

WITH THE BEST MEMBER THAT I HAVE¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Third Sunday after Epiphany, 22 January 2023, being the orchestral performance of Franz Schubert's Mass in A flat Major (D678)

O GOD, my heart is ready, my heart is ready: I will sing and give praise with the best member that I have.

Awake, thou lute, and harp: I myself will awake right early.

I will give thanks unto thee, O Lord, among the people: I will sing praises unto thee among the nations.²

One of the great joys of our orchestral masses, and of the choral repertoire of St James' generally, is that everything is done with a full heart, with, as the psalmist says, the best member that we have. There can be no doubt that the music of St James' has heart. Not only that, but the heart of the musician affects the heart of the listener. The philosopher, Hegel, commented:

The ear ... listens to the result of the inner vibration of the body through which what comes before us is no longer the peaceful and material shape but the first and more ideal breath of the soul.³

That is, our listening is not just to the sound as a material thing affecting the mechanics of our ears. It is the transformation of the mechanical into meaning. The material is transformed. Music performed with heart conveys itself to our heart and changes us.

Reflecting on our experience of virtual worship during the pandemic, Patty Van Cappellen, of the Belief, Affect & Behavior Laboratory at Duke University, commented on the importance of movement and posture in worship and its lack in the virtual environment. She said in an interview:

We're missing out on the *sharing*, like looking right and left and saying hello. But I think it goes deeper. It goes into synchrony of movement. We know from psychology that [synchrony] has an effect on the impression that you belong to your church, but also on this collective effervescence. The fact that we're all together and doing things at the same time and sharing emotions is reinforcing faith.⁴

Music is part of that synchrony. Italian theologian, Bruno Forte, suggests that music is

... a privileged instrument of the experience of the Holy Spirit in the community of the believers, united in the identification of each one of them with the whole, made accessible in the universal concrete, who is the incarnate Word.⁵

¹ Readings: Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1-10; 1 Corinthians 1:10-14; Matthew 4:12-25

² Psalm 108:1-3, Myles Coverdale (1488–20 January 1569 [Myles Coverdale - Wikipedia](#)) translation, *Book of Common Prayer*, 1662

³ From Hegel's *Aesthetics*, quoted in, Bruno Forte, *The Portal of Beauty: Towards a Theology of Aesthetics*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2005, Ch 7

⁴ [Disembodied Worship? - John Templeton Foundation](#)

⁵ Forte.

Music, and especially sacred music, both comes from the heart and speaks to the heart. Singing is not a decoration or add-on to worship. Rowan Williams confirms this when he says:

To listen seriously to music and to perform it are among our most potent ways of learning what it is to live with and before God.⁶

In the light of this, what are we to say of Franz Schubert, of his heart, and of this morning's Mass in A Flat Major?⁷ We might begin by noting that life in early 19th century Vienna was anything but pleasant. In fact, as the city grew, living standards declined. It exemplified death and disease. Leon Botstein notes:

... deteriorating sanitary conditions, overcrowding, increased poverty, and public begging. ... When Schubert died in 1828, there was still no sewage system in the city. The absence of a modern water supply system was particularly devastating. ... The oft-recounted scene of Schubert becoming violently ill at a meal shortly before his death ought not to divert the attention of the modern reader from how common encounters with bad food actually were. The quality of the diet and the food was a cause of constant concern throughout Schubert's life.⁸

Son of a schoolmaster, a student of Antonio Salieri, a musical prodigy, Schubert never had a full-time position as a musician or adequate financial resources and lived largely on the generosity of his friends and family. For a while, under the influence of his father, he was a schoolteacher, but that did not last long. He would, despite everything, be a composer.

He moved in circles often characterised as subversive by the oppressive imperial regime controlled by Chancellor Klemens von Metternich.⁹

Eduard von Bauernfeld, Schubert's friend, described life in the 1820s this way in his 1872 memoir: "Today's youth cannot imagine the humiliating pressure on our creative spirits under which we, as young people—aspiring writers and artists—suffered. The police in general and censorship in particular weighed on us all like a monkey we could not get off our back."¹⁰

The result was an inability to trust, a reluctance to speak directly and honestly, and the relentless uncertainty that prevailed. One waited for the knock on the door. Schubert and four of his friends were arrested by the Austrian secret police on suspicion of revolutionary activities. Schubert was severely reprimanded for using insulting language, however his school friend, Johann Senn, was detained for over a year without charges.¹¹ In such circumstances, "[m]usic, the art form least susceptible to political and ideological interpretation, flourished."¹² For this reason, much of Schubert's music was written for the social circle in which he moved.

Masses, however, do not exist for private society, they were, and are, music for the public sphere. Scholars differ about Schubert's religious beliefs. He grew up a traditional Roman

⁶ Rowan Williams, "Keeping Time," in *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994, p. 249.

⁷ As a piece of trivia, our son, Simon, met his wife, Amy, when singing in this Mass in 1994

⁸ Leon Botstein, "Realism transformed: Franz Schubert and Vienna," in Christopher H Gibbs *The Cambridge Companion to Schubert* (Cambridge Companions to Music). Cambridge University Press.

⁹ [Klemens von Metternich - Wikipedia](#)

¹⁰ Botstein

¹¹ [Franz Schubert and His Schubertiade Friends : Interlude](#)

¹² Botstein

Catholic and sang, as have many musicians then and now, in a church choir, in his case the Royal Chapel. In his youth, he appeared conventionally religious, although this changed after he left school.

