

Chapter One

“The Sappho of Vienna”: Gabriele von Baumberg and the disasters of war

IN THE FIRST VOLUME of her memoirs, *Denkwürdigkeiten aus meinem Leben* (Reminiscences of My Life), and the second volume of her *Zerstreute Blätter* (Scattered Album Leaves), the Viennese writer Caroline Pichler briefly invokes a friend of her youth, “one of the most interesting women in Vienna”: the poet Gabriele von Baumberg (1766–1839).¹ This gifted poet was indeed fascinating, but her renown died long before she did. Despite her often-stated desire for poetic immortality, the public turmoil of revolution and the private turmoil of her marriage to another poet silenced her voice and stopped her pen well before physical extinction. The elderly Caroline Pichler, poignantly aware of having outlived her own era, lamented her old friend’s obscurity and sang her praises before her own death in 1843, but oblivion returned when the loyal advocate was no more.²

There are many reasons to resurrect the extraordinary life and works of Gabriele von Baumberg – if the connection with Schubert is the principal impetus to do so in this context, it is not the only cause for curiosity. She was a local literary celebrity in Schubert’s youth, although her fame did not endure: eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women *were* able, despite considerable obstacles, to publish their works and garner a measure of critical acclaim in their own day, but the approbation seldom lasted. Gabriele von Baumberg, whom Carl August von Schindel praises in his 1823 compendium of female authors, *Die deutschen Schriftstellerinnen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (German women writers of the nineteenth century),³ perfectly exemplifies the phenomenon; the association with Mozart’s and Schubert’s names (Mozart’s “Als Luise die Briefe ihres ungetreuen Liebhabers verbrannte,” or “When Luise burned her faithless lover’s letters,” K. 520, on a text by Gabriele is among his most beautiful songs) was not sufficient to attract more than passing mention from later music historians.⁴ Where her name *has* resurfaced, it is primarily as an appendage to her spouse; Schindel was not alone in speaking more of Gabriele’s husband, the Hungarian poet Batsányi János, than of Gabriele herself. The couple was still alive at the time Schindel’s encyclopedia was published, but he was right to speak of them in the elegiac terms of a tragedy long past and beyond reparation. Batsányi’s political troubles and his jealousy of her writing constituted a juggernaut that crushed her creativity

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altogether for the last thirty years of her life. At the nexus where history at its most violent collides with personal and artistic destiny, theirs is a tale of love, art, and revolution with a special poignance.

Before disaster struck, Gabriele's works were regularly published in the *Wiener Musenalmanach* (Viennese Almanac of the Muses), an artistic periodical founded by two of the leading figures of the Austrian Enlightenment, Lorenz Leopold Haschka and Johann Baptist von Alxinger;⁵ Gottlieb Leon, another member of the circle, called her "our poetess."⁶ She was evidently a music-lover: in a poem entitled "An den grossen unsterblichen Hayden [*sic*], bey Gelegenheit als die Schöpfung diess Meisterstück der Tonkunst im k. k. Nationaltheater aufgeführt wurde" (To the great, immortal Haydn on the occasion of his *Creation*, this masterpiece of music, performed at the Royal-Imperial National Theater), she hails the composer as "the God of harmony."⁷

Erquickend – sanft – wie alles Schöne
 Entzückend, feurig und doch rein,
 Strömt oft der Zauber deiner Töne
 Durch's Ohr in unser Herz hinein.

Jüngst schuf dein schöpferisches Werde!
 Den Donner durch den Paukenschall;
 Und Himmel, Sonne, Mond, und Erde,
 Die Schöpfung ganz – zum Zweytenmal.

Gefühlvoll – staunend – Wonnetrunken!
 Wie Adam einst im Paradies
 Am Arm der Eva hingesunken,
 Zwar sprachlos den Erschaffer pries,

So huld'gen wir, im Aug' die Thräne,
 Dem Kunstwerk deiner Phantasie –
 Der Allmacht deiner Zaubertöne –
 Und Dir, dem Gott der Harmonie!!⁸

Refreshing – gentle – like everything beautiful,
 Enrapturing, fiery and yet pure,
 the magic of your tones often flows
 through the ear deep into our hearts.

