



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

aud 92.541

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[American Record Guide](#) (Koob - 2006.03.01)

Schubert's sixth and final mass (seventh if you count his German Mass) is his masterpiece in the genre and part of the incredible gush of musical glories from his final months. It gets far fewer performances than it deserves. The work is built on the innovations first seen in his previous A-flat Mass, also from his final years (1826). Both works – especially this one – offer the kind of scope and dimensions characteristic of his great C-major Symphony.

Schubert was certainly familiar with his idol Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* and paid tribute to it here. Running nearly an hour, its “heavenly lengths” indeed approach the dimensions of that choral behemoth. But, unlike Beethoven (who didn't care whom he offended), Schubert couldn't bring himself to entirely abandon the strict Viennese church music protocols of the day. So he avoided Beethoven's humanistic overtones, wrote distinctly non-operatic parts for his soloists, and stuck to subdued orchestration that eschewed “frivolous” instruments like flutes. Remember, Schubert was deeply steeped in the classical mass tradition, having sung the best ones by Haydn and Mozart as a Hapsburg Court choirboy under Salieri.

But why look for hints of Beethoven from Schubert's gentle soul? He has left us here what he's best at: broad rivers of long-breathed melody, ingenious modulations, gut-wrenching beauty – and his own sweet sincerity of spirit. No composer captured moods and emotions – including sacred ones – more honestly or effectively than Schubert. Just as he can sound happier, more playful, more lovesick, more agitated, or more depressed than any other, he can sound more pious and reverent as well. Even though Schubert was insecure about his abilities as a contrapuntalist, he achieved sacred drama and solemnity here (and further supported sacred traditions) by means of some very impressive polyphony, especially the massive fugues that end both the Gloria and the Credo.

This account – recorded in concert – is a dream come true. Rafael Kubelík is a Schubertian to the core and taps this ethereal score for every drop of its spiritual exaltation. Chorus, orchestra, and soloists are all caught up in his spiritual spell and perform splendidly. All of the rather subdued solo roles are beautifully handled, but I fell in love with Gundula Janowitz's radiant soprano all over again. Their ‘Et incarnatus est’ ensemble, not far into the Credo movement – ravishing, gently rocking interlude in 6/8 time – is unforgettable.

This is part of a new Super-Audio series from Audite, dubbed “Listen and Compare”. Each release contains two versions of the same recording. One is a sophisticated digital restoration of the original concert tapes, re-engineered for multi-channel SA; the other – also copied into the SA format – presents the otherwise unrestored historical archive. And therein lies the only fly in the ointment for me. My SA player

duly delivered the very lush and detailed restoration in totally ear-pleasing fashion, but wouldn't read the tracks containing the undoctored copy of the source tapes. Having noticed no other defects in my equipment, I hesitate to lay the blame on it. Perhaps the producers of this recording should be aware that some SA players apparently can't handle their product.

But no matter: a sublime masterpiece, sympathetically performed by legendary artists and reproduced in rich, clear sound is always welcome. I'll look forward to future releases from this series.

