Chapter 1

Introduction

I secretly hope I will achieve something, but who dares to try anything after Beethoven?¹

This book shines a light into a half-century of shadows in the history of the German nineteenth century symphony, namely the years 1826–76. How widespread Schubert’s secret hopes, as expressed in this chapter’s opening quotation above, on the future of the symphony, were disseminated before they were made known in 1858, 30 years after his death, is unclear. Even so, at that date the symphony was in the throes of a second, longer crisis, and composers would not have relished reading Schubert’s words. This crisis was identified by Carl Dahlhaus most recently in 1989, when, like Wagner before him, he pronounced the death of the symphony as having occurred in 1850 after Schumann’s last contribution to the genre.² We should, however, raise the possibility of a disingenuous Schubert misleading us, for in 1825, just a year after Beethoven’s ninth symphony, he answered the question himself with a ninth symphony of his own. For lesser mortals it was different. The late Alan Krueck described Beethoven’s position as ‘so powerful in the period 1830–70, that even the most talented men shrank from this symphonic god like penitent apostles struck dumb with awe’.³ For half a century from 1824, Beethoven’s ninth became an impossible act to follow.⁴ It was only after Schumann discovered Schubert’s masterpiece in a drawer at his brother Ferdinand Schubert’s house in Vienna in 1838, that he realised that ‘it was still possible to make an original contribution to a genre whose potential had been seemingly exhausted by Beethoven, and it certainly stimulated him to take up symphonic composition again’ after his aborted attempt in 1832.⁵ Throughout this book, we shall find many references to Beethoven’s ninth when dealing with his German symphonist descendants, either in reviews and analyses or in the

⁴ Mendelssohn’s Lobgesang (Symphony No. 2) makes a brave, if uneven, attempt at retaining the choral element.
music itself, ranging from similarities or even outright plagiarisms to mere hints or recognisable quotations. It had already started within a year of the first performance when, in 1825, Schubert quoted it with a pair of clarinets in the finale of his own Great C major symphony (Ex. 1.1), although, despite his unqualified enthusiasm for Beethoven’s masterpiece, Schumann curiously failed to mention this understated tug of the forelock.

Example 1.1 Schubert: Symphony No. 9 in C Great D. 944. Finale, bars 386–93

Midway through the period under discussion Mendelssohn and Schumann both made their mark for a decade and in so doing, illuminated the progress of the symphony. Each man’s talent and influence, the one as a teacher, the other as a writer and both as composers, played a crucial part in revitalising the genre through the 1840s. Between them, they fed the concert repertoire with at least half a dozen symphonies, two of Mendelssohn’s five (Nos 3 and 4) and all four by Schumann. These six works are mentioned but not covered in any great detail in their own right, beyond reference to the influence they exerted on composers encountered on the road to Brahms a quarter of a century later. They are by no means summarily dismissed, but they are fully covered elsewhere in numerous other books. The symphony was territory that neither man comfortably inhabited; instead, between them, they reigned supreme in the fields of chamber music, oratorio, piano music and Lieder. According to Marcel Brion, ‘the evolution of Schumann’s art was a constant development of its language, with no end to his learning. [His] symphonies … may be regarded as stages in the conquest of a more stringent musical form’.6 The consequences of his contribution, both in his symphonies and more importantly his writings, were confusing. On the one hand he was noticeably non-formulaic in his own symphonies, yet on the other, in his writings he solidified a set of pre-requisites for the genre, which were then so rigidly taken up and applied by critics, musicians and public alike that too often they stifled the inspiration of hopeful symphonists. Those who came after Beethoven were simply not given the chance to develop in their own time and in their own way until the arrival on the scene of Brahms, who produced his first symphony as a mature work and as one that immediately took its place in the concert hall. Even so, it too had its own quarter-century of gestation before he

