

String Quartet No. 14 in D Minor, D. 810, "Death and the Maiden" by Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

In 1823, the 26 year old Schubert began to show the first signs of venereal disease. Schubert's anguish and despair at being forced into a premature and unwelcome contemplation of death is revealed in a letter to his friend Leopold Kupelweiser in 1824: "I feel as though I am the unhappiest, most wretched man on earth. Imagine a man whose health will never be right again, and whose despair makes things worse rather than better. Each night when I go to sleep I hope never to wake again, and each morning only recalls yesterday's grief."

Irritating his already fragile state was his inability to achieve true success as a serious composer. The critics regularly dismissed his attempts at opera and symphonic works. It was only in the lieder, or popular song of the era that the youthful genius was able to make a name for himself. He would then commonly use the well-known song melodies in his chamber music. The popular tunes enhanced the overall desirability of the work.

Considering Schubert's state of mind at this time, he must have been easily drawn back to his song *Death and the Maiden*, originally composed in 1817. In this setting of a poem by Mattius Claudius, death is accepted as a friend bringing eternal peace. It is in the second movement of the d minor quartet that this tragic melody is put to use in a set of variations, but its sullen atmosphere pervades the entire work.

The foreboding fortissimo chords that open the first movement are preparation for music that represents a struggle between contentment and pain. It ends in a powerful surge of emotion which dissolves into a muted sob.

The solemn funeral march of the second movement's *Death and the Maiden* melody leaves much room for elaboration and variation. In variation no.1, the first violin rhapsodizes above the tension caused by the insistent chordal accompaniment. The theme is finally left hanging in midair. In variation no.2, the solo cello struggles to be heard amidst the still looming unrest of the first violin. The angst spreads throughout the quartet in the third variation as the violin continues its personal lament. Soon, the mood is stilled, and the variation ends with all strings in passionate agreement. In variation no. 4 the anxiety is finally spent. The mood has turned to sublime contentment, and the violin is allowed its original place, once more rising above the sympathetic accompaniment. In the final variation, the unrest returns as the strings make one last attempt to express themselves. Exhausted, the music winds down and the movement ends in gentle harmony.

The Scherzo's fiery restlessness has an unrelenting intensity relieved only by an abrupt ending and the introduction of the *Trio*. It is a soothing serenity, tinged with sadness, containing only a hint of the passion that has come before.

The finale is a robust tarantella, a maniacal Italian dance of death, characterized by a rapid triplet rhythm. The tenacious dance perseveres throughout. The coda is a fanatical onslaught and erupts in a decisive climax.