

The life of Schubert

CHRISTOPHER H. GIBBS



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I Representing Schubert: “A life devoted to art”

[Schubert] lived solely for art and for a small circle of friends

Obituary Notice, *Allgemeine Wiener Theaterzeitung*, 27 December 1828

(SMF 10)

Schubert had an image problem. During his lifetime, he was largely unknown beyond his native Vienna, where in any case the public was familiar with only a select portion of his vast output. After Schubert’s death, scarce, inaccurate, and often conflicting information about him meant biographers and commentators could create almost any representation they fancied, the all-too-familiar portrait whose authenticity deserves a hard look. This introductory chapter examines Schubert’s malleable image by contemplating the larger meanings of three important nineteenth-century pictures. Pondering specific visual depictions, I believe, can help us better understand Schubert’s baffling place in the popular imagination. The sketch, sepia drawing, and painting reproduced here raise crucial issues concerning Schubert’s compositions, cultural milieu, and general reputation. Even if this preliminary investigation does not ultimately yield the “real” Schubert, at the very least it alerts us to some of the complicating factors in representing his life.¹

But before looking at these visual portraits, I should say a few words about the verbal portraits of the composer that have so powerfully informed public views. The first significant biography of

Schubert appeared nearly forty years after his death, an inconceivable lapse of time for any other leading nineteenth-century composer. No doubt a major reason for this delay was the unusual course of Schubert's lived and posthumous career, particularly that so many of his supreme compositions were only discovered long after his death. When Schubert died in 1828 at age thirty-one, few people would have considered his life worthy of a substantial book. Only in the mid 1860s did Heinrich Kreissle von Hellborn, a Viennese lawyer who had never met Schubert but who loved his music passionately, finally realize the task others had started yet never finished. In his lengthy biography Kreissle suggests another reason for the lack of interest: "Schubert is, perhaps, a single instance of a great artist whose outer life had no affinity or connection with his art. His career was so simple and uneventful, so out of all proportion with works that he created like a heavensent genius."² In short, Schubert's music is magnificent; his life is dull.

The composer's own family and friends had already sounded this familiar theme. Josef von Spaun (1788–1865), who arguably wrote the most detailed, reliable, but also the most protective reminiscences of his close friend, reacted quite negatively when Kreissle's book appeared late in 1864. He took issue with some of the musical observations offered, and even more with the portrayal of Schubert the man: "The biography contains too little light and too much shadow regarding Schubert as a human being" (SMF 362). Yet neither Spaun nor any other friend left a thoroughly convincing and compelling verbal portrait of the person they knew so well. Moreover, Schubert's own words are discouragingly limited. Fewer than a hundred of his letters survive, many fairly inconsequential. Aside from some scattered diary entries of 1816 and 1824, several poems, and a few pages known as "Mein Traum" (My Dream), no diaries, criticism, essays, or memoirs by Schubert have come down to us.

If we do not possess Schubert's own words in nearly the abundance we do Mozart's, Schumann's, or Wagner's, there does exist a good amount of testimony from others. Ultimately the letters, diaries, and

memoirs written by family and friends provide the core information for a narrative of Schubert's life and the delineation of his character; they have proved indispensable to his biographers. The so-called Schubert Circle established a pattern of supporting and promoting its friend while he was alive, and it further sought to perpetuate certain views of him after his death. Some writings date from Schubert's lifetime, others came as memorial tributes immediately following his death, but the vast majority appeared many years later, after dear friend Schwammler (an affectionate nickname meaning "little mushroom") had become a recognized Great Composer.

In fact, the evidence on which recent biographical conjectures about Schubert's sexuality and darker nature are based has been available for more than fifty years; most was published by the great Schubert scholar Otto Erich Deutsch in two magisterial collections of "documents" and "memoirs" (the essential SDB and SMF cited throughout this book). Revisionist scholars have rarely marshalled new material but, rather, like Dupin in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter," looked afresh at documents long in full public view. If these reinterpretations make use of familiar sources, what is novel are the connections made, the subtle readings and methodologies employed, and the critical imagination that attempts to conceive of Schubert free from the sentimental clichés of the past. Archival discoveries in the last few decades have substantially broadened our understanding of Schubert's cultural milieu, especially of his friends' lives, but unfortunately significant letters, diaries, or writings by the composer himself have not been found. Schubert remains in the shadows, even as some try figuratively to bring him out of the closet and the pub and into the psychiatrist's consulting room.