---

deemed it ready or worthy of performance in the year (1876) in which Wagner’s *Ring* cycle was also first heard. By that date the symphonic poem (for example Liszt’s *Faust* and *Dante* symphonies) had been fully accepted as a genre. This in turn encouraged a radical rejection of the traditional symphony as impossible after Beethoven and led to its redirection through a process of synthesis. The concerto, meanwhile, had advanced (for example, Tchaikovsky’s for the violin) and it was also time for the symphony to reinvent itself at the highest level. In 1878 the German music scholar Friedrich Chrysander was among the first to acknowledge that ‘the [first] symphony by Brahms … belongs to those musical works that are significant not only through their specific musical content but also through the position they occupy in the development of music’. Nevertheless, the half-century leading to this success is strewn with near misses, so near that many of them may now be deemed worthy of reassessment and even revival. What was it that made them stand out from the run-of-the-mill compositions that soon fell by the wayside? What made a good symphony? The best composers brought originality to a symphony, developed it and posthumously influenced symphonists who came after them. These criteria, originality, development and influence, were therefore the three vital ingredients in the recipe for success, a yardstick that this book will also seek to apply. The press of the day constantly demanded originality, high-quality thematic material and skill in its development, but all such elements were to be present within the traditional symphonic structure, particularly in the application of a sound contrapuntal technique. An optimum length developed, but this was a consideration that (a cynic might say, predictably) only seemed to arise when the material was mediocre and therefore boring. Texture and colour were expected in the mastery of orchestration, critical at a time when instruments were growing in size and volume, more musicians were being trained, and bigger halls were available to growing numbers of audiences.

What the press was not looking for was a newly established style or even harmonic progressiveness, presumably because mould-breakers such as Wagner, Liszt and their New German followers were providing more than enough of either in other genres. *Colorit* or *Farbenfülle* (colour), *Behandlung* (treatment) and *Entwicklung der Formen* (development of form) were common words or phrases in a critic’s armoury. Like Beckmesser (the pedantic trouble-maker in Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger*), they marked their slates noisily when they heard or read anything of which they disapproved, such as a symphony in only three movements, an absence of a fugue, unmemorable themes or dense scoring. A phrase such as ‘applauded without opposition’ appeared frequently, for new music was generally assumed to be guilty until proven innocent, particularly if the

---

7 Friedrich Chrysander in *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* (henceforth *AMZ*), Vol. 13 No. 6, 6 February 1878, col. 94 as quoted in David Brodbeck, *Brahms: Symphony No. 1* (Cambridge, 1997), 86.

8 For example *Die Signale*, Vol. 27 No. 3 (1869), 40; *AMZ*, Vol. 4 No. 10, 10 March 1869, col. 79.
composer was unknown and untested. Scherzos and slow movements fared better and were the most popular with the public, because their respective structured patterns were familiar. While a scherzo usually showed obvious character by being loud, exciting and rhythmically robust, a tuneful Adagio could wear a full range of emotion on its melodic sleeve. The first movement, if the material was good enough, was expected to fit into a template of sonata form. This left the finale as a problem, the more so because Beethoven had come up with a brilliant solution. For those who came after, including Mendelssohn, who was brave enough to attempt the same choral solution but to no avail, the finale problem became the Achilles heel of any new symphony.

A decade after Beethoven’s ninth, Gottfried Wilhelm Fink, one of the earliest editors to write about the symphony, placed the genre on a pedestal as the pinnacle of instrumental music. Quoting E.T.A. Hoffmann from some 20 years earlier, Fink added that the symphony had become ‘the opera of instruments’, which by then (i.e. 1835) gave a composer free rein, with all possible means at his disposal, including order of movements, harmony and instrumentation, to enchant the listener. Fink pointed out that combinations of orchestral instruments required more independence and freedom in a composer’s treatment and control of sound and colour, in a way that was unachievable when writing for the more uniformly monochrome sound of a string quartet. Almost as a throw-away line, he begged the question whether the symphony should be constructed on a narrative or a poem, for he viewed it as a dramatised, sentimental novella; whatever the chosen description, feelings were an essential ingredient, otherwise a symphony became merely a collection of meaningless sounds. The argument between absolute and programme music had begun.

