eden and the tenebrous trembling following. The tension between these two faces of the same material motivates the unfurling drama of the movement. The second theme is filled with hope, a gently rolling, tender melody which quickly becomes unsettled and takes on an unexpected harshness, filled with

desperation. At the arrival of the coda we are plunged into an abyss, cold and distant, surrounded by spectral cries. A quickening of the tempo allows for one more attempt at facing the crisis head-on, but dissolves in defeat at the movement's close.

The second movement is responsible for the nickname of this quartet, "Death and the Maiden," since it is a set of variations on Schubert's song of the same name. Rhythmically it proceeds in dactyls, the metrical foot of ancient Greek elegiac poetry. In the song, Death approaches a young maiden and says to her "Give me your hand, you lovely, tender creature. I am a friend and come not to punish. Be of good courage, I am not cruel; you shall sleep softly in my arms." The treatment of this theme here reveals the full ambiguity of the idea of Death in Schubert's music, at once terrifying and consoling. The theme is presented as a hushed chorale, austere and inexorable. A breathless, gasping variation follows, and then one with the original theme sung in the cello while the other instruments provide a richly textured, yet delicate accompaniment. The full fury of Death is unleashed in the third variation, the rhythm of the theme repeated obsessively four times as fast, with the delicate answers in the first half of the variation disappearing in the second. An exploration of a possible sense of final peace is allowed before a terrifying, inevitable but very slow building to the climax of the movement. Its denouement glistens with the ambiguity of resignation which is both tired and finally at rest.

The Scherzo is far from the original idea of such a movement as a light joke. Filled with jabbing offbeat accents, its anxiety is dissipated in the trio which follows, now in major. Soft throughout, this trio is a perfect example of the unreachable Eden Schubert dreams of, forever out of reach. The return of the Scherzo dashes any such hopes, of course, and the movement comes to fiery end, setting up the energetic final movement.

The final Presto is a dark galloping night ride in d minor, which keeps finding itself precariously perched in major keys. Forcefully driving almost without relief, with even more slowly moving themes accompanied by figures which dart about restlessly, the movement as it nears its close erupts into a Prestissimo coda which rushes headlong, mercilessly, to the final, brutal chords of the piece.

Note by Mark Steinberg