Although many friends and acquaintances described Schubert's physical appearance (often somewhat contradictorily), portraits supply the most compelling images.³ Wilhelm August Rieder, an acquaintance of Schubert's, produced a famous watercolor that served as the basis for innumerable later illustrations (see illustration

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1 Sketch by Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller of Schubert and friends (1827).

13, page 133). Schubert’s nickname “Schwammerl” becomes much more concrete after one sees the caricature of the diminutive composer walking behind the towering singer Johann Michael Vogl (see illustration 7, page 58). Schubert’s closest friend Franz von Schober (1796–1882) is said to have sketched these figures, and just as music was part of the general skills of many in Schubert’s circle, so also was drawing. Two of his intimates, Leopold Kupelwieser (1796–1862) and Moritz von Schwind (1804–71), however, were far more than dilettantes; they were distinguished artists who executed many portraits of the composer.

The three depictions examined here enable us to consider Schubert in his contemporary context, as well as to chart briefly the changing representation of him over the course of the century. The first is by the distinguished Biedermeier artist Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller, who otherwise is not known to have been connected to Schubert. He sketched the composer informally singing with friends in a drawing that can be dated to late 1827. This primary source is, in fact, the closest thing we have to a “photograph” of Schubert in active music-making with friends, not all of whom have been identified.⁴ The date and unusual scoring of the vocal trio (two males and a female) strongly suggest that they are singing *Der Hochzeitsbraten* (The Wedding Roast), a charming concoction to a trivial Schober text that was sure to delight all who heard it. This is Schubert enjoying music with friends, spontaneously and merrily.

All three of our illustrations, as well as many others dating from his own time, portray Schubert in the company of others. On the other hand, as befits the quintessential solitary creative genius, there are no known contemporaneous depictions in which Beethoven is placed together with anyone else. This is emblematic of Beethoven’s relative isolation, in contrast to Schubert’s far more social existence. The situation is likewise reflected in their respective musical reputations. While Beethoven’s fame came from mighty masterpieces, primarily instrumental, Schubert was best known for small works, primarily vocal and keyboard. All three pictures capture this intimate, social,

and domestic side of the Schubert. And yet the project of Schubert's maturity was to accomplish and to account for more.⁵ In this he directly confronted the magnificent musical tradition bound to his native Vienna, and, more specifically, to the dominating artistic presence of Beethoven.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Vienna, still at the center of the Holy Roman Empire, was in the midst of a musical golden age. The roughly seventy years (1760s-1828) that span Haydn's maturity and Mozart's entire career, and that conclude with the deaths of Beethoven and Schubert, saw not only the glories of the Classical style and the birth of musical Romanticism, but also striking changes in musical culture, such as the beginnings of modern concert life and the forging of a new status for musicians working as independent creative artists. Much of the music and musical life that we know and value today emerged during this remarkable period. Beethoven is the pivotal figure, the bridge between Classic past and Romantic future. Blessed by Mozart (who supposedly predicted that he would go far) and for a time fitfully taught by Haydn, Beethoven was the imposing model for many composers who followed him. Moreover, his ultimate authority came as much from the aesthetic creed he embodied as from the music he wrote. One can scarcely imagine the solitary Beethoven wearing a powdered wig or bowing to anyone, as Haydn and Mozart had. Schubert, too, let his hair grow free.

Schubert studied and cherished this outstanding musical heritage, although he lived a quite dissimilar existence from that of his predecessors. A truly freelance composer, without title or station, Schubert died just twenty months after Beethoven – a generation younger, yet his contemporary. While Rossini's operas delighted Viennese audiences beginning in 1816, and Paganini's wizardry dazzled them in 1828, Beethoven towered artistically above them all, and the musical world knew it. Schubert genuinely admired Rossini ("You cannot deny him extraordinary genius") and was overwhelmed after hearing Paganini play ("Tonight I heard an angel sing"), but Beethoven consumed his thoughts. If Schubert had a "Beethoven complex," it was

something he shared with most later nineteenth-century composers.

