



## A Surfeit of Schubert? The NC Symphony Celebrates the Master's Final Year

by John W. Lambert

Franz Peter Schubert was born in Vienna in 1797 and died there, 31 years later, in 1828. That means that 2006 is not a convenient anniversary year, but Schubert is worth celebrating anytime, so it's fortuitous, indeed, that the NC Symphony, at the instigation of pianist and conductor Ignat Solzhenitsyn, has made a terrific festival of ten events – eight concerts (four programs) plus a master class and a lecture – part of its own 75th anniversary season. The undeniable musical wonders of the last year of Schubert's life are the festival's primary focus, and the participating artists include Solzhenitsyn (in dual roles as pianist *and* conductor), pianist Leander Bien, the St. Lawrence String Quartet with guest violinist Soovin Kim, cellist Sophie Shao, five distinguished vocalists, the Choral Society of Durham (Rodney Wynkoop, director), and the NCS and its Music Director, Grant Llewellyn. The venues include the orchestra's home base plus Fletcher Opera Theater, Kenan Auditorium at Peace College, UNC's Memorial Hall, and Duke Chapel. In addition to NCS itself, the Raleigh Chamber Music Guild offers a program consisting of both of Schubert's piano trios. And the good news is that there are six more opportunities to learn more about Schubert and sample some sublime music. See our [calendar](#) for details.

**Friday, November 10, 2006, Raleigh, NC:** After a piano four hands program on November 7 and a master class with the St. Lawrence String Quartet on November 8, the NC Symphony itself joined the party with three performances of Schubert's Ninth Symphony, known as "The Great" (to differentiate it from another C major symphony, the Sixth) and "The Symphony of Heavenly Length." It's a big piece, and that second nickname can be read several ways, but as heard in Meymandi Concert Hall on November 10, it was indeed heavenly and at times ethereal, too. But first things first.

There was in Raleigh a superb pre-concert conversation with cellist and professor Jonathan Kramer of NCSU. This former NCS member addressed the personal relationship he and many professional musicians sense with Schubert and other great composers. Kramer played second cello in the Quintet in C as a teenager, so Schubert's music was woven into his psyche early on; his experience is not uncommon among artists, and of course it's those "personal relationships with the composer" – plus years of study and reflection – that shape the very best performances of great concert music. Kramer also addressed the happy confluence of the development of the *language* of music during Schubert's lifetime, a language the composer was able to use to articulate feelings and drama and more at the start of what we have come to call the Romantic Era in Western art music. It was a splendid talk, marked by personal reflections that helped bring the subject to life for the capacity audience that assembled in the Swain Lobby at 7:00 p.m. Patrons who are attending the November 11 repeat of this program are urged to arrive in time to hear Kramer's remarks.

The program was unusual in that it combined chamber music – in the form of the Cello Quintet in C, D.956 – with the Symphony No. 9, D.944, which is also in C major. On paper, one might expect two bright, cheerful works. It's typical of Schubert that an astonishing range of emotions is conveyed in both. Maestro Solzhenitsyn introduced the program with brief remarks.

It's not the first time chamber and orchestral music have been mixed in one program – a while back, the Eastern Music Festival presented Brahms' Piano Quartet in g minor in its original version and in Schoenberg's over-the-top orchestration – but it may have been the first time in Raleigh.

The performers on this occasion were the St. Lawrence String Quartet and NCS Principal Cello Bonnie Thron. With SLSQ violinist Geoff Nuttall on paternity leave, violinist Scott St. John served as leader while violist Lesley Robertson and cellist Christopher Costanza joined in articulating the lower voices. Violinist Soovin Kim, already in the Triangle for Sunday's piano trio program, rounded out the ensemble.

Meymandi is a fine concert hall in which the NCS sounds better than anywhere else it routinely plays, but Meymandi is not ideal for chamber music, which has been tried there previously. (That aforementioned EMF program worked better sonically because Dana Auditorium is not as large as Meymandi.) If Meymandi is going to be used for recitals, chamber ensembles, even chamber orchestras and chamber choirs, it really needs a shell – and absent one, the Schubert Quintet, as heard from the rear of the orchestra, came up short in terms of impact and immediacy, despite the evident magnificence of the performance itself. And what a performance it was! The artists played as if they had worked together for years, not just a few days, and they delivered a reading of what is arguably one of the greatest chamber music scores in existence as if their very lives depended on it. There was nothing amiss in technical or interpretive terms, the tempi were astutely chosen, and the ensemble was virtually without blemish. Reservations about the sound itself aside, this was also a miraculously clean reading in which every line could be followed clearly and distinctly. The performance therefore made a strong case for chamber music as a genre distinct from orchestral music. And the crowd seemed to appreciate everything about it. There was, despite the quintet's 54-minute length, studied silence during the music, evident twitter between the movements, applause following the exciting third section, and a well-earned standing ovation at the end. So far, so good. And chances are the eventual broadcast of this concert will present the work to even better advantage than many in the audience enjoyed, thanks to close-in microphone placement.

Part two of the program began as Solzhenitsyn bounded onto the podium and gave the signal for the opening horn solo, radiantly played. He led the symphony without a score, thus freeing himself to communicate directly with the players. It paid off handsomely in one of the NCS' best performances – of anything – to date. The strings, slightly augmented, sounded superb, and with the first and second violins divided across the front of the platform the sound in the hall was palpably rich and full. The conductor monitored balance with care, concurrently eliciting some amazing performances from the winds, horns, and brasses. The timpanist showered himself with glory but was hardly alone in his excellence – this was a night that made one glad this orchestra, for better or worse, has been remarkably stable, resulting in its ability to play as one. The reading was very fast (sometimes the fastest this listener has ever heard), but the *execution* of the music was so clean and proficient that at no point did the work sound rushed. The bottom line is that while the quintet often took on almost symphonic garb, due to its size and scope, the symphony often resembled chamber music, due to the breathtaking delicacy with which so many phrases were realized. When the "Symphony of Heavenly Length" ended in triumph 58 minutes after it had begun (the time was 10:20 p.m.), the audience again erupted with applause, loudly and lengthily expressing its great pleasure.

This program will be repeated in Meymandi Concert Hall on November 11. We're not suggesting high-class larceny, but if you can beg, borrow or steal a ticket, the concert will amply repay your efforts.

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