

Charles Munch Born: September 26, 1891 - Strasbourg, Alsace, France

Died: November 6, 1968 - Richmond, Virginia, USA

The eminent Alsatian-born French conductor, Charles Munch (originally, Münch), was the son of the Alsatian organist and choral conductor Ernst Münch (1859-1928). His elder brother was the choir-master and professor of music, Fritz Münch. Charles studied violin at the Strasbourg Conservatory and with Lucien Capet in Paris. At the outbreak of World War I (1914), he enlisted in the German army; made a sergeant of artillery, he was gassed at Peronne and wounded at Verdun; after the end of the war (1918) and his return to Alsace-Lorraine (1919), he became a naturalised French citizen.



Having received further violin training from Flesch in Berlin, Charles Munch pursued a career as a soloist; was also professor of violin at the Leipzig Conservatory and concert-master of the Gewandhaus Orchestra there. In November 1932, he made his professional conducting debut in Paris with the Straram Orchestra. He studied conducting with Szendrei in Paris from 1933 to 1940. He quickly rose to prominence; was conductor of Paris's Orchestra de la Société Philharmonique from 1935 to 1938, and in 1936 became a professor at the École Normale de Musique. In 1938 he became music director of the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire de Paris, remaining in that post during the years of the German occupation during World War II; refusing to collaborate with the Nazis, he gave his support to the Resistance, being awarded the Légion d'honneur in 1945.

Charles Munch made his USA debut as a guest conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in December 1946; a trans-continental tour of the USA with the French National Radio Orchestra followed in 1948. In 1949 he was appointed music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, which he and Monteux took on its first European tour in 1952; they took it again to Europe in 1956, also touring in the Soviet Union, making it the first USA orchestra to do so. After retiring from his Boston post in 1962, he made appearances as a guest conductor; also helped to launch the Orchestre de Paris in 1967.

Charles Munch acquired an outstanding reputation as an interpreter of the French repertoire, his performances being marked by spontaneity, colour, and elegance. French music of the 20th century also occupied a prominent place on his programs; he brought out new works by Rousset, Milhaud, Arthur Honegger, and others. He wrote *Je suis chef d'orchestre* (1954).

Schumann Symphony No. 1

Manfred Overture

Schubert Symphony No. 2

Charles Munch - Boston Symphony Orchestra

Ruins of Grevenburg castle above Traben-Trarbach, German Mosel valley



This “Spring” Symphony was written in the depths of winter, in January and February of 1841. Schumann was still basking in the unimaginable joy of his marriage to Clara Wieck. The couple had endured years of separation, disappointment and sorrow at the hands of her father (culminating in a fight in the courts) in order to marry. Schumann’s happy feelings poured out of him in songs, poems, diaries and letters — everything he touched at this time vibrates with exultation.

This symphony — with its journey out of the cold and darkness of winter into the light and promise of spring — seems perfectly to symbolize that struggle and happy ending. Schumann’s inspiration was a single line from the obscure poet Adolph Böttger (1815–70): *Im Tale blüht der Frühling auf* (“In the valley, spring bursts forth”). Böttger’s poem otherwise offers a familiar conceit of a disappointed lover contrasting the wintry sorrow in his heart with the joy of the world at the coming of spring. Schumann ignored all that and seized solely on the idea of rebirth.

Schumann’s way of working was always intense and compulsive. He would light on a particular genre — song, say, or symphony or chamber music — and write little else for a time. 1840 had been his celebrated “year of song,” during which he created some 140 songs. Come January 1841, he turned to the symphony — perhaps at Clara’s encouragement. It was a big step.

Beethoven, though dead now for 14 years, still cast a long and intimidating shadow for all composers; it is striking how few great symphonies were written in the 1830s. Schumann — whose published works to date were almost exclusively for piano — had tried to write one in 1832 but had given up. In his role as a critic, he had already derided the “pale efforts” of several colleagues to shake off the yoke of Beethoven. Now, could he face the challenge himself? He would need to prove that he could master the broad paragraphs of symphonic structures. He had written many substantial works in the past, but with few exceptions they were aggregates of many smaller movements.

Schumann threw himself into the task suddenly and wholeheartedly. He sketched the entire piece between January 26 and 28, then spent the next month completing it. He neglected his home life and wife — even failing to contribute to their “wedding diary.” He originally appended titles to each movement, but deleted them before publication. And, just as one can sense the emotional journey of Beethoven’s Fifth without needing to imagine specific scenes and events, Schumann’s “Spring” Symphony tells its story very clearly. It opens in darkness, and Schumann wanted “to suggest the world becoming green, perhaps with a butterfly hovering, and then, in the Allegro, to show everything to do with spring coming to life.” He envisaged the trumpet calls as a “summons to awakening.” If that makes this a kind of Last Judgment, then the rest of the symphony is a Garden of Heavenly Delights.

The Manfred Overture is one of Schumann’s finest orchestral creations; it conveys very effectively the urgent despair of Byron’s work. Three remarkable chords precede the pained, chromatic tune in the oboe and second violins. A somber texture is provided by the orchestra, here Schumann’s frequently ineffective and superfluous doublings seem most appropriate, until the passion can be restrained no longer and a wild rout ensues. A few brief fragments of lyric thought in the major mode occasionally poke through — how effective are such outbursts of hope against so grim and indefatigable a background! The energy is momentarily spent as we near the midpoint of the piece; chorale-like fragments in the brass and isolated woodwind chords receive a terse commentary from the lower strings. As the anguished pursuit continues, it is easy to see the marked influence that Schumann’s imitative orchestral procedures had on Tchaikovsky. The underlying E flat tonality is firmly re-established by a long succession of E flat minor chords in the winds, against which an agitated violin figure (with that piquant raised fourth, a prominent feature throughout the work) finally runs out of energy as the initial oboe melody returns.

Schubert’s Second Symphony in B flat major (D. 125), which was begun in December of 1814, was completed on the 24th of March 1815. However, it was not performed until 1877 in the London Crystal Palace under the direction of Sir August Friedrich Manns. Like the First Symphony, it is nourished by the typically Schubertian breadth of the melodic development, the extensive modulations and the altogether astonishing harmonic shifts.

The opening movement is unusual in that the reprise is in the sub-dominant instead of in the tonic, a device seldom found in the classical period. On the other hand, classical Mozartian elements are to be found in the transition to the development section, and the further treatment of the motif has a striking parallel at the same point in Mozart’s Jupiter Symphony.

The graceful Andante with its theme and five variations provides a charming moment of rest, only to be succeeded by the energetic progress of the Allegro vivace-Menuetto with its delightful oboe melody in the Trio section. The finale, based upon folk themes, is marked by a vehement energy and the sparkling good humour of a wandering minstrel.

Schumann Symphony No. 1

Manfred Overture

Schubert Symphony No. 2

Charles Munch - Boston Symphony Orchestra

Symphony No. 1

1. Andante un poco maestoso - Allegro molto vivace
2. Larghetto
3. Scherzo Molto vivace
4. Allegro animato e grazioso
5. Manfred Overture

Symphony No. 2

6. Largo - Allegro vivace
7. Andante
8. Menuetto - Allegro vivace
9. Presto vivace)

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