Such was the context in which Schubert gradually established an unrepresentative kind of fame during the 1820s. The musical genres for which he was most familiar were quite different from those which eventually won his immortality or which audiences usually encounter today in concerts or on recordings. Among the small-scale genres occasioning such intimate music-making as Waldmüller sketched, *Lieder* won pride of place, although Schubert's popularity and success also came from dances, partsongs (usually for two tenors and two basses), and keyboard music (especially four-hand compositions). Whereas Mozart, Beethoven, and others first made their names as virtuoso pianists, Schubert, a performer of far more limited talent, earned more modest recognition through the popular types of compositions. This constituted his sole musical accomplishment in the eyes of many during the early part of the century.

But like his imposing predecessors, Schubert, too, had higher aspirations and during the 1820s he increasingly composed ambitious dramatic, religious, keyboard, chamber, and orchestral works intended for a wide public. His contemporaries knew only a few of these "higher" compositions; hence the discrepancy between Schubert's lived and posthumous fame, as well as between the image of him as a song and dance composer and as a serious master. The larger musical implications of Waldmüller's sketch for Schubert's biography are clear: we must know what music, in what genres, we are talking about at various stages of his career.

Late in life, nearly forty years after Schubert's death, Moritz von Schwind crafted his famous "Schubertiade at Josef von Spaun's," which features a grand party of familiar Schubertians. Although Schubert figured prominently in many of Schwind's drawings and paintings, this particular project held special importance for the artist, who by the 1860s was one of the most notable in central Europe. After completing a preliminary sketch, Schwind wrote to the poet Eduard Mörike: "I have begun to work at something which I feel I owe



2. Sepia drawing by Moritz von Schwind of a Schubertiade at Josef von Spaum's (1865).

the intellectual part of Germany – my admirable friend Schubert at the piano, surrounded by his circle of listeners. I know all the people by heart."⁶

If Waldmüller's sketch prompts us to consider the nature of music-making among Schubert's friends, Schwind's elegant and more substantial representation raises the question of who exactly all these people were. Although composers inevitably have friends, collaborators, and champions, Schubert's entire existence seems unusually involved with a group of friends, mainly young men often quite distinguished in their own right, with whom he lived, worked, traveled, and socialized. Schubert's background differed considerably from most of them. Born into a modest, although not poor, family, Schubert was blessed with a phenomenal musical talent. As a scholarship student at an excellent boarding school, Schubert came into contact with fellow students, as well as with their extended network of families and friends, most of whom were of higher social status. (The "von" in many names testifies to their privileged positions.) Friends gave the young Schubert manuscript paper when he had none, introduced him to a vast spectrum of the arts, and actively promoted his music with publishers and performers. A few provided housing, sometimes for years at a time, and determined the course of his daily life in myriad ways.

Later, these individuals told Schubert's story to posterity. Whereas prominent public figures usually begin at some point to mold their own reception (Wagner is a notorious example), Schubert did not live long enough to do so. Thus it was up to those who remained behind to establish his image, albeit with varying degrees of knowledge, insight, and candor. While for many composers a spouse, family member, or friend so dominates their emotional life that a single relationship becomes a central biographical issue (think of Robert and Clara Schumann), Schubert's ties were much looser and more varied. As far as we can tell, Schubert's family, except for his older brother Ferdinand, played a relatively minor role after his teenage years, although he went back to live with them on various occasions and

would visit when he lived elsewhere. Schubert never married, nor apparently was there any sustained and mutual love affair with a woman. Instead, except for some troubled and troubling periods, the core group of male friends was the essential and ever present reality of his daily existence year after year.

