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FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797–1828) Octet, D803 (1824)

i. Adagio – Allegro ii. Adagio iii. Allegro vivace iv. Andante v. Menuetto (Allegretto) vi. Andante molto – Allegro

ESTIMATED DURATION

The concert will run for approximately 65 minutes

COVER IMAGE

Concertmaster Andrew Haveron Photo by Pierre Toussaint

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Portrait of Franz Schubert (1827) by Gábor Melegh (1801-1835) Image courtesy Museum of Fine Arts – Hungarian National Gallery

Early in 1824 Schubert's health deteriorated as the symptoms of secondary syphilis advanced. Yet while he freely acknowledged how wretched he felt, he created at least three of his most miraculous pieces, including the A-minor String Quartet (known popularly as 'Rosamunde'), the D-minor Quartet, (*Death and the Maiden*), and the Octet for winds and strings.

Like much of Mozart's work for solo winds. Schubert's Octet was written with a particular player in mind. Count Ferdinand von Troyer was an amateur - though evidently very good - clarinettist who played at the musical events held in the home of Beethoven's patron, the Archduke Rudolf, whom Trover served as Chief Steward. Trover had played in the premiere performance of Beethoven's Septet in 1800, and in 1824 commissioned Schubert to write a companion piece to that work to be led by the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, who worked closely with Beethoven on his late quartets, and with Schubert on his two masterpieces in the genre. (Schuppanzigh, incidentally, didn't think much of Death and the Maiden and told Schubert to 'go back to your songs'!)

Schubert responded to Troyer's commission with another outright masterpiece, and one which gives the clarinet subtle but clear prominence in the announcement of themes in the first three movements. The piece was given a private performance at a house concert in 1824, but had to wait until 1827 for its first public performance. Both featured Troyer and Schuppanzigh. The score was only published, incomplete, in 1853.



A postcard of Franz Schubert, produced by the German printing company Stengel & Co.



Violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh (1776-1830) Image courtesy Historisches Museum Der Stadt Wien

Schubert closely modelled his Octet on Beethoven's work: they both have six movements, reflecting the influence of the wind serenades and divertimenti that were so much in vogue in the time of Mozart, and which Beethoven had emulated in a number of early works for the Viennese public. But while Beethoven's Septet plays for a mere 40 minutes, Schubert's has that 'heavenly length', as Robert Schumann famously put it.

Each of the outer movements consists of a slow introduction and substantive Allearo. The first's slow introduction begins with a long-held F in octaves from winds and double bass, while the remaining strings tentatively stated short rising motifs whose dotted (longshort) rhythms anticipate the main Allearo material. We are unmistakeably in Schubert's sound world from the start: the thematic material is lyrical and yeers between major and minor modes, while the two groups of instruments, winds and strings, are at first used as complementary choirs. There is more integration in the more urgent Allegro section (full, as we have noted, of the dotted rhythms carried over from the introduction), though here Trover's clarinet and Schuppanziah's violin often break out in passages of florid bravura. The music gathers speed and intensity as it goes, though as often in Schubert and rarely in Beethoven, the work is not driven by a sense of titanic struggle and conflict, and the close of the movement features a sudden change of mood with the emergence of a lyrical horn solo.

The second movement is a slow movement in 6/8; Schubert politely gives his main theme to the clarinet, which is eventually joined by violin and bassoon over rocking figures from the other instruments. As the music unfolds, the dotted rhythms of the first movement return, as the serene lyricism of the opening begins to explore more emotive and unstable moods, often issuing in a quiet solo passage before the return for a versions of the opening song.

In both Beethoven's Septet and Schubert's Octet, the third and fifth are dance movements, but Schubert inverts Beethoven's order, placing the faster scherzo movement (Allegro vivace) third, and the more stately Menuetto fifth.

Though without the urgency of the older composer's scherzos, Schubert's reflects Beethoven in its use of driving rhythms across groups of two or four bars. There is some of the 'call and response' between groups of instruments as in the work's opening, as well as the expected solos for Troyes and Schuppanzigh, and the music is suffused with a triple-time version of the dotted rhythm. The central section or Trio of the movement is much less emphatic, with longer lines for the upper parts, pushed along by a skipping bass-line.

In the fourth movement Schubert went back to his songs, in that it is a theme and variations based on the duet 'Gelagert unter'm hellen Dach der Bäume' (Encamped under the trees' bright roof) from his own German opera Die Freunde von Salamanka (Beethoven likewise guotes himself in the Menuetto of his Septet). The tune is a standard-issue Viennese pop-song, 'sung' here in a bright C major by the clarinet and violin. The seven variations that follow are prodigious: in the first the clarinet and violin chase each other, ornamenting the tune with sextuplet figurations,, while in the second the sextuplets become the driving accompaniment as the winds try. at first to maintain a more forceful pattern of dotted rhythms that dissolves into the accompanying figure. In the third variation. repeated figures at different speeds support fragments of the tune passed between the horn and the paired clarinet and bassoon with brilliant interjections from the violin, while in the fourth the music is stripped down to motivic fragments. The fifth is the traditional minore, densely scored though (mostly) quiet, in contrast to the lighter

textures of the sixth, in the unexpected key of A flat. The seventh is a light-footed dance, offering the first violin some opportunity for folk-style fiddling, though the music slows down and fades away.

Schubert's second dance movement, the Minuet, then follows featuring duets from the usual suspects – though in the Trio, the bassoon doubles the violin for an unusual and beautiful effect.

Schubert (again like Beethoven) begins his last movement with another slow introduction, creating a sense of expectation by the use of tremolo figures in the lower strings over which the winds sound repeated falling motifs in dotted rhythms before releasing a characteristically carefree and lyrical finale. The material is based on the 16bar tune we hear first in the strings and then the full band, building up exciting textures with repeated motifs, overlaying duplets and triplets, and, in another Beethovenian touch, resorting to sudden moments of silence. More radically, Schubert follows Beethoven in reinserting material from the slow introduction to dramatically interrupt the music's flow, making its final moments even more thrilling.

Beethoven came to hate his Septet owing to its enormous popularity and numerous arrangements; Schubert, on the other hand, seems to have been pleased with the Octet. He wrote to a friend that it, along with the major string quartets of the same time, might prepare the ground for a 'great' (meaning Beethovenian) symphonic work. This is perhaps overly modest. Schubert had after all written eight symphonies by that stage, and his mastery of chamber music in a work like the Octet can be explained in part by his having composed some eleven string quartets while still a teenager.

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