Recently you created your creative "Become!"
 the thunder resounding through the drum-rolls;
 And heaven, sun, moon, and earth,
 the entire creation, for the second time.

Full of emotion – astonished – drunk with joy!
 Like Adam once in Paradise
 leaning on Eve's arm,
 almost speechless, praised the Creator,

so we laud, with tears in our eyes,
 the artistic work of your fantasy,
 the power of your magical tones,
 and you, the god of harmony!

Her passionate evocations of feminine experience and her preoccupation with what it meant to be both a poet and a woman played a little-recognized part in Schubert's development at a critical juncture. One of his first extant attempts at lieder composition is an incomplete sketch of her lengthy poem "Lebenstraum" (Dream of life), D. 39 (21A), composed in 1810 (?) at a time when he too had perhaps begun "dreaming of life" and wondering what its future course would be. Because the teenage composer gravitated for several years thereafter to ballad compositions and Baumberg was not a ballad poet, Schubert did not return to her verse until August 1815. When he did, it was from an altered perspective. In the midst of a spate of Goethe settings (the conjunction is not, I believe, coincidental), he set five of her poems to music in a single three-day span: "Lob des Tokayers" (In praise of Tokay wine), D. 248; "Cora an die Sonne" (Cora to the sun), D. 263; "Der Morgenkuss" (The morning kiss), D. 264; "Abendständchen: An Lina" (Evening

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-77862-6 - Schubert's Poets and the Making of Lieder

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Excerpt

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serenade: To Lina), D. 265; and “An die Sonne” (To the sun), D. 270. The 1815 settings, especially “Der Morgenkuss,” betray in every measure the influence of Mozart and Gluck on the young Schubert, whose enthusiasm for *Iphigénie en Tauride* is well-documented and who studied composition with Gluck’s student Antonio Salieri. Schubert, I believe, associated the elevated language of love in Gabriele von Baumberg’s poetry with the invocations of noble passion in eighteenth-century opera, in particular, the works in which Orestes and Pylades value love for one another before their own lives and Pamina and Tamino prove worthy of the most exalted conception of love. Indeed, as Ewan West has pointed out, operatic models were crucial to the formation and continued life of Viennese song before 1815;⁹ that Schubert should engage in yet another experiment with opera-in-the-lied, and should do so in his own individualistic way, is not surprising. But let us first meet the poet and come to know something of her troubled life and the poetry she was able to write before history intervened, something of the context from which “Der Morgenkuss” and other such delicately radical poems emerged.

A TEMPEST-TOSSED LIFE

In “Liebel an mich” (To me from Liebel), Ignaz Liebel,¹⁰ a professor of aesthetics at the University of Vienna, hails her as the Sappho of Vienna:

Du Sappho Wiens, in deren holden Blicken	Thou Sappho of Vienna, in whose gentle gaze
Der Dichtkunst und der Liebe Feuer glänzt;	poetic art and the fire of love glow,
Die selbst die Musen mit dem Lorbeer	whom the Muses themselves adorn with laurel
schmücken,	
Und Amor mit der Myrthe kränzt! ¹¹	and Love crowns with myrtle!

The sobriquet, whether or not Liebel was the first to use it, evidently caught on. Among the extant depictions of Gabriele, the best-known is an undated painting, now in Kaschau, Hungary, by the Viennese *Historienmaler* (history painter) Heinrich Füger in which she is depicted as Sappho, a pseudo-Grecian veil draped about the head, shoulders, and arms, with a lyre cradled to her bosom. In another contemporary painting (fig. 1) she is quite beautiful, with an oval face and high forehead, a sensitively modeled mouth, and large, dark eyes, her intensity and melancholy disposition apparent. The designation as Sappho – Plato’s “Tenth Muse” – is a commonplace for women poets through the ages, multiply emblematic of the equation between sexual passion and poetry, the taint of the perverse (“unnatural” women, both poetically and sexually), and the solitude of the woman poet. Given Gabriele’s determination to attain Parnassus, comparisons to Sappho might well have been both the ultimate accolade and cause for pangs of fear: Sappho, after all, was alone.¹²