Schwind completed the final sepia version of his picture in 1868 (an oil painting of the same design was left unfinished), and even today nearly every individual in it can be identified. He grouped participants according to their creative field: the artists Rieder, Schwind, and Kupelwieser stand together behind the seated ladies; literary friends—Franz Grillparzer, Johann Senn, Johann Baptist Mayrhofer, Ignaz Castelli, Eduard von Bauernfeld—are at the extreme right. The host of pre-eminent Schubertiades, Josef von Spaun, sits on the composer's left. Spaun long played the role of best friend, loyal and devoted, although not necessarily the most intimate or influential. The two first met in 1808 at the school dormitory where they lived, and Spaun quickly took Schubert, nine years his junior, under his wing. It was Spaun, a law student at the time, who supplied the music paper and enabled Schubert during vacations to see operas such as Gluck's *Iphigenia in Tauris* and Josef Weigl's *Das Waisenhaus* and *Die Schweizerfamilie*, thereby exposing Schubert not only to the works themselves, but also to performers such as Vogl and the famous soprano Anna Milder. Spaun also introduced Schubert to many of his friends from his native Linz. Later Spaun fondly remembered how "all became friends and brothers together. It was a beautiful, unforgettable time" (SMF 130).

Schubert accompanies Vogl, sitting on his right. Twenty-nine years the composer's senior and perhaps more mentor than close confidant, Vogl, Spaun felt, "might be regarded as Schubert's second father: he not only took care of him materially, but in truth furthered him also spiritually and artistically" (SMF 14). A *divo* who translated classical Greek texts to pass the time, Vogl could be a prickly personality with stringent moral standards. According to one acquaintance, Adam Haller, "Schubert alone, or rather his genius, possessed the

magic to tame this rough nature" (SMF 56). Vogl's professional efforts played a vital role in launching Schubert's career. He also introduced him to important patrons and cultural luminaries, and provided advice and financial assistance, especially on the long journeys Schubert and he took together during certain summers. The eminent singer lent some stability to Schubert's life, in sharp contrast to the youthful exploits of Schober and Company, which one of Vogl's biographers deemed "the most dissolute circles of university students, artists, poets, and theater people" (SMF 162). By the time Schwind depicts, Vogl was retired from the operatic stage and rarely performed in public. Schubert's songs preoccupied his last twenty years, and he sang them frequently at private gatherings until his death, in 1840, at age seventy-two.

Two other figures rendered under Schwind's keen eye deserve special mention. A portrait of Countess Caroline von Esterházy, a student of Schubert's for whom he evidently possessed an idealized love, serves as muse above the guests, a fact worth noting for later discussions. Another significant touch – and a compelling commentary – is Schwind's visual reproach of Schober, seated in the second row on the far right and the sole participant not entranced by Schubert's music; he is rather more interested in flirting with the lovely Justina von Bruchmann sitting next to him.

Schober held particular importance for Schubert. Today, we might characterize him as charismatic. Clearly he cast a spell, not only over Schubert, who lived with him and his mother for extended periods. (They even merged their names into one: Schobert.) Born in Sweden a year before his friend, Schober came from a wealthy family whose fortunes kept falling under the weight of his mismanagement and extravagant living. Talented in several of the arts and apparently passionate about them all, Schober lacked the discipline and formidable talent of other friends – the literary skills of Senn, Mayrhofer, and Bauernfeld, the artistic gifts of Kupelwieser and Schwind – and he could scarcely hope to compete with the special genius of his musical companion. Nearly everyone adulated Schober, many sincerely. Schubert once

wrote to him in a letter, “Your understanding of art is the purest and truest imaginable” (SDB 98).

Schober facilitated a vibrant intellectual, cultural, and artistic atmosphere for Schubert and exerted a profound influence on his art by suggesting what the composer read and set to music, and even by providing his own words for a dozen songs and an opera (*Alfonso und Estrella*). Many years after first introducing them, Spaun gave a generous assessment of Schober’s importance for Schubert, emphasizing

the great services rendered by the extremely talented Schober with his burning enthusiasm for art. Schober, with his mother’s permission, repeatedly received Schubert into his home and gave him many proofs of his friendship and his care. In particular, Schober is deserving of the greatest credit in regard to Schubert for having brought about the latter’s association with Vogl, which was achieved only after great difficulties. The society of a young man so enthusiastic about art and of such refined culture as Schober, himself a successful poet, could clearly have only the most stimulating and favorable effect on Schubert. Schober’s friends also became Schubert’s friends, and I am convinced that living among this circle of people was far more advantageous to Schubert than if he had lived among a circle of musicians and professional colleagues, though he did not neglect these either. (SMF 363–64)

