

# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Franz Schubert

Romanticism

# SCHUBERT: A LIFE IN ART

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 2 The Music Trance

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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The early romantic composer whose works now loom in history as the most decisive, all-transforming “crossing of the edge” into inwardness was a composer who lived his short life in relative obscurity, and whose enormous influence, both on his creative peers and on the listening habits of audiences, was almost entirely a posthumous one. In a way this is unsurprising, even fitting, since the music of Franz Schubert (1797–1828) reflected, in its exploration of the inner “I,” one of the most outwardly uneventful, essentially private lives any composer of major standing was ever destined to live.

Unlike the “Vienna classics” Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, Schubert, the son of a schoolmaster, was actually a native Viennese. At the age of eleven he was accepted, like Haydn before him, as a choirboy in the imperial court chapel. There he took instruction with Antonio Salieri, still the imperial Kapellmeister. In addition to his chapel duties, Schubert played violin in (and occasionally conducted) a student orchestra organized by the twenty-year-old Josef von Spaun (1788–1865), then studying law at the University of Vienna. Spaun, who spent his career in the civil service supervising lotteries, would be Schubert's lifelong friend and, because he survived long into the period of Schubert's posthumous fame, became the chief source of biographical information about the composer.



**fig. 2-2 Franz Schubert, portrait in oils by Josef Willibrord Mähler.**

After his voice broke, Schubert briefly became an assistant teacher, then a young master, in his father's school. By the end of the year 1816, however, encouraged by devoted friends whose families promised financial support, Schubert had renounced steady employment for full-time composition. (Nevertheless, over the next two years he would occasionally return to teaching at his father's request, and he twice briefly accepted employment as music tutor to the children of a minor member of the Eszterházy family, famous for its patronage of Haydn.) By the age of nineteen he was the author of six operas (mainly singspiels, short comic works in German with spoken dialogue), five symphonies, sixteen string quartets (composed for family recreation), dozens of dances for piano or small chamber ensemble, and literally hundreds of songs set to verses by contemporary poets. The latter included some early masterpieces, never to be surpassed, including *Gretchen am Spinnrade* ("Little Margaret at the spinning wheel"), to a passage from Goethe's *Faust*, composed at seventeen, and *Erlkönig* ("The Elf King"), to a ballad or narrative poem by Goethe, composed the next year. Small wonder that he inspired reverence among his friends, and appeared to their wealthier parents to be a good investment.

In the autumn of 1817 Rossini conquered Vienna and Schubert, hearing him for the first time, was liberated by the experience. Until then (as seems inevitable for a Viennese) he had considered Beethoven the only possible model for composition in large

forms, and a daunting one. This constraint is most obvious in his Fourth Symphony, composed early in 1816; it is cast in the “Beethoven key” (C minor) and subtitled “Tragic.” (This subtitle, unlike most, was actually the composer's.) Schubert's reputedly “Mozartean” Fifth Symphony, in B  $\flat$  major, composed later the same year, is as clearly modeled on Beethoven's Fourth Symphony (in the same key) as his Fourth Symphony had been modeled on Beethoven's Fifth. To Spaun he confided, “I hope to be able to make something out of myself, but who can do anything after Beethoven?”<sup>16</sup>



**fig. 2-3 Stadtkonvikt in Vienna, the monastery school where Schubert lived while he was a choirboy at St. Stephen's cathedral (drawing by Franz Gerasch).**

The works he composed soon after his brush with Rossini—notably two overtures “im italienischen Stile” (in the Italian style) and the Sixth Symphony in C major, all completed between October 1817 and February 1818—show a new face. The symphony, in particular, incorporated a vein of Italianate melody that was no longer customary in such works (often played, à la Rossini, by solo winds). The long tunes loosened up the structure and began to impart to Schubert's large-scale compositions the discursiveness (or “heavenly length,” as Robert Schumann called it<sup>17</sup>) that so enraptured the later romantics who discovered them upon their posthumous publication.

Beginning around 1817, Schubert began to find some public champions, mainly singers (one of them a nobleman) with whom the composer began appearing as song accompanist in fashionable Viennese salons. In March 1818, he had a “concert debut” of sorts when one of his Italian overtures was performed by a restaurant orchestra. In 1820, one of his singspiels ran for five performances at the same Vienna theater where *Fidelio* had its premiere, and Schubert was engaged thereafter to write some incidental music to other shows. A breakthrough occurred in 1821 when, thanks to a subscription undertaken by the composer's friends, a number of songs (including *Erlkönig*, which thus became his “opus 1,” and *Gretchen am Spinnrade*) were published.

Their sales earned the twenty-four-year-old composer an income that, however meager at first, was nevertheless connected with his creative work. From then on, as the Viennese music historian Otto Biba has established,<sup>18</sup> Schubert managed to eke out a living from the products of his pen, and was the only composer in Vienna at the time who was officially classified as a *freischaffender Komponist*—a “freelance composer” who neither gave lessons nor worked at a civil service sinecure nor enjoyed aristocratic patronage in support of his musical vocation. He was, albeit in a small way, a commercial success, and a bit of an economic pioneer.

