Schubert and his America

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This essay was written in response to the COVID-19 lockdowns beginning in late March as well as the events following the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020.

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

- Langston Hughes

In a twisted way, classical musicians thrive on the existential crisis of our field: is this music relevant?! So many of our current practices such as recontextualizating masterpieces, rediscovering lost pieces, remastering old recordings, researching performance practices, and rethinking that one newly problematic composer give rise to the feeling that there is nothing waiting ahead of us besides finding the next verb to which we can attach the prefix "re-." As ill-considered or self-important as this initial question might seem, there are more nuanced ways of framing its concerns within the context of today's socio-political landscape. For instance, is it even *possible* for my field, whose context is typically middle or upper class, to play a role in radical change?

Since quarantine began and racial disparities have once again come to forefront of American discourse and the primacy of classical music has become more and more distant. Lockdown has people in the performing arts begging for the day when things will get back to normal while voices at the front of the racial dialogue such as Ibram X. Kendi claim "any return to normal is a return to the normality of racism."[1] Admittedly, both of these senses of "normal" refer to very different contexts but nonetheless, going back to March 2020, the recent past has thrown a whole new set of obstacles against which classical musicians must protect or redefine what they see as their "relevance."

Since classical music is very much at the center of my "normal," it has been a very disorienting time as I reflect on whether the music I love has any sympathetic resonance with the striking current events of today. In certain moments, I wonder if indulging in the music I love feels like I am only glorifying the cultural artifacts of periods whose inequalities and injustices we believe we have moved beyond.

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[1] Ibram X. Kendi. Twitter Post. June 26, 2020, 1:16 PM. https://twitter.com/DrIbram/status/1276564954833915915

Previously, my own answer to the question of relevance of classical music has been to use music as a way to build community. I found that, whatever people's doubts may be, their love of it alone was often enough to give it a meaningful and current context. Before COVID and the murder of George Floyd, it was easier for me to overlook the more difficult question of the music itself. COVID took away my regular communal activities and the aftermath of Floyd's death only further crushed any hopes at coming together in what should have been communal and unified grief. Instead, the music itself became one of the only reliable sources of comfort in my life and this lead to a closer examination of what it means to me.

Since March 2020 we have all been called upon to look deeper within ourselves and question what drives us socially, politically, and emotionally. Prying myself open to this degree causes great malaise as I put into question the foundations of my love of classical music. The following essay represents the beginning of an ongoing personal effort to address this question. Instead of focusing on classical music as an interpersonal tool as I have in other essays, I feel the need now to try address the music and the composers themselves.

Before beginning, I would like to make two points that serve as the foundation of my approach. First, when sifting through history, one should avoid the temptation to sort things neatly into the categories of good/bad, moral/immoral, or progression/regression. For starters, what is to be made of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society of 1840 which denied a political voice to women? The second point is that as we look backwards through history, we must remember that its constituents lived it forward. We naturally judge history on *what happened,* but especially in the liberal arts, there is room for the consideration of what individuals *would have liked to happen* as something separate even from their actions.

As a turn my attention to James Fenimore Cooper, Franz Peter Schubert, and others, I will state what some readers may have already surmised will be my ultimate conclusion: I find it is entirely ignorant to give credence to the narrative that classical music is somehow removed from or irrelevant to the historical dialogue over social and political change. In the following paragraphs, I hope to show that one can make direct connections between Schubert's music and his idealized view for what America could be. And so, with the a tip of the hat to the fault which is implicit in my own subjective interpretation, I can now address the American novelist and Viennese composer in order to ponder what Schubert might have liked to see happen in 2020 America.

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Though exceedingly popular in its day, the work of American author James Fenimore Cooper has suffered much since his death. *The Last of the Mohicans* continues to stay in the popular consciousness by way of assigned school readings and repeated film adaptations (1923, 1932, 1936, 1977, and 1992) yet Cooper's list of critics is just as long as it is illustrious. Mark Twain, in his essay "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," complained that "Cooper wrote about the poorest English that exists in our language." Others find it dull and overwrought. Laura

Sewell Matter writes, "his racist portrayals of savages, both barbaric and noble, provoke contemporary distaste… his prose is terrible."[2] Why then, on November 12, 1828, seven days before his death, did an emaciated Franz Peter Schubert write the following to his friend Franz Schober?