At once at the center of a remarkable group of young men, Schober was ultimately distinguished by mediocrity, laziness, and, in the eyes of some contemporaries, as we shall see, loose living. When the writer Eduard von Bauernfeld (1802–90) finally met Schober in 1825, after having heard about him for years, they “at once began an agreeable relationship” and even lived together briefly. Bauernfeld’s first reaction was that even though many “worship him like a god, I find him pretty human, but interesting.” His opinion had not much changed eight months later, when he wrote in his diary, “Schober surpasses us all in mind, and even more so in speech! Yet there is much about him that is artificial, and his best powers threaten to be suffocated by idleness” (SDB 428, 516). Bauernfeld left a trenchant commentary in a

New Year's sketch from 1826 in which Schober is cast as the lazy and corrupting Pantaloon (SDB 486–502). Although Schwind also long worshiped Schober, the place he assigned him in the Schubertiade representation reveals his eventual disenchantment.

The aura of Schwind's visual Schubertiade is unabashedly nostalgic and offers up a sanitized Vienna seemingly without political repression, daily hardships, or emotional cares. Remembering the brief time Schubert and he lived door-to-door, Schwind told the composer Ferdinand Hiller: "There could be no happier existence. Each morning he composed something beautiful and each evening he found the most enthusiastic admirers. We gathered in his room – he played and sang to us – we were enthusiastic and afterwards we went to the tavern. We hadn't a penny but were blissfully happy" (SMF 283). Such nostalgia, we shall see, permeates not only this and other images, but also many of the writings of Schubert's circle, and even some of the music Schubert composed and others arranged.

Near the end of Schubert's life, Bauernfeld wrote in his diary of a "gap in the friends' circle . . . What is to become of us all? Shall we stick together?" (SDB 661). In fact, after Schubert's death friends did drift apart even more, not so much because Schubert had been the glue that had held them together, as because the late 1820s marked a time during which adult life circumstances – marriage, jobs, artistic fame – meant that many went their own way. Therefore much of the nostalgia that colors images of Schubert's life comes from the fact that when friends discussed or pictured Schubert, they were looking back on their own lost youth as well.

As Schwind's image shows, Schubert provided the musical focus for many social gatherings. The image is deceiving, however, in a number of respects. Although friends often referred to themselves as a "circle," sometimes even the "Schubert Circle," such a label implies a single group with a fixed constituency, and further suggests that Schubert was the origin and center – neither of which is true. In fact, Schubert and his friends often allude to a "circle" (*Kreis*), "society" (*Gesellschaft*), or "club" (*Verein*) in describing a range of both formal

and informal associations that comprise a variety of participants and activities. The *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde*, Vienna's musical society, boasted a large and distinguished membership of passionate amateurs and professionals, and Schubert worked his way up to prominence in that organization. The secret societies with which his name was linked included individuals he knew from school or from elsewhere in Viennese cultural life. The informal "reading society" in which Schubert participated held regularly scheduled meetings where serious conversation was highly valued, if not always achieved. The "pub crawlers" (as they called themselves) with whom Schubert, after a long day composing, would spend many hours, many nights a week, were a varied and informal group of old friends and new acquaintances. Not only was there no unchanging circle of friends, but the particular people Schwind includes in his *Schubertiade* were never all in one room together, and a few never even met Schubert or one another.

