

# AN UNFINISHED LIFE

Franz Schubert's *Schmerzen*  
and the Shadow of Beethoven

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# Introduction

Franz Peter Schubert looks self-assured in the portrait that Anton Depauly painted in the year of his death (Illustration 1). His gaze is somewhat surly, but also proud and more intense than in the other portraits of him that are known. What is missing are his glasses, which he wore long before 1814 and also often kept on in bed at night to quickly record his inspirations. Everyone saw Schubert only when he was wearing glasses, but this 'trademark' of his was obviously not allowed to be immortalized. Depauly had been told by his client that the composers he portrayed for posterity had to 'look their best'.<sup>1</sup> A double chin points to his somewhat short, plump build and betrays a tendency to become corpulent. Many who knew Schubert well thought August Rieder's portrait from three years earlier to be the best resemblance (Illustration 2). The composer is shown here with glasses, half in profile, looking satisfied and almost nonchalant, somewhat triumphantly leaning back on his chair.

In both portraits we can clearly see that Schubert had recovered after a deep crisis in March 1824, when most of his dreamed-of successes had failed to materialize and an incurable illness had begun to slowly undermine his health.

But we should be careful with this judgement. Schubert may have rediscovered himself, but he still missed the important successes that he had so fervently hoped for, his illness was steadily worsening, and when portraitists painted their models in those days, they did so as flatteringly as possible. Even if portraits of Schubert had been painted during this 1824 crisis, no one would have seen his despair.

That his friends preferred to see him as portrayed by Rieder is understandable. Many knew of his crisis but liked to see Schubert as they knew him in the past: the cheerful Franz, their old '*Franzl*' or '*Schwammerl*' (little fungus – because of his physique), an avid coffee-house visitor, beaming with self-confidence and 'full of gaiety'.



*Illustration 1. Portrait of Schubert by Anton Depauly (1828).*

*Photo: Archiv der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, Vienna.*

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This book describes how Schubert's crisis of 1824 had everything to do with his contemporary Ludwig van Beethoven. Schubert's final resting place was also linked to the older composer, and years after he was buried beside Beethoven (at the end of November 1828) a miraculous event took place that is unparalleled in music history.



*Illustration 2. Portrait of Schubert by August Rieder (May 1825).*

*Photo: Archiv der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, Vienna.*

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### **Next to Beethoven at the Währinger Ortsfriedhof**

Over the course of sixty years, Schubert and Beethoven were buried three times, and they received new coffins once. It was not until June 1888 that they found their final resting place.

Schubert was buried in the Währinger Ortsfriedhof in Vienna on 21 November 1828, after Beethoven had preceded him there on 29 March 1827.

Their remains were left undisturbed until October 1863. Then it was decided to exhume them for study purposes. The exhumers wanted to see if the coffins needed to be renewed after 35 years, and Viennese skull experts (motivated by the general enthusiasm for phrenology at that time) were eager to investigate whether the shapes of the composers' skulls could explain why the two had written music that was so different in character.

Another, even more radical, event took place at that time: the graves were rearranged, and Schubert's was given a new location. He was now placed right next to Beethoven, which must have made him very happy posthumously (Illustration 3).

In 1828, while delirious on his deathbed, Schubert had whispered to his brother Ferdinand that he was already dead underground, but not where Beethoven lay. After his brother died, Ferdinand decided to regard this feverish dream as a final deathbed wish. Although Schubert's grave then did not lie directly next to Beethoven's, it was only three graves away; that was as close as he could get at the time because the graves in between were already occupied.

His and Beethoven's reburials in 1863 became a grand ceremony. A choir positioned itself in a semi-circle around both open graves and sang two songs. Then Mass was celebrated in their honour, after which the old tombstones covered over the two new zinc-clad coffins.

Even this peace proved to be only a relative one. The Währinger Ortsfriedhof was closed in 1873 and cleared in 1888. During this final exhumation, the coffins with their remains were lifted for the second time. A thorough examination was not carried out on this occasion; the coffins were opened only for inspection of their contents and the conditions of preservation. Subsequently, they were transferred to the new and much larger Zentral Friedhof, to be reburied side by side in a row of 'graves of honour'.

Whereas in 1828 Schubert's feverish dream was the only reason to bury him close to his idol Beethoven, in 1863 a large committee from Viennese music circles had taken it upon themselves to transfer his grave to a location right next to the composer who had preceded him in death. The fact that a large crowd and choir added lustre to this occasion indicated the enormous interest in the relocation of Schubert's grave next to that of Beethoven's.