> "Be so kind, then as to assist me in this desperate situation by means of literature. Of Cooper's I have read *The Last of the Mohicans, The Spy, The Pilot,* and *The Pioneers*. If by any chance you have anything else of his, I implore you to deposit it with Frau von Bogner at the coffee house for me. My brother, who is conscientiousness itself, will most faithfully pass it on to me."[3]

In her essay, Matter cannot quite make heads or tails of Schubert's attraction to Cooper. After reading heaps of Cooper in an attempt to better understand her own attachment to the piano sonata D. 960, she writes, "after all my research and imaginative hypotheses about what made Schubert's last piano sonata vibrate with such sadness and such hope…the reasons elude articulation."[4] She does manage to find one passage from *Last of the Mohicans* where the main character, Natty Bumppo, is moved to tears by music. She then posits that Schubert "was willing to overlook a strained metaphor or two when he read that passage because the idea of the transcendent power of music was there clearly enough."[5] Surely though, it is too much to believe that Schubert, after having eaten nothing for eleven days, was scanning through the thousands of pages that make up Cooper's novels in search of little morsels of an American novelist's thoughts on music.

For me, it is utterly untenable that Schubert, who was torch bearer at Beethoven's funeral, was poring over Cooper looking for answers on music's mysteries. Cooper's success during his lifetime came from the escapism his stories provided through their various settings on the burgeoning American frontier. For his massive European readership, this escapism had distinct political underpinnings. Cooper embraced his role as one of the earliest representative authors from a nation that had just jettisoned itself from European monarchy. In light of this, it is not too much of a stretch to place Schubert's insatiable appetite for Cooper as a symptom widespread fame the novelist's work enjoyed in Europe.

In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* cemented a growing European intuition: after the British Empire's failure in the War of 1812, Europe would need to take note of America as it was sure to be an enduring part of nineteenth-century geopolitics. Imagine the potential for intellectual projection from the point of view of someone living in Schubert's Vienna: as monarchic European capitals grew in population and Vienna began to experience increasingly conservative reforms during the Metternich era, across the ocean, there was news of a great wilderness that was being tamed by an infant democracy. How concretely, then, do the

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[2] Laura Sewell Matter, "Franz Schubert Dreamt of Indians." The Georgia Review 64, no. 1 (2010). 116.

[3] Ibid., 112.

[4] Ibid., 128.

[5] Ibid., 127.

disparate realms of French politics, an American novelist and landowner, and an Austrian composer overlap? In fact, they intertwine with surprising intimacy. I will first look at Schubert's relation to Cooper's work.

The in-crowd of art song often gets misty-eyed as they recount how Schubert was correcting proofs of *Winterreise* on his death bed while they conspicuously neglect that in between the pages of those twenty-four songs, he was reading James Fenimore Cooper. Surely this is due to the fact that Cooper has had a significant fall from grace since his death while the lore of Schubert's masterpiece has seen it soar to the zenith of its genre. Yet if we consider the composer's personal struggles with political censors, as well as the wider psychology of the European citizen regarding authorities, a lust for Cooper's literary world seems only natural. Goethe himself, the paragon of European citizenship, had a well documented infatuation with America and he even recorded in his diary the years that he had read Cooper's *The Pioneers, The last of the Mohicans, The Spy, The Pilot, The Prairie,* and *Red Rover.*[6] Cooper's America played directly into the hands of European intellectuals who were laying the groundwork for such 19th century themes as the essential nature of individuals, the wilderness, and liberal political reform.