Perhaps Gabriele would have been better so, although she, I suspect, would not have agreed. She was born on 24 February 1766, the third child of Johann Florian Baumberg, a high-ranking official at the imperial court, and his wife Maria Christina Rodius.¹³ (The couple had four children, but the other three all died in infancy.) Florian Baumberg was an educated man with a particular interest in literature and

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Figure 1. Portrait of Gabriele von Baumberg (1766–1839) in 1791

art who encouraged his daughter's literary pursuits; Gabriele idolized him, but had a difficult relationship with her mother.¹⁴ Her father began his career at the court as a clerk in charge of purchases and transportation, but was transferred to the court chambers, where he became first a secretary and finally director of the court archives. He was Gabriele's principal teacher (she also had a piano instructor and a dancing master) until the age of eleven, when she was sent to a Catholic public school; it was her father who introduced her to the works of Goethe, Schiller, the Virgil translator and poet Johann Heinrich Voss, and Salomon Gessner. Whether he did so for lack of any other family members with whom he could share his interests or as an expression of liberal principles regarding women's education (perhaps both, perhaps neither), she was grateful for the early fostering of her gifts as a writer.

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Educated or no, she was expected, and would herself expect, to be married. Gabriele was, from all accounts, much courted by young noblemen, but her first important love, whom she calls “Eduard” in her poems, was a poverty-stricken, albeit cultured and well-educated, young man named Anton Bernhard Eberl (1762–1805). He was the impetus for her first published poem, which appeared anonymously in the *Wienerblättchen*; he replied in the same journal, and their poetic love-letters continued until the journal announced in 1785 who the authors really were. Although Gabriele was reportedly distressed about the revelation, it drew the attention of such established writers as Alois Blumauer and Alxinger to her and resulted in entrée to the highest literary circles in Vienna. Her first poem published under her own name was an occasional piece in honor of her father’s birthday, printed in the *Wiener Musenalmanach* in 1785,¹⁵ when Gabriele was nineteen years old. Thereafter, between 1785 and 1796, sixty-nine of her poems appeared in the *Musenalmanach*,¹⁶ also in Christoph Martin Wieland’s *Der teutsche Merkur*, a leading periodical in German intellectual life for thirty-seven years; Johann Wilhelm von Archenholtz’s *Literatur- und Völkerkunde*, which ran from 1782 to 1791; and the *Österreichischer Taschenkalender*. If her reputation was primarily local, she did have readers elsewhere in the German-speaking world.

The learned, lively Caroline Pichler, whose salon was one of the most important centers of Viennese cultural life in the early nineteenth century, was always interested in the conjunction of love and art – women writers, who had to construct their own unique *mélange* of those two concerns and then justify the inclusion of art, could hardly escape the subject. The one event from Gabriele’s life that she recounts in some detail (she says nothing about the events of 1809) is the young Gabriele’s unhappy love affair with Eberl; this tragedy, in part, made Gabriele into a practicing poet and provided her with her principal poetic material thereafter, openly autobiographical in nature. The couple are believed to have met in 1783 when they both performed in one of the theatrical performances at the Greiner household on Monday evenings. In such domestic theatres, the melancholy Eberl was a favorite for the role of the gallant lover. Pichler describes him as follows:

A dark disposition, a sharp intellect, a melancholy view of the world drew the attention of his acquaintances, particularly that of women, to him. His circumstances (he held a small post in a government accounting office); his character, which was not without ambition and the desire for distinction; his limited means; and his sickness which ... hindered each of his aspirations, failed to lighten his melancholy aspect. But these same traits rendered him, with his refined manners, pleasing demeanor, and cultivated mind, a very significant personality in society. When he made his appearance in the role of the actor [Joseph] Lange in private theatricals, roles in which he was equally striking in figure, bearing, and motions, many glances and hearts flew his way.¹⁷

Caroline Pichler herself felt the attraction of this saturnine creature and later based the novella “Das gefährliche Spiel” (“The dangerous play,” Pichler’s pun on play-acting both in love and on the stage) on this incident.¹⁸ But if she turned away from a more serious involvement with Eberl, Gabriele did not, to her mother’s