The reason for this unique event lay in the discovery of an impressive number of largely unknown compositions after Schubert's death and the increasing reappraisal of his musical achievements during the intermediate 25 years. Schubert himself did not have a good overview of everything he had written in



*Illustration 3. The graves of Beethoven and Schubert in the Währinger Ortsfriedhof in Vienna (Photo taken between 1863 and 1888). Schubert's grave is on the right.  
Photo: Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien.*

roughly 15 years; he could therefore not offer the outside world any insight into the growth of his achievements, and he was also not in a position to conduct the kind of public relations policy in which Beethoven had excelled. It was only after his death that all kinds of largely unknown instrumental compositions (piano sonatas, string quartets and last symphony) surfaced, many of which turned out to be masterpieces. It was this posthumous reevaluation of Schubert's work that became the decisive cause for the new location of his grave. The research on both skulls also marked a change in Schubert's status as a composer. His skull was compared with that of Beethoven, who was already considered to be one of the greatest composers of all time. Therefore, being buried 'next to Beethoven' also carried a figurative meaning; it stood for what he had not succeeded in achieving during his lifetime. He now moved up the ranks of composers to receive a place right next to Beethoven.

Schubert's fame during his lifetime was attributed mainly to his songs, while he was longing for recognition of his instrumental music - which became really known and appreciated only after his death. In life he had struggled with this lack of recognition, with poverty and illness, and in the decades after his death an atmosphere of tragedy became attached to both his person and his

work. Added to this was the fact of his very early death, at the age of only 31 – so ‘An Unfinished Life’<sup>22</sup> seemed to be an appropriate title for this book.

### **Schubert’s disease**

It remains somewhat unclear from which illness Schubert died at exactly 3 p.m. on 19 November 1828. Syphilis, from which he had been suffering for almost six years, could have reached the third stage by then and could have been the cause of his death - but only theoretically, because death rarely occurs within ten years of the primary infection. The doctors attributed the cause of death to ‘typhus’, a catch-all term for all kinds of ailments for which medical science had not yet found a specific cause. The official ‘Birth and Death Register of the Family of Schoolmaster Franz Schubert’ speaks of ‘nerve fever’ (*Nervenfieber*). Given the syphilis and Schubert’s inordinately high rate of composition in the year before his death, it is very likely that his constitution was so weakened that almost any serious illness could have killed him. The miserable hygiene conditions in Vienna may have caused a nasty flu or a neglected gastrointestinal disease (which was also called ‘*Typhus*’) that overtook Schubert’s primary syphilis and further undermined his severely fragile condition.

While we do not know the exact cause of his death, the question of Schubert’s ‘mental health’ is not so easy to answer either. Many contemporary sources claim that he had psychological problems. He sometimes suffered from fits of rage, and in the years before his death he sometimes exhibited strange or even nasty traits in his behaviour, as some of his closest friends remembered. But medical and historical experts are divided on the answer to the question of what disorder can explain this behaviour. It may have been the syphilis, but it may also have been a mild form of manic depression or a childhood trauma that, in combination with the worries about his syphilis, continued to burden him mentally.

### **Towering ambitions**

The fact that Schubert expressed a wish on his deathbed to be buried next to Beethoven shows his admiration for the composer, 26 years his senior. Schubert idolized Beethoven and was indebted to him in many respects. Beethoven and his music inspired him; frequently this becomes noticeable in passages that can be traced back to Beethoven’s work. But the influence ran deeper, and Beethoven’s music demanded the utmost from Schubert’s

ambition. The younger composer wanted to tread the path taken by his older contemporary in search of a different form of music: 'serious music' or '*Kunstmusik*' (art music), as it was called at the time. Schubert wished to achieve the success he initially had with his songs. He wanted to move on to works in other musical genres: in opera or stage work accompanied by music (*Singspiel*), in chamber music, and finally in 'the symphony', then considered the ultimate proof of compositional ability. In this struggle for recognition, he wanted to measure up to Beethoven. With his ambition to equal and perhaps even surpass Beethoven, however, Schubert found himself faced with a virtually impossible task – especially because he was always susceptible to frustrations. Friends and acquaintances from his immediate circle knew that he made very high demands on his compositions. He was seldom really satisfied with them, driving himself further and feverishly searching for something new or better that would bring the desired results.

His pride, obstinacy, and boundless ambition enabled him to forge his own path in the field of *Kunstmusik*. He passionately hoped that his work would catch on with the public, the critics, and especially the publishers. However, this road turned out to be paved with many disappointments, occasionally alternating with small or more substantial successes. We can conclude that a considerable portion of Schubert's oeuvre (almost 1,000 opus numbers) was in fact the result of a fierce battle he fought not only with himself, but also with Beethoven.

### **Violent passages**

The violent moments in some of Schubert's later compositions – for example, in the Andante of his Eighth ('Great') Symphony (D 944) and in the Andantino of his Piano Sonata in A major from 1828 (D 959), with their many bars of painful explosions of *fortissimo* chords – these require further explanation.

What are we listening to? Do we hear the tantrums recorded by friends, tantrums aroused by intense frustration at the lack of public recognition? Or are these the syphilitic pains that manifested themselves intermittently? Or the despair that arose from his depressions and possible personal trauma? Or did he also want to prove his originality with such violent passages?