In ideological opposition to these themes, the early 19th century saw the rise of prominent public figures like Eugène François Vidocq, the father of the modern French police system. Given the today's western view that sees Europe and America as victors against the repressive societies of the USSR and the PRC, it is easy to overlook just how aggressively Europe controlled and monitored its citizens in the early 19th century. Around the time of Schubert's death in the late 1820's, European monarchies had already started to consolidate their power in reaction to the American and French revolutions, to say nothing of the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars. Gregor Dallas writes in his *1815: Roads to Waterloo* that, "between 1806 and 1814 there was a fivefold increase in the budget for the recruitment of Austria's secret agents."[7] After the European coalition's defeat of Napoleon, leaders like Metternich and Count Joseph Sedlnitsky turned the oversized wartime secret police into a force that monitored the Austrian people.

This police force was primarily responsible for picking up murmurs within Vienna regarding nationalist or anti-royal sentiments. Metternich sought an omniscient hold over every individual, private meeting, or publication within Vienna's walls. Travel to and from Vienna was highly regulated, mandated by written law, and reinforced by bureaucratic absurdity. In 1830, Chopin found himself in such a nightmare as authorities refused to grant him a passport to Paris. The letter below shows just how infuriating it could be to deal with Viennese authorities as well as the candor that individuals felt in circumventing the imposed restrictions:

> "Every day, they promise me a passport, and every day I drag myself from Ananias to Caiphas to recover what I have deposited with the police. Today I

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[6] Ian Bostridge, *Schubert's Winter Journey : Anatomy of an Obsession* (First United States ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 410.

[7] Gregor Dallas, *1815, The Roads to Waterloo (*Bournemouthe, UK: Pimlico Publishing Limited, 2011).

> learned something new again, namely that my passport has been lost somewhere. In addition to the fact that they won't find it, I must apply for a new one…I am taking Bayer's advice. I'll obtain a passport for England, but I'll go to Paris."[8]

Within the city walls, "the secret police included not only highly placed informants, but also scores of coach drivers, chambermaids, waiters, valets, and servants who daily reported their observations and overheard conversations to police agents."[9] Metternich's paranoia was at such a pitch that his domineering hand extended itself to the arts. Playwright Franz Grillparzer suffered greatly from the obstruction of the censors. His *König Ottokars Glück und Ende,* written in 1823 and eventually published in 1825, became a symbol of Hapsburg repression. Beethoven himself, after squabbles with censors over his *Missa Solemnis*, threatened to cancel a concert which featured none other than the premier of his 9th symphony.[10]

Schubert had his own run-ins with Vienna's censors. Anecdotes - such as when Schubert was forced to change the name of his opera *Die Verschworenen* (The Conspirators) to *Der häusliche Krieg* (The Domestic War) - give the feeling that censors tormented Viennese artists more to perpetuate the psychology of subordination than to actually block the work itself. There were nonetheless very concrete repercussions for Schubert. His *Deutsche Messe* was prevented from being performed by ecclesiastical censors, the libretto to *Fierrabras* had to be redacted before publication, and his *Graf von Gleichen* was banned in 1826 because the plot includes the marriage of a nobleman while he was still married to another woman. Schubert continued working on the score to *Graf von Gleichen,* however, even after it was banned. Alice Marie Hanson points out that these "actions are unusually daring, and illustrate a possible indifference to or deliberate defiance of the state - certainly a facet of Schubert's character overlooked by his biographers."[11]

It was against this backdrop of European governments' quotidian ideological repression that James Fenimore Cooper emigrated to Europe in 1826 and was warmly greeted by a large readership. As Ian Bostridge writes, Cooper's "fantastical America could be a promised land, free of the constricting politics and locked-in habits of a has-been Europe. In Cooper's primeval forests, with their heroic natives and rough-hewn colonists, the so-called *Europamüdigkeit*

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[8] Alice Marie Hanson, "Social and Economic Context of Music in Vienna from 1815-1830," PhD. diss. (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1980). 89.

[9] Ibid., 86.

[10] Ibid., 98.