From 1822, the list of Schubert's major works begins to accumulate: the Mass in A ♭ major, the unfinished Symphony in B minor that even as a two-movement torso has become a repertory staple, and the “Wanderer” Fantasy for piano which, published in 1823 as op. 15, was the first of Schubert's larger works to be printed during his lifetime. It is named after the song that provided the theme for variations in the second of its four connected movements; there are similar song-variation movements in Schubert's Quintet in A major (“The Trout,” 1819) and his Quartet in D minor (“Death and the Maiden,” 1824).

Eighteen twenty-two was also the year of his first serious illness, a bout of syphilis that incapacitated him for several months and forced him to return to his paternal home. His financial resources depleted, Schubert was forced to accept lump sums rather than royalty contracts for the publication of some of his most popular songs. By the middle of 1823, he had been moved to the Vienna municipal hospital and was expected (at the age of twenty-six) to die. At this low point he produced one of his greatest works, the song cycle *Die schöne Müllerin* (“The beautiful miller maid”), a kind of novel-in-lyrics that ends with a lovelorn suicide.

From this point to the end of his woefully truncated life, which ended at the age of thirty-one (some say from typhus or typhoid fever, others say alcoholism, still others tertiary syphilis), Schubert's health would be precarious. But apart from the intermittent physical sufferings of the last years, and the unexpectedly grim finale, his life was no romantic scenario but a placid existence devoted almost entirely to creative work. To recount it is basically to offer a chronicle of composition, as one of his friends, the painter Moritz von Schwind (1804–71), already hinted in mock-exasperation in 1824: “If you go to see him during the day, he says, ‘Hello, how are you?—Good’ and goes on writing.”<sup>19</sup> It was seemingly a life lived almost entirely inside the heart and head—and yet what could be more romantic than that? The inner life was the only life, according to romantic doctrine; and Schubert's music was of a sort that seemed to give access to it, making the composer, despite the absence of outward personal drama (or indeed of any intense personal intimacies, at least reliably recorded ones), the subject of intense human interest and vicarious personal identification.

The access, of course, is illusory, but such is the abiding influence of romanticism on today's conventional thinking about the arts that we need constantly to remind ourselves that they deal in representations, not realities. The memoirs of his friends show Schubert to have been far from reclusive (except, as Schwind found out, in the afternoon). Musicological research has revealed him not to have been without worldly ambition, nor was he devoid of social recognition. Medical history assures us that his life span was neither as short nor his illnesses as egregious within the conditions and expectations of his time as they would be in ours. But nothing will prevent those affected by the music from creating its composer in its image. That is an integral part of the romantic experience: the beautiful lie (or higher truth) of a supreme fiction. As the critic Alex Ross has written, “The man is not quite there; the music is another thing altogether. Its presence—its immediacy—is tremendous,”<sup>20</sup> and creates for us a sense of its creator's presence that the mere facts of his life will not efface.






**fig. 2-4 Schubert singing with his friends, as drawn by one of them, Moritz von Schwind.**

The masterpieces, meanwhile, continued to mount: the “late” piano sonatas and character pieces, the “late” quartets, the dark and troubled song cycle *Die Winterreise* (“The winter journey”). The last year of Schubert's life produced an astonishing series: the C-major Symphony (later nicknamed “the Great” to distinguish it from the “Little” C-major Symphony of 1817), the two piano trios, the Mass in E  $\flat$  major, the C-major String Quintet, the last three piano sonatas, the F-minor Fantasia for piano duet, fourteen of his greatest songs collected in two volumes for publication—posthumous publication, as it turned out, under the title *Schwanengesang* (“Swan song”).

Whether measured by quantity or by quality, the list (which could be augmented by a slew of minor works) strains belief, as indeed does Schubert's output overall. His earliest known compositions are dated 1810, so that his whole career as a composer lasted no more than eighteen years, during which—by the reckoning of Otto Erich Deutsch (1883–1967), the compiler of a thematic catalogue of Schubert's works modeled on Ludwig von Köchel's *Mozart-Verzeichnis*—he amassed a total of 998 works, “an outburst of composition without parallel in the history of music,”<sup>21</sup> in the provocative yet unchallengeable words of his biographer, Maurice Brown.

## Notes:

(16) Joseph von Spaun, notes prepared for Ferdinand Luib in 1858; quoted in Otto Erich Deutsch, ed., *Schubert: Memoirs by His Friends*, trans. Rosamond Ley and John Nowell (London: A & C Black, 1958), p. 128. 

(17) Robert Schumann, *On Music and Musicians*, ed. Konrad Wolff, trans. Paul Rosenfeld (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 110.




(18) See Otto Biba, "Schubert's Position in Viennese Musical Life," *Nineteenth-Century Music* III (1979–80): 106–13.



(19) Moritz von Schwind to Franz Schober, 6 March 1824; Otto Erich Deutsch, *The Schubert Reader* (New York: Norton, 1947), p. 331. 

(20) Alex Ross, "Great Soul," *The New Yorker* (3 February 1997), p. 70.

(21) Maurice J. E. Brown, "Schubert," in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* Vol. XVI (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 754. 

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