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displeasure.¹⁹ The relationship, however, ended when he left Vienna in December 1786 for a post in Brussels. Gabriele, according to Pichler, was devastated: she was sick with grief for a year and did not fall in love again until she met Batsányi thirteen years later. The parting with Eberl was the impetus for the poem "Fragen an mein Schicksal" (Question to my destiny):

O Schicksal! musstest du mein Herz mit Lieb' erfüllen, Mit Liebe für den Mann, der nie die Seufzer stillen, Die Thränen trocken wird, die er mir ausgepresst? Und bin ich nie ein Gast bey Amors Wonnefest? Lernt' ich den edelsten der Männer darum kennen, Um stets von ihm verkannt, im Stillen nur zu brennen? Soll dieses arme Herz der Jugend beste Kraft Verschwenden in dem Streit mit Pflicht und Leidenschaft? Und soll ein Mann, wie Er, versehn mit tausend Gaben, Von tausend Fehlern frey, den Einen Fehler haben: Dass er mich Liebe lehrt, die Schülerinn nicht liebt, Und durch Entfernung nur die Ruh' ihr wieder giebt? ²⁰	O Fate! Must you fill my heart with love, love for the man who will never still the sighs, never dry the tears, which he has forced from me? And will I never be a guest at Love's feast of rapture? Did I therefore come to know the noblest of men only to be continually misunderstood, left to burn for him in silence? Shall this poor heart expend youth's best strength in the strife between duty and passion? And should a man like him, graced with a thousand gifts, free from a thousand faults, have this one fault: That he taught me love, but did not love his pupil, and only through distance can restore peace to her?
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Gabriele's friendship with Caroline Pichler seems to have suffered as a result of Eberl's greater interest in Caroline upon his return to Vienna; the two women did not see much of each other after 1787. And yet, the friendship with Caroline was important to Gabriele, who met the leading Viennese literati at the Greiner household. Gabriele was even appointed to the court in the early 1790s, although her connections with the aristocracy were not sufficient to help her uncle Franz Rodius, a cavalry captain who was imprisoned on charges of Jacobin ties; despite a verdict of innocence, he was exiled.²¹ A similar fate would later befall Gabriele and her husband, János Batsányi, born 5 September 1763 in Tapolcza, Hungary.²²

From the portrait by Heinrich Füger, he was indeed an arresting figure, ramrod-straight, with a stern face, high forehead, Roman nose, and piercing gaze (fig. 2). As a young man in Pest, he was befriended by Baron Lőrinc Orczy, who aided the young commoner in his literary ambitions. The first fruit of Batsányi's nascent patriotism was the poem "A magyarok vitzsége" (The Valor of the Magyars), published in Pest in 1785. Three years later, Batsányi founded the literary quarterly

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Figure 2. Engraving of János Batsányi (1763–1845) after a painting by Heinrich Füger

Magyar Múzeum (Hungarian Museum), with two associates, but the journal ended that same year when he was fired, in part because he challenged his employer to a duel, in part because of his support of French revolutionary principles. The poem “A franciaországi változásokra” (On the changes in France), written in 1789, exemplifies his vision of poetry as social philosophy and prophesy:

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Nemzetek, országok! kik rút kelepében	Nations still trapped within the snare of servitude!
Nyögtök a rabságnak kínos kötelében,	Peoples who groan in pain, by iron bonds subdued,
S gyászos koporsóba döntő vas-igátok Nyakatokról eddig le nem rázhatátok;	who have not shaken off the collar of the slave, the yoke that drags you down into a wretched grave!
Ti is, kiknek vérét a természet kéri, Hív jobbagyitoknak felszentelt hóhéri!	You also, sacred kings, who consecrated kill – since earth cries out for blood – the subjects of your will
Jertek, s hogy sorsotok előre nézzétek, Vigyázó szemetek Párizsra vessétek!	to Paris turn your eyes, let France elucidate, for king and shackled slave, a future and a fate!