[11] Hanson, 99. It should be noted Hanson wrote this in 1980. She goes on to describe the minutia of different types of censorship: "Materials reviewed by the censors received one of four classifications: 1) *imprimatur* or *admittur* meant that the work would be printed and sold in Austria without restrictions; 2) *transeat*, often given to foreign works, meant that the work was permitted in Austria, but that it could not be advertised in newspapers nor used in lending libraries; 3) *ergam schedam* or *missis deletis* was given to work that was to be strictly regulated and allowed to circulate only with the censor's permission; 4) *damnatur* or *non admittur* meant that the work was rejected as dangerous or offensive." (91)

(European tiredness) of the time could find refreshment in an open and invigorating atmosphere."[12]

Here, it is crucial to realize that Cooper's European fanbase for the most part never saw America for themselves. In this way, Cooper was part literature and part propaganda: the poetic realization of political ideals. Gerald Rose in his response to Cooper's detractors suggests that today, the New York author's books cannot be read as novels; they must be read as "strategic studies."[13] He goes on to state that "if you do not find the founding of America interesting…if you're not reading [his novels] from the standpoint of what made this country what it is… the cultural and related problems to create a country like this, you cannot read James Fenimore Cooper."[14] Rose continues his lecture to explain at length that Cooper's literary merit is not necessarily one of language but of sociological and political narrative. Returning to Twain's flaming criticism, Rose explains that the later Missouri author hated Cooper because he depicted humans "primarily as noble and representing principles," while Twain's novels primarily focus on "little people…not really doing anything world-historical."[15]

In light of this reading, we can imagine that Schubert, Goethe, and many other Europeans were fascinated with Cooper's America because of the sociopolitical potential it represented. Contrasted against the growing political conservatism in Europe, Cooper's characters illustrated the agency of the individual that struggles between embodying British, Native, and Colonial identities and the anonymous wilderness of the frontier. It is so difficult for us to imagine today what it must have been like for a European to contemplate the concept of America in the early 19th century. Given its infant history, the overwhelming sticking point of America's identity by the time Cooper started writing was that in the span of less forty years, it had twice repelled the greatest military force in the Atlantic in order to forge a new path. Europeans, pregnant with early Romantic ideologies, projected the negative image of their *Europamüdigkeit* onto the intellectual project of American government and the spiritual/humanist, not to mention imperially ruthless, experiment unfolding on its western frontier.

The European concept of America as something not entirely attached to reality continued into the the end of the 19th century as Brahms considered writing an opera featuring Californian gold prospectors. Jan Swafford writes, when looking for a libretto, "Brahms rejected realistic drama in favor of myth and legend…for Brahms, [California] would also have been a foray into the fantastic."[16] By that time, the American frontier had moved considerably west from Cooper's northwest New York, but both of these Viennese men (Schubert and Brahms) held a fascination for where the limit of the young nation touched "the wild."

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[12] Bostridge. 412.

[13] Gerald Rose. Plato's Academy of the 21st Century, "An Introduction to James Fenimore Cooper." Youtube video, 46:09. June 2, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IqFm64QY4HE

[14] Ibid., 7:25.

[15] Ibid., 8:00.

[16] Jan Swafford, *Johannes Brahms: A Biography* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1999).374.

When I think of Schubert's music and choice in poetry, I think of the breadth of space which can be found in the last piano sonata D. 960 and slow movement of the 9th symphony, but also in small pieces like first of the *Moments Musicaux*. I think of *Die Schöne Mullerin* and the main character's existential link to the brook and nature's color: green. I think of the recurring theme of freedom, mixed with a blissful death in nature, that features in his second *Wanderers Nachtlied*. I think of Schubert's mythical love of the outdoors in his setting of Goethe's *Ganymed*, which, as Graham Johnson suggested in his recent lecture hosted by SongFest, uses Zeus as a metaphor for Nature itself. I think of the heroism of the *Wanderer Fantasie* as the solo performer makes virtuosic conquest of the keyboard while being transported by the power of a germinal musical idea.

Of course none of these pieces have to do directly with America but they do of course give a sense, however abstract, of Schubert's spiritual ideology. With carefully limited license, we can react to the abstract qualities of Schubert's humanist values as evidenced by his music as the foil to the more concretely negative aspects of his life: harassment by conservative authorities within a crowded urban environment. If we remember the fervor with which the Austrian sought out the New Yorker's novels, it is reasonable to find parallels between several of the aesthetic characteristics we find in Schubert's music and his motivation in escaping into Cooper's depiction of the frontier. The urgency of Schubert's desire for spiritual escapism in an American landscape is all the more powerful given that he asked for the novels on his deathbed.