Whereas Schwind represented events he knew from personal experience, however nostalgically, our third image is pure fiction, created by an artist who had no connection with Schubert. Julius Schmid was commissioned to paint his bourgeois *Schubertiade* to commemorate the 1897 centennial of the composer's birth. He shows Schubert and his elegant audience in a lush setting that would not be out of place on a Hollywood movie stage. The immediacy of Waldmüller's sketch, and the brio of Schwind's intensely personal drawing and the loving accuracy of its group portrait, have here devolved into a falsely dramatized image of the genius at the keyboard taking requests from his audience. Schmid's painting epitomizes the trivialization of Schubert found in countless medleys, novels, and operettas at the opening of the twentieth century, most notoriously Heinrich Berté's tremendously successful operetta *Das Dreimäderlhaus* (1916), based on Rudolph Hans Bartsch's best-selling Schubert novel *Schwammerl* (1912). Film versions of Berté's operetta, especially the adaptation starring Richard Tauber, as well as English versions called *Lilac Time* and



3 Oil painting by Julius Schmid of a Schubertiade (1897).

Blossom Time, were also hugely popular. The influence of such seductively ingratiating kitsch is difficult to counter and reverse. The meek Schubert who loves but never wins the girl, who writes beautiful music only to be neglected by all but his faithful friends, who was so poor and died so young – this sentimental view reached its height at the *fin de siècle*, especially in Vienna. Many of these themes linger to this day.

All three of our Schubert representations may make us wonder exactly what compositions are being played (and heard) within them. As mentioned, the date of the Waldmüller sketch, and the performers depicted, indicate a specific vocal trio from 1827. We might like to think, as Schubert's biographer Maurice J. E. Brown suggested, that Schwind presents Vogl and Schubert playing the wondrous song *An die Musik*, Schubert's ode to his beloved art that sets Schober's sentimental words. And in the Schmid painting, one can imagine a large variety of pieces intended to delight listeners. Music is at the inaudible center of all three depictions, and points to the fact that it is the music that ultimately makes us care about Schubert's life.

In truth, Schubert's compositions themselves assume unusual biographical importance and not just because they may, as is often the case, reflect specific events in the composer's life. We wonder what sort of man would conceive such pieces: beautiful, sad, convivial, dark – a long list of apparently contradictory qualities – and begin to construct an image of Schubert based on personal responses. Many compositions suggest a carefree soul who must have loved to sing and make music with and for friends. Other pieces seem almost private mediations written for no intended audience. (Schubert persistently composed ambitious works without any prospect of performance or publication.) There are hints of deep religious feeling in some compositions; at the same time Schubert's Masses consistently undercut institutional dogma. He was obsessed with death throughout his career, and typically Viennese darker forces often lurk beneath the gaiety. The frequent wistfulness, the laughing through tears (or crying with laughter), conspire to seduce us into believing we know something of the man who expresses himself in such ways.

Ultimately, however, the images we construct are projections of our own feelings, desires, and interests; they do not really tell us much about Schubert the man. So we inevitably connect Schubert's music with what we know – or think we know – about his life in hazy outline: he loved his friends, his health was poor (as were his finances), he wrote quickly and intuitively, he died young. The tendency to relate Schubert's music to his biography is epitomized by the popular "Unfinished" Symphony, which seems a perfect metaphor for an "unfinished" life. (In point of fact, this extraordinary work was not silenced by death; Schubert had put it aside years earlier.) The urge to make such musical and biographical connections was encouraged by Schubert's friends. A year after Schubert died, Bauernfeld wrote in a memorial tribute that "so far as it is possible to draw conclusions as to a man's character and mind from his artistic products, those will not go astray who judge Schubert from his songs to have been a man full of affection and goodness of heart" (SMF 31).

A hundred years after Schmid's lavish illustration, no single visual image symbolizes the postmodern Schubert; instead, we have a new conceptual portrait of a darker, neurotic composer. An impressive oil painting, recently identified as depicting the young Schubert (some dispute this claim), graces the covers of books, scores, CDs, and concert programs.⁷ Many people react, "Well, that certainly doesn't look like Schubert." This is rather like the response to the new image of Schubert as gay, drunk, and depressed, "Well, that certainly doesn't seem like Schubert." Ultimately, Schubert may get lost in images that tend to reflect the time of the observer, and which serve diverse purposes and interests, more than that capture the historical realities of Schubert's perhaps not-so-dull life.