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Schubert Quartettsatz

Ushering in the set of three great string quartets Schubert wrote at the end of his life is a torso of a work, the Quartettsatz (quartet movement) in c minor, written in 1820. This powerful movement was originally intended to be the first movement of a full quartet, and there exists a sketch for the opening of a second movement as well. It is not known why Schubert never completed the work, but the movement he did write is a masterpiece fully worthy of being in the company of the later, last three quartets.

The conflict between desire and reality is very often at the heart of Schubert's music, a conflict at the root of what it is to be human. For we are rarely masters of Fate, and mortal longing defines the painful space between possibility and imagined fulfillment. By way of exploration one can look at the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe, as related by Ovid in the *Metamorphosis*. Pyramus and Thisbe, two of the most beautiful people in the land, are desperately in love, yet forbidden by their fathers to wed. Their sole communication is through a small hole in a wall, large enough to transmit a whisper, small enough that lips that offer a kiss will never know a response. They decide to steal away in the darkness of night and meet. On her way to meet her lover Thisbe espies a lion who has recently feasted on prey, his mouth still awash in blood, and she runs off, inadvertently dropping her cloak. The hungry lion chews on the cloak, drops it, and leaves. Pyramus, looking for his love, stumbles first upon the bloody cloak and, thinking Thisbe eaten by a monstrous creature, uses his sword to join her in death. Then, upon her return, Thisbe finds Pyramus dead and leans on the sword herself.

Terrible, incomprehensible forces coexist here with the beauty of tender vulnerability. The stranglehold of authority, the physical presence of the wall, the violence of nature, the impossibility of omniscience: all these are external obstacles interfering with the purity of love. But still the shadows they cast upon that love, spawning yearning and hope, introduce a fragility and an aching quality to that love that we recognize as deeply human. The renunciation of life as a reaction to thwarted love also exalts this love.

In the Quartettsatz such elements exist in close juxtaposition. The piece begins with a tremulous figure reminiscent of the opening of that other great uncompleted Schubert work, the *Unfinished Symphony*; there is a sense of instability created which permeates much of the work, even in anxious figures accompanying otherwise lyrical themes. It is a precarious and poignant ambiguity which is quintessentially Schubertian, the song that is even more

beautiful because it exists only in memory or in imagination. Yearning and desire are even more moving when one dares to hope despite being confronted over and over by unforgiving realities. In Notebook/To Lucien Freud/On the Veil from School of the Arts poet Mark Doty speaks of “no hope/ without the possibility of a wound.” Schubert shows us the forces that wound, and the immense sensitivity of the soul that hopes. In this piece, Fate deals the final blow.

Note by Mark Steinberg