To be sure, when thinking about America, Schubert probably didn't bother himself too much with the streets of Philadelphia, the plantations of Georgia, the factories of New England. These more mundane aspects of America were left to men like de Tocqueville. Nevertheless, America still played an as of yet under appreciated role in the imagination of European artists, even if this vision of America was not based on their first hand experience.

It was not only artists who paid attention to Cooper's "world historical" presentation of America. Politicians and individuals outside Vienna were also attracted to the emigrated author. Although the Marquis de Lafayette is largely remembered solely for his involvement in the Revolutionary War, he remained extremely politically active in France until his death in 1834. In Wayne Franklin's keynote address at the 16th Cooper Seminar in 2007, Franklin paints a picture of how, in the 1820's, Lafayette was interested in using America as a means to increase his own political leverage in France. Cooper and Lafayette eventually established a close relationship to the point that Lafayette signed his letters to Cooper "your affectionate friend"[17] as he eagerly courted Cooper in the late 1820's.

Cooper and Lafayette were sharing meals together at the nobleman's La Grange estate in April 1827, just one year before Schubert's death. In fact, the power of the American author's voice as cultural and political propaganda was so clearly recognized that the "unquestionably… idealistic" was scheming to influence his upcoming publications.[18] One visitor to Lafayette's

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[17] Lafayette, "Letter to James Fenimore Cooper, July 14, 1831."

[18] Ibid.

home in France recounted, "everything was subordinated to [Lafayette]…foreigners fell into step and adjusted, not only their opinions and their conversations, but even their gestures and voices to the customary usage and tone of the house."[19] Franklin writes, "there is no doubt Lafayette had wished to have Cooper closer—close enough that…he could get him to speak back the things he himself wished to hear—so that, when he was assured of the American's closeness, he could convince him to commence the book he wanted Cooper to write."[20]

Extending from Goethe and Schubert to Lafayette and de Tocqueville, we see how this question of what America would become attracted all different sorts of individuals for a great many reasons. What underlies them all is the concept of potential. America as the land of opportunity is a trope that deserves as much merit as it deserves to be ruthlessly exposed when it flatters to deceive. Nonetheless, from an early 19th century European perspective, we can clearly see how many of America's qualities stood in contrast to the problems facing Europeans. In this way, America as the land of opportunity is better understood not necessarily as referring to what this country offers in a strictly real sense. We must once again remember that this ideological European view of America had very little to do with actual goings on in the country. America was a sort of ideological currency whose socio-political value was yet to be fixed.

Now we can glimpse is a fuller picture of what Schubert might have been after when he so desperately asked Schober to supply him with Cooper's books. Schubert's letter was not simply a case of bizarre literary taste; it was a manifestation of a much deeper-running European obsession with what America represented. One gets the feeling that within every individual European's mind, there existed a different version of America. Cooper's oeuvre supplied the source material but from this soil grew a multitude dreams from both Viennese composers and powerful French aristocrats alike. This in turn served as ideological leverage against their own European toil. For Schubert, Cooper's America might contain a world where he and his friends would not be harassed by censors and secret police, free to live out the less publicly permissible facets of their characters. For Lafayette, Cooper's America might be the centerpiece in the trophy room of his legacy.

Needless to say, 2020 concerns itself very directly with the disparity between what America is and what it could be. If anything, the multiplicity of potential Americas living in people's imaginations has greatly diversified since the 1820's. Especially in an election year, we are overwhelmed by the diversity of people's future plans for America. I would like to make clear that there is enough evidence for those in the classical music community to credibly ponder what Schubert and others had in mind for our country. As we continue to address the violent and perniciously complex history of this country, we as musicians cannot ignore that classical music, though only tangentially related to the more explicitly evil aspects of our history, has actively participated, since before Schubert, in the dialogue of what America might one day be.