(trans. Matthew Mead)²³

In his German poetry (he wrote in Hungarian, German, French, and Latin), he took his cue from Friedrich Klopstock, as in the following extract from a poem written in the aftermath of hearing the blind virtuoso Marie Theresia von Paradies perform in 1798. This is the rhapsodic-grandiloquent style he would press upon Gabriele as more elevated than her own, a model she should emulate.

Nach langem Sehnen, endlich sah und hört' er Sie	After long desiring it, at last he [the Poet] saw and heard you.
Er hörte Sie mit toller Seele; und verlor Von ihres sichern Spieles reizenden Getöne Nicht einen Laut – ganz Sinn, ganz Ohr.	He heard you with frenzied soul, and lost not a single sound from your assured playing of bewitching tones – all senses, all ears.
...	...
Rief er mit Staunen aus: "Groß! groß und herrlich sind Die Wunder Deiner Macht, o Kunst Du Himmelskind! –	He cried out with astonishment: "Great, great and majestic are the wonders of your power, o Art, Thou child of heaven!
...	...
So rief erstaunt der Dichter aus. Er sprach Zu sich gekehrt, kein Wort mehr. Er fühlte nur,	So cried the poet, astonished. He spoke not a word more, turned in upon himself.
Und dachte schweigend dann noch lange nach;	He only felt, and pondered silently a long time after
Welch unbekannte Kraft in Dich verborgen liege	What unknown power lies hidden in you,
Du Menschen-Seele! Gottes-Haupt!	Thou human spirit! Godhead!
Und ob der Geist, der solche Wunder wirkt, wohl auch	And does the spirit that works such wonders vanish
(Wie mancher wähnt) mit diesem Leben einst verfliegen? ²⁴	(as many believe) when this life is gone?

In 1794, Batsányi was accused of participation in a Jacobin-inspired conspiracy²⁵ and, despite being cleared of the charges, was imprisoned in the fortress of Kufstein for a year in 1795–96, where he wrote the powerful *Kufsteini elégiák* (Elegies from Kufstein). After his release, he went to Vienna and worked in the finance ministry

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as a clerk, but his political interests were not in abeyance. The mixture of personal anguish and revolutionary fervor typical of this poet are evident in the massive poem, *Der Kampf* (The Struggle), completed in 1801 and published anonymously in 1810, along with a lengthy prose appendix entitled “On the feudal system and the new European state system, or the republican constitutional monarchy,” written in August 1809 (the date is significant). The political ardor was fuelled in part by disgust: like many revolutionaries, he was repulsed by most individual specimens of the humanity whose lot he ostensibly wished to better, writing that “Man is false and horrible and wicked! Hostile and malicious wherever I find you! A lowly poisonous race of snakes!”²⁶ Rather, he envisioned humanity as he dreamed it would become in the wake of revolution, free from the “grim priests’ blood-altar,” and he claims for poets the truest democracy because they are not bound to time and place: their Fatherland is the world. The desperation of this self-styled “Sohn des Unglücks” (son of misfortune) is palpable from the beginning: “The path of life grows ever darker and more confused, and all my energies can hardly suffice to bear the heavy burden. Where should I go? What can I, what dare I, the weary one, hope for? Gods! Shall there never be an end to my suffering?”²⁷ He had apparently not met Gabriele when he wrote the lines, “Alas, and no beloved woman! Who could harken to the straying man’s fearful, anxious cry! No one who, pitying him, lovingly extends a lifeline to him! From the heights showing him the divine light in his last struggle! Saving him from certain and nearby fall! No one! No one!” He was prone to this hyper-exclamatory – dare one say hysterical? – vein.²⁸

For all that Batsányi wrote political poetry and Gabriele poetry of love, friendship, and poetic art in a woman’s voice, the two were akin in their intensity and their sense of isolation from others. The thirty-six-year-old Batsányi and the thirty-three-year-old Gabriele met on 17 October 1799 at a soirée given by the artist Vincenz Georg Kininger (1767–1851). Shortly thereafter, Batsányi lent Gabriele his copy of Herder’s *Zerstreute Blätter* (Scattered album leaves), and she wrote on 4 November to thank him and to tell him, with remarkable frankness, about the effect on her of their conversation the previous day. In a wonderfully extravagant analogy, she compares her state to that of an exotic plant left untended in a kitchen garden to wither in the cold, obdurate ground until Destiny’s storm shatters the greenhouse windows and lets in the sun and rain so that the plant might revive. Only then does the astonished gardener notice what a rare botanical specimen had been in his keeping all along.²⁹ Batsányi was clearly “Destiny’s storm,” and both her sense of her own uniqueness and the impact of their meeting are measurable in the vivid letter.