There were, of course, alternatives to writing a symphony for performance in the concert hall during the first half of the nineteenth century, such as the concert overture, which appeared regularly in programmes. Since the eighteenth century, the overture in opera or ballet was played first, but in the context of a concert programme this was not always the case. Neither was it always extracted from an opera. Sometimes (as in the case of Beethoven’s Coriolan overture) it preceded a spoken drama or recitâtion; and in that particular case, it was even heard for the first time (in 1807) literally as a concert overture in its rightful place to start the concert. In many ways the concert overture became the soft option to writing a symphony. After a slow introduction, it became a symphonic first movement in a loosely structured sonata form. Those that bore a title may have conveyed a programmatic message, either a direct literary reference or by an implication of mood using words such as pastorale or solenelle, while others carried no more than a mundane nomenclature such as an opus number or the key. Concert overtures

---

10 Fink (1783–1846) edited AMZ 1828–41.
were frequently produced on demand as occasional pieces; and in order to enhance an audience’s pleasure, a composer would incorporate familiar melodies such as chorales or anthems following a tradition going back to Weber and beyond.12 In the second half of the century, another genre presented itself as a way out for composers who had taken the symphony as far as they could, when a revival of the eighteenth-century suite and serenade became a less challenging alternative to such composers as Johann Kalliwoda, Franz Lachner, Robert Volkmann and Joachim Raff. This retrospective approach was part and parcel of Mendelssohn’s Bach revival in the post-Beethoven years, while later in the century Brahms cast his eye even further back in his admiration for the music of Palestrina or Schütz.

In his survey of post-Beethoven symphonic music, Hermann Kretschmar commented:

> The works of the Romantics were a last flicker of the old light; the lean years of the symphony began and not even the best intentions of an open competition could change that. If four or five new symphonies appeared on the programme of a winter season and were even half worthwhile, that was the best one could expect.13

Schumann himself seems to have triggered signs of a revival in the genre’s fortunes after writing a composite critique of symphonies by Gottfried Preyer, Karl Gottlieb Reissiger and Franz Lachner in 1839, the year Schubert’s ninth was first heard.14 In fact, as Sanna Pederson has noted,

> Schumann’s criticisms made manifest the tension between venerating past masters and realising the tremendous expectations for the glorious future. Now that Beethoven’s symphonies were established, their true greatness had to be maintained in two ways, Schumann repeated over and over. First, their tradition had to be preserved and honoured and second, composers had to realise this tradition further by composing works that were new and progressive. The task of writing symphonies was weighed down with enormous significance.15

Schumann must have intimidated many a young composer when he wrote in 1840 that crossing the symphonic Rubicon had become impossible after Beethoven, 

12 Such as Weber’s Jubel Overture (1818), which concludes with the anthem God Save the King to the words ‘Heil dir im Siegerkranz’ written for the 50th anniversary celebrations of the accession to the throne of King Friedrich August I of Saxony.
and that any such subsequent work represented nothing more than an interesting signpost for its composer’s own development, rather than a contribution to the universal progress and development of the genre. He dismissed such symphonists as mere epigones, for the music they produced was nothing more than ‘mirror images’.16 Ironically, both he and Mendelssohn then spent the next decade (1840–50) grappling with their own symphonic problems.17 Although Lachner’s sixth symphony came off relatively unscathed in Schumann’s article (having already taken his fifth apart three years earlier, as we shall see), the symphonies of Preyer and Reissiger were shot down in flames, consigning them to subsequent oblivion.18 On the other hand, some of Lachner’s symphonies are at least heard today, on disc if not in the concert hall, so Schumann generally recognised a worthy work when he saw it. Yet Lachner may well have taken the criticism to heart, for his last two symphonies (his seventh and eighth) are separated by a dozen years (1839–51). What is more, this pillorying and deflation of symphonic aspirants, which started with the death of Beethoven in 1827 and continued for decades, was not just confined to Schumann’s pen but also to lesser writers wielding as much power and influence from their journalistic bases. A more enlightened critic, however, would encourage a composer to view Beethoven not as an impediment but as a guide and touchstone. Such advisers, however, were too rare; and while the press could take on its share of responsibility for keeping the symphony alive, too often its finger hovered uncomfortably close to the self-destruct button when analysing and reviewing new works.


17 Mendelssohn’s Scottish and Italian symphonies are meant here; both had their origins far earlier in the composer’s lifetime and, leapfrogging the decade of the 1830s, went on to cause him considerable problems; see R. Larry Todd, Mendelssohn: A Life in Music (Oxford, 2003), 276 and 430.

18 Gottfried Preyer (1807–1901), Viennese organist, composer, conductor and pedagogue; Karl Reissiger (1798–1859), German composer, conductor and pedagogue.