



F. Schubert: Mass No. 6 in E-flat major, D 950

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Schubert penned this last, and some would say the greatest, of his sacred works in the summer of 1828, which also proved to be his last year. He was already suffering from the ravages of tertiary syphilis, and was mentally bruised by the rejection of his previous Mass in A flat (D. 678) for performance at the Imperial Chapel. No doubt the self-evident severity of his symptoms stirred religious thoughts in him, and he immediately began Mass no. 6 in E flat major, composed for his friend Michael Leitermeyer, choral director at the Alservorstädter Pfarrkirche in suburban Vienna. It proved to be the only one of his masses not to be performed in his lifetime.

Like its fellow in A flat, the E flat Mass is of symphonic form and (heavenly) length. The solo vocal parts are often of a Lied character but limited to quite short sections of the Credo (*et incarnatus est*), the Benedictus and *Dona nobis pacem* of the Agnus Dei. Remarkably, the barcarolle-like '*et incarnatus*' (in 12/8 time) has a pair of tenor soloists whose parts intertwine with one another and with the soprano's. There are a number of sections where Schubert repeats and re-integrates sections of texts to provide startlingly dramatic episodes of orchestral and choral textures. The '*Domine Deus*' of the E flat Mass's Gloria is a miniature apocalyptic drama based on two phrases used in only three lines of the text, turning the focus away from God to Schubert's personal, subjective beliefs, speaking directly to his own religious convictions rather than those of the Catholic Liturgy.

This disk is one of Audite's "Listen and Compare" series. Tapes from March 1968, recorded live in the Herkulesaal of the Residenz in Munich by Bayerische Rundfunk were carefully restored before digital conversion at 88kHz/24bits to PCM. This otherwise "untouched" stereo version occupies tracks 7-12 on the disc. Tracks 1-6 contain a version which has been through digital signal processing, on a Sequoia workstation with restoring software called "The reNOVATtor", which is "a extremely time-saving tool for mastering or post-production engineers struggling with disturbing noises in live recorded music, interviews or film sound." Audiophiles can compare and contrast the results of the DSP by comparing those "restored" tracks with the unaltered digital copy. The two versions are on the SACD layer of the hybrid disc only.

In this case, I would go so far as to say the processing has been a near disaster. A prominent deep rumble underpins the whole effort, immediately apparent before the music begins, in musical silences and even between tracks. There is virtually no perspective depth of the sound stage, and almost no trace of the hall's acoustic. The stereo sound stage is distinctly asymmetric, with most of the sound issuing directly from the left speaker most of the time; only very occasionally do instruments or voices clearly appear from the right channel. All the soloists tend to huddle together on the extreme left too, and one keeps thinking that there has been a connection

failure somewhere in one's system, turning off the right speaker. When something does clearly come from the right, it seems to come from the speaker itself. This is reminiscent of the "ping-pong" effects of early stereo engineering, and certainly doesn't give a satisfactory illusion of performers in concert.

Amazingly, all these problems go away when listening to the un-restored tracks. The stereo stage is clearly in focus from side to side, with decent front-to back perspective too. There is also a real sense of the hall acoustic. It at last becomes clear that the second violins are on the mid-right, as are the choral basses and tenors, and the soloists are arrayed across the centre of the stage as one would expect. String sound is sweeter and less harsh in climaxes, although there are some traces of HF ringing at volume. The deep bass rumble has gone, and without headphones there is no appreciable hiss, and using speakers only I was not aware of any obvious print-through. Some instruments, e.g. oboes and clarinet do still have a rather thin, pinched sound, but their timbres are more natural than on the "restored" tracks. There is very little evidence of an audience being present and no applause, although there are a few podium thumps.

Awarding audio stars, I would have to say 2.5 for tracks 1-7, and 3.5, nearly 4, for the un-restored plain digitised tracks 7-12. Without a doubt, the latter presents the most musical and listenable experience, but still does not get close to a good recent RBCD sound.

Kubelik is renowned for his honesty and self-effacing dedication to music making of the highest quality. On this occasion, though, he and the choir seem to be performing dutifully rather than being inspired. The music just fails to catch fire, and I found it hard to keep my attention focussed. The main problem is a stoic and metrical approach to rhythm, not dragging speeds. Turn to Hickox's RBCD with his Collegium 90, and we are in another world of passion and commitment, with wonderful articulation of Schubert's often complex and dramatic rhythmic impulses - Hickox makes the 3/4 pieces dance enchantingly; the fugues surge with power and bite which Kubelik and his Bavarian Radio Choir replace with loving heaviness. This involvement is not gained by swifter tempi, just sheer rhythmic élan, expressiveness and transparent textures. Hickox is barely a minute faster than Kubelik over the whole work.

It is, however, a delight to hear Kubelik's soloists (on the un-restored version), especially the creamy-voiced (and much missed) Gundula Janowitz. His two tenors also do a fine Italianate job (although Hickox has Mark Padmore and James Gilchrist, both great Schubertians). But the solos only occupy a few minutes of this music and don't really redeem the whole approach.

By no means would I suggest that any listener acquire this as their only version of Schubert's last Mass; hear Hickox and his vivid period instrument RBCD first. This Audite disc is a curiosity which demonstrates what digital signal processing, with the best intentions, can sometimes do to music.