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[19] Wayne Franklin, *Everything Was Subordinated to Him: Coopers Resistance to Lafayette*. Keynote Address, James Fenimore Cooper Society and the College at Oneonta. August 2009. https://jfcoopersociety.org/articles/SUNY/2007suny-franklin.html#note12.

[20] Ibid.

This line of thinking, however, comes with great caveats. There are many examples of the unsolicited appropriation of music, the most notorious perhaps being Hilter and Bruckner - or Trump using the music of The Rolling Stones and Bruce Springsteen in his rallies. Just as with the misogynist American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society of 1840, we must be clear about employing a strong sense of discernment and nuance. Nobody is well served by classical musicians today doing anything "in the name of Schubert." There *is*, however, the potential for those who feel a connection to Schubert's music to join in a dialogue between his world view, which directly though not exclusively concerned itself with the symbol of America, and the world we live in today.

During the century that created the Great Man theory from models like Napoleon, Beethoven, and Goethe, Cooper's novels fit like a puzzle piece into a European landscape which saw great individuals fighting towards the successful birth of a nation. With the "birth of a nation," however, we see how the 20th century twisted these theories as the 1915 film of the same name is a trigger for the dark and evil machinations of the American narrative. We must be careful to what extent we subscribe to ideologies, no matter the zeal they inspire in us. In a perverted thought experiment, one can easily imagine that given the license, 1,000 of Schubert's white male "wanderers" would unwittingly colonize the forests through which they wander. After all, the "wilderness" is their home…

I can also point out that while Gerald Rose, whom I cited earlier, uses his expertise to give knowledgable insight into the nature of Cooper's oeuvre, he has also served on the editorial board of the Executive Intelligence Review. This publication serves as a mouthpiece for the self-righteous and dangerously paranoid politics of Lyndon Larouche and apparently doesn't mind stooping low enough to insinuate that Greta Thunberg is a mass murderer.

(title from an article published in the EIR on September 22, 2019, with a photo of then sixteen-year-old activist Greta Thunberg)

As a caveat for taking Schubert or someone else's name in vain, we should recognize that there are many active organizations that do this already - the result is always embarrassing and sometimes verges on the dangerous. A prime example of this is the Schiller Institute, a German based think tank, which was founded by the radical and controversial fringe activist Helga Zepp-Larouche (wife and disciple of Lyndon). As I said before, anyone imagining the 2020 politics of

someone from another time must limit themselves to conjecture. Anything more reeks of arrogance.

Though they are laden with warning, I write these words to empower fellow classical musicians. I have spoken with so many friends and colleagues about the perceived futility of performing music by "dead old white men." While it is true that the white male-ness of it all needs to be addressed, I suspect that the dead old white men who populate the history of classical music are especially banal because we have stripped them of their politics. The museum culture that pervades classical music today suffocates the real life experience of individuals who found themselves in their own idiosyncratic socio-political turmoil. Their music is necessarily music of their world, including both their contents and discontents. From Mozart writing an opera in German, passing through Dvorak's advocation for black composers in America and Poulenc's song *Le Mendiant*, all the way to Frederic Rzewski's *The People United Shall Never Be Defeated*, the history of classical music is inextricably linked to the political discourse of the day.

Musicians need to realize that the answer to whether classical music is relevant or not is found within the fabric of *their own values* and not in from some external validation. John Oliver recently responded to White House Press Secretary, Kayleigh McEnany, "The answer to, 'where do you draw the line?', is literally always 'somewhere'."[21] This proactivity that Oliver suggests is precisely what is need in this moment. Classical musicians need to shake off their existential crisis of "is it relevant?" with an emphatic response of "yes" and stop being ambiguous about where the line of contemporary relevance is drawn. If, as I hope to have shown, the chasm between classical music and "real world relevance" is a myth, I prefer to forgo the act drawing the dividing line between irrelevant and relevant entirely. If we genuinely care about this music, we must embrace the fact that there is no shortage of options for where the music of the past can begin to converse with the world of today.

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[21] John Oliver, *S7 Ep15: Facial Recognition*. June 14, 2020. (Xfinity Stream/HBO) 31:08.

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