Franz Schubert Overture in B-flat major, D.11 (Der Spiegelritter)

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) is undoubtedly best known today for his purported setting of Ave Maria, frequently sung at weddings and funerals. The “Schubert Ave Maria” was broadcast worldwide during the state funeral of John F. Kennedy and the funerals of his two brothers Robert and Edward. Irish tenor Ronan Tynan performed it in this Cathedral at Ronald Reagan’s state funeral. That his original music wasn’t an actual setting of the Roman Catholic prayer Ave Maria is—well, never mind. People love it because they recognize the melody. And Schubert was a superbly gifted melodist in every genre and form.

A Life in Brief
Franz Schubert was born in 1797 in Vienna where he spent most of his all-too-brief life. Musically precocious from a young age, he studied piano and violin. As a chorister at the Imperial Chapel, he was admitted to study at the Akademisches Gymnasium while boarding at the Stadtkonvikt (Imperial and Royal Seminary). He studied composition with Antonio Salieri (1750-1825), director of music for the court, and developed an intense and all-consuming passion for composition to the detriment of his other studies. (When the Seminary orchestra’s principal second violinist Joseph von Spaun discovered Schubert was composing secretly on scraps of paper with makeshift lines, he arranged to provide him with proper manuscript paper.)

As a member of the Seminary orchestra composed of fellow students, he regularly performed Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven at the orchestra’s Thursday concerts that also served as an incubator in which to test his own nascent musical ideas.

His First Overture
In December 1811, when he was fourteen and still a boy soprano, Schubert embarked on his first effort at writing for the theater. Having been introduced to Viennese opera by Spaun—he had recently heard Mozart’s Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute)—Schubert chose a Singspiel (spoken dialogue alternated with songs) by the well-known librettist August von Kotzebue. Der Spiegelritter (The Looking-Glass Knight) was a magical fantasy not unlike The Magic Flute. He returned repeatedly to Der Spiegelritter during 1812, but abandoned it after writing only the overture with which this concert opens. Two events that year (his mother’s death in May and his voice breaking) may have been factors. He noted the end of his career as a chorister by scribbling in the score of Peter Winter’s First Mass in C, “Schubert, Franz, crowed for the last time, 26th July 1812.”