Schubert composed six Masses, an early group of four and two final works in his maturity. This morning's Mass, written between 1819 and 1822 and revised in 1826/27, is No. 5, one of the two later compositions. Henry Frost says:

In almost all of the literature on the Masses, the new style of the late Masses has been interpreted as the product of a conscious attempt by Schubert to distance himself from religious orthodoxy.¹³

Not that he had no positive religious position. In his diary for March 1823, he wrote:

With faith man steps forth into the world. Faith is far ahead of understanding and knowledge; for to understand anything, I must first of all believe something. Faith is the higher basis on which weak understanding rears its first columns of proof; reason is nothing but faith analysed.¹⁴

In July 1825, he wrote to his parents,

My audience expressed great delight at the solemnity of my Hymn to the Blessed Virgin; it seems to instil in the minds of listeners a spirit of piety and devotion. I believe I have attained this result by never forcing on myself religious ecstasy, and never setting myself to compose such hymns or prayers, except when I am involuntarily overcome by the feeling and spirit of devotion; in that case devotion is of the right and genuine kind¹⁵

Peter Gammond says,

In general it might be said that Schubert, although educated in every way under the wing and surveillance of the Catholic Church, did not have a deeply religious (in the ecclesiastical sense) side to his nature. His few writings reveal a natural belief and trust in God and nature, but ... [h]e mainly wrote church music as a duty and an exercise ...¹⁶

But, in relation to today's Mass, Gammond notes how much time Schubert spent on it, to the detriment of his Unfinished Symphony:

Perhaps Schubert saw the church rites, and the mass in particular, in the light of a balm, a calming of the mind, a cleansing of the worldly troubles, a preparation for equable thoughts of God.¹⁷

¹³ Glenn Stanley, "Schubert's religious and choral music: towards a statement of faith" in Gibbs

¹⁴ Henry Frost, *Franz Schubert: A Biography* p. 142.

¹⁵ Frost, p.154

¹⁶ Peter Gammond, *Schubert*, London, Methuen, 1982, p. 110.

¹⁷ Gammond, p 113.

Schubert is known for his practice of omitting sections of the Mass text.¹⁸ Sometimes this might have been for musical reasons, but mostly, it is suggested, he omitted sections with which he did not agree. He is not consistent. In today's Mass, for example, he omits from the *Gloria* the phrase, "Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris", "Who sits at the right hand of the Father" but includes the corresponding words in the *Credo*. The overall pattern of omissions reveals that, like many in his time and since, Schubert struggled with some doctrines.¹⁹

More significantly, Schubert omits from the *Credo* in all his Masses, the words, "Et unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam", "And one holy, catholic and apostolic church". Perhaps this omission reveals the truth about a person with heart and underlying belief who yet rejects the institutional church. Many of us can relate to that sentiment. Despite the omissions, some of Schubert's Masses were used liturgically during his lifetime.

Schubert was short, about 152 cm tall, and stout. His colleagues called him the "Little Mushroom". His personality has been described as cyclothymic, now a recognised mental health condition.²⁰ It is characterised as having emotional ups and downs. Schubert's condition became more pronounced towards the end of his life, resembling bipolar disorder. Somewhere around the time that he finished composing today's Mass, Schubert contracted syphilis,²¹ possibly from a visit to a brothel after a drinking party.²² At that time, syphilis was treated with mercury, a substance equally as dangerous as the disease. On 14 November 1828, Schubert was confined to his bed. Three days later, he lapsed into a coma and died on 19 November. His death certificate gave the cause of death as a brain fever, a term applicable to syphilis. The official registration was for typhus, a common disease and one that could accompany Schubert's general deterioration.

I close with two comments, the first by John Gingerich:

When Schubert decided to write [his] last two masses instead of composing more songs, symphonies, or string quartets, it was surely because the mass allowed him to say something offered by no other genre. And that something could only have concerned his faith and his church, expressed through his music and his text.²³

Writing of today's Mass, Glenn Stanley said:

¹⁸ John Gingerich, "[To how many shameful deeds must you lend your image](#)": Schubert's Pattern of Telescoping and Excision in the Texts of His Latin Masses | Academic Commons (columbia.edu) *Current Musicology*, August 18 2022

¹⁹ Today's Mass in A flat major has the largest number of omissions. They are: *Gloria*: suscipe deprecationem nostrum; Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris; Jesu Christe; *Credo*: Patrem omnipotentem; Genitum, nonfactum; consubstantialem Patri; ex Maria Virgine (omitted in the original 1822 version but restored in the 1826/27 revision); Et unam sanctam catholicam et apostolicam Ecclesiam; Et exspecto resurrectionem.

²⁰ [Cyclothymia \(cyclothymic disorder\) - Symptoms and causes - Mayo Clinic](#)

²¹ Peter Gilroy Bevan, "Adversity: Schubert's illnesses and their background", in Brian Newbold (ed) *Schubert Studies*, London, Routledge, 1998, pp. 244-266

²² Syphilis was a very prevalent infection in the early 19th century. See [Did everyone in Bridgerton have syphilis? Just how sexy would it really have been in Regency era London? \(theconversation.com\)](#)

²³ Gingerich, p.79

The master of Lied and religious drama has come to terms with the Catholic liturgy by writing personal, subjective music for those parts of the text that spoke to his own religious convictions.²⁴

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²⁴ Stanley



Franz Schubert
Wilhelm August Rieder,²⁵ 1825



Schubert and his friends at a social gathering known as a “Schubertiade”
Schubert is at the piano

²⁵ [Wilhelm August Rieder - Wikipedia](#)