That was the start of an extraordinary correspondence, or what remains of it (only fifty-eight of their over five hundred letters have been preserved) – fragments from an extraordinary relationship. Encouraged by her dazzled reaction, Batsányi evidently suggested love-making after less than a month, or so one infers from Gabriele’s witty reference to “your lengthy prescription from Doctor Ovid.” The phrase occurs in her “Grosse Antworth” (Great answer) of 18 November, less a conventional letter than a manifesto of her beliefs and a disquisition on her life before she met him.³⁰ “Frostige” (cold) men nipped the bud of her springtime, she writes; her summer

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skies were darkened by storm clouds, and autumn makes her fear the winter to come. (It is an eloquent reminder of life expectancy in late eighteenth-century Europe that she characterizes thirty-three as autumnal.) Concerning marriage, she confesses, "I try to attend all wedding ceremonies out of an utterly singular species of curiosity because *until now, I have never seen a wife whom I envied on account of her husband* [Gabriele's italics]." And yet, she desired love and marriage, but only according to her own proud ideals.

I know of no pageantry more festive, no ceremony more solemn than a wedding, when a gentle bride comes to the altar accompanied by a worthy matron, and with indescribable feelings of overpowering sweetness, with tears in her eyes, looks into the future which hangs over her that very night, in clear expectation of those things that will follow, extends her trembling hand to the husband who will lead her through life, and whose worth is thereby ennobled and elevated, who is sacred to him right up to the final moment when he may say: *now she is mine!*

I have gone to weddings where I have crept away from the press of people and thanked Heaven, with gentle tears, that it had *joined together two equal souls* [Gabriele's italics], but nowadays one sees few such instances.

In this letter and others, she provided him with a primer on how to win her heart, and Batsányi responded to every cue, including Gabriele's fear that she would go to her grave without ever having known love. "We have found one another late – perhaps too late," he told her. "Our remaining years vanish quickly ... the autumn of life is upon us ... with every day, every hour, we draw closer to the grave and what will we have found on the long, hard, thorny path?"³¹ Gabriele was not easily persuaded, however. Her importunate lover in December 1799, having seen her in a dream, told her ("thou cold, hard maiden") that his nights were more fortunate than his days, that she could become Héloïse to his Abélard, if only she would consent to love him as he loved her (the analogy seems an unfortunate one).³² That same month, after they had quarreled about her reluctance to trust him and accede entirely to his love, he wrote that God had never created so equal a pair, two instruments more exactly and harmoniously tuned to praise His might.³³ He was not only eloquent but insistent, and his efforts were successful, from the evidence of their increasingly incendiary letters. Exclamation marks and ecstasy fill the pages, as in Gabriele's "poetische Idee über das Ja – bei der Heirath" (poetic idea on "Yes" with regard to marriage):

Stop! – Not yet is the powerful word, whose monosyllabic sound makes the difference between happiness and sadness for humanity, spoken aloud, the word that rules over life and death, that often frees the slave, yet often binds free people and chains them for their entire lives. Mighty word! so gently resounding in the ear of a loving youth, like the silvery tone of a flute, when he draws you forth from his pitiless sweetheart's lips after a long trial. Mighty word! You teach the doubting one faith, call back the dying man from Orcus and elevate the submissive son of destiny above the clouds.

Magic tone, that, avowed before human witnesses, sanctions your sacred right ... This "Yes"! Soon it shall resound in my ears from the mouth of the one I love, that through the echo of my stammered response will be transformed from "brother" to "husband." O that the power