



Schubert, Franz (1797-1828)

by Julia Pastore

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Franz Peter Schubert is often regarded as the consummate tragic artist: sickly, poor, prolific, and unappreciated during his lifetime. This view is only partially true, however. Although he remained relatively unknown outside of his native Vienna, Schubert did achieve substantial popular success, particularly for his songs (*Lieder*).

Still, the depth of Schubert's talent remained unknown until after his death because many of his orchestral works, including his symphonies and operas, were unperformed and unpublished during his lifetime. Only when these large instrumental works came to light following his death--through the help of friends and composers such as Liszt, Schumann, and Brahms--did his reputation grow.

Schubert's music bridges the classical and romantic styles and is known for its simplicity and depth of feeling. He often juxtaposes moods within a piece, evoking, for example, both sadness and conviviality.

In its supposedly "feminine character," Schubert's music was long regarded as the antithesis of Beethoven's. In the words of the nineteenth-century composer and critic Robert Schumann, who first articulated the opposition, the feminine Schubert "pleads and persuades where the man [Beethoven] commands."

Born to Franz Theodor Schubert, a schoolmaster, and his wife Elisabeth, a domestic servant, Franz was their fourth son. A respected middle-class family, the Schuberts were cultivated and musical. Franz received his earliest musical education from his father and played the viola in a string quartet with his older brothers Ignaz, Karl, and Ferdinand.

In 1808 Schubert won a scholarship that included a place in the imperial court chapel choir and an education at the Stadtkonvikt, the principal boarding school for commoners in Vienna, where his tutors were Wenzel Ruzicka, the imperial court organist, and, later, the composer Antonio Salieri.

When his voice broke in 1812 and he left the school, Schubert continued to study privately with Salieri. During this time he entered a teachers' training college in Vienna and in the autumn of 1814 became assistant in his father's school. While composing vigorously, Schubert worked as a schoolmaster until 1818.

Schubert's harmonic ingenuity and skillful blending of piano and voice transformed the *lied* into a respected genre. The composer's first undisputed masterpiece, *Gretchen am Spinnrade* (1814), sets a poem by Goethe to music. In 1815, he composed more than 140 songs; and in total he wrote more than 600.

Schubert's unfinished *Symphony in B Minor* (1822) is noted for its haunting quality and harmonic daring. It was his last major work before he contracted syphilis in late 1822.

After 1822, his works reveal an increasing seriousness and despair. While in the hospital in 1823, he composed *Die schöne Müllerin*, considered the epitome of his lyrical art, in which the sexual passion of the protagonist leads to his suicide. In the *D Minor Quartet* known as *Death and the Maiden* (1824), death

offers comfort to an innocent youth.

On March 26, 1827, the death of Beethoven, who influenced his compositional style greatly, added to Schubert's despair, but led to the *Trio in E-Flat*, which explores the cyclical structure of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. It was performed on the first anniversary of Beethoven's death.

The last year of Schubert's all too brief life, 1828, was filled with compositions. He completed the *C Major Symphony* ("The Great") in March of that year. Performed for the first time twelve years after his death, it is considered the summit of his musical achievement.

One of his best piano duets, *F Minor Fantasy*, also dates from 1828. It evokes a disturbing violence and lyrical beauty.

In September and early October of 1828, he composed his last three piano sonatas, in C minor, A major, and B flat major, successfully synthesizing many of his stylistic features. The *String Quintet in C Major* was his last instrumental piece before his death on November 19, 1828.

Schubert is buried in Währing cemetery, three bodies away from Beethoven.

Schubert was significantly influenced by his close-knit group of male friends, known as the Schubert Circle. His relationships with an older school friend Joseph von Spaun, the young poet Johann Mayrhofer, and the wealthy young sensualist Franz von Schober were the most important of his life. He and Schober often lived together for extended periods.

Although Schubert's homosexuality had long been rumored in gay musical circles, it was not explicitly argued in print until 1981, when Maynard Solomon published an article in *American Imago*, later expanded in *19th Century Music*.

Citing the composer's dissipation, his lack of female love interests, his passionate male friendships, and several oblique references in his surviving correspondence, Solomon argued that Schubert's primary erotic orientation was homosexual.

The reaction on the part of many musicologists and music critics, who often simply refused to consider the evidence, revealed a deep-seated homophobia among many specialists in classical music.

In recent years, however, the notion of a gay Schubert has become if not commonplace, at least much less controversial. Schubert's alleged homosexuality and its effect on his music are subjects of continuing debate among music historians and critics.

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About the Author

Julia Pastore is a New York-based freelance writer who works in book publishing.