A letter from Schubert himself can possibly answer these questions. It dates from 31 March 1824 and contains a long cry of despair. In this letter, Schubert mentions all kinds of '*Schmerzen*' (pains, sg. *Schmerz*) and blames

his syphilis for this deep personal crisis. Because of this illness, he writes, his work fails, his great expectations as a composer are dashed, his sense of beauty disappears, and happiness in love and friendship offer him only 'pain'.<sup>3</sup> He expects nothing more from the future. A huge problem looms large over him. Years earlier he had told Josef von Spaun: 'The State has to support me. I came to this world for nothing else but composing!' Now Schubert's composing mission seems to have run into serious obstacles.<sup>4</sup>

In the music literature, this letter has been regarded as a proof of his syphilis being the main cause of all the *Schmerzen* he mentions. His 'depressions', as they are vaguely described in some literature, are also largely attributed to this illness. But should we take Schubert at his word when he says that 'his health problems [syphilis]' was the main cause of all his misery? In another reading, the letter in question offers a different view of Schubert's complaints, as I wish to propose here. In addition, there are other pressing issues requiring an answer.

In this letter, Schubert mentions Beethoven, for instance, as his leading example for composing a new symphony: the 'Great Symphony'. Was Beethoven the reason for the murderous pace at which Schubert started composing after his crisis of 1824, and was Beethoven, being more than a quarter of a century older, thus partly 'responsible' for the exhausting battle that, according to my view, proved fatal for Schubert? Aside from the slowly debilitating syphilis and other *Schmerzen* mentioned in the letter, what role might Beethoven have played in Schubert's desire 'not to wake up again'?

Obviously, the competition with Beethoven also had a practical side, which for Schubert must have meant another kind of *Schmerz*. With his later symphonies, piano sonatas, and in particular the string quartets, Beethoven succeeded in establishing *Kunstmusik* as a new field in music history, his music becoming more and more personal and daring, and thus also inaccessible. Nevertheless, he continued to be successful with publishers as well as with the general public. With his *Kunstmusik*, moreover, Beethoven earned considerably more than Schubert, whose irregular income was all too often used up by his circle of friends, leaving him penniless again. What his older contemporary managed to do remained for Schubert an ideal that seemed unattainable but would dominate his compositions in the final years of his short life.

This book follows him along the road to his own form of *Kunstmusik*, where he inevitably felt Beethoven's shadow hovering over him in everything he wrote. While rendering an account of Schubert's inner struggle for his



*Kunstmusik* and of his competition with Beethoven, this book also addresses the burning question that often arises in Schubert literature: did the two composers meet in person during their lifetime or not? The question can be separated into others, which in turn address issues that have been circulating in the Schubert and Beethoven literature since their deaths but have remained unresolved until now. Did Schubert personally give Beethoven his Op. 10? Was Schubert at Beethoven's deathbed, after some sixty of his songs had previously been given to the mortally ill Beethoven for appraisal?

For an answer to these questions we are dependent on Anton Schindler (1795–1864), Beethoven's secretary, who had built up a friendly relationship with Schubert and, as an eyewitness, provided unique information about possible contacts between the two composers. But Schindler fell into disfavour with musicologists at the end of the twentieth century, when he came to be considered as a fraudster and meddler in important source material. In order to gain insight into the true historical value of his accounts, I will compare his information with different sources and also delve into the literature, which will often be quoted in a comparative sense in order to give the clearest possible picture of Schubert's struggle for recognition.

### **Whole and half-truths**

Today, anyone who tries to research Schubert's physical and mental condition in the lead-up to his death is confronted with an almost inextricable tangle of fictions, illusions, and whole and half-truths. Many testimonies consist of often divergent, credible or not, stories of friends and acquaintances.

What these contemporaries thought of Schubert has been processed in the course of a century and a half in many biographies and studies, each of which attempts to convey its own 'Schubert image'. The credibility and original meaning of these personal testimonies are often difficult to ascertain. If we want to know to what extent the composer's crisis had to do with his syphilis, his mental health, or external factors (such as Beethoven), then we have to rely not only on the statements of his friends and contemporaries; we must also look at what Schubert himself thought about his condition. The latter has of course been investigated many times in the past century and a half of biographies and articles about the composer. The results, however, depend mainly on the explanation of that single letter from March 1824, in which Schubert, more than four-and-a-half years before his death, complains about his *Schmerzen*.

Now that most music historians choose syphilis as the cause of the suffering he described, the question remains about what more this letter, as a key document about Schubert, can reveal about his illness(es) and early death.

### **‘I feel like the most unhappy, miserable man in the world’**

Was Franz Peter Schubert the unluckiest man ever? At the end of March 1824 he thought so himself. In his letter to Leopold Kupelwieser, a painter friend who was in Rome at that time, he lamented his fate: ‘I feel like the most unhappy, miserable man in the world’.<sup>5</sup>

A few days before, he notes in his diary: ‘Sorrow sharpens the mind and strengthens the spirit...’, writing immediately afterwards: ‘[There is] no one who understands the other’s sorrow, and no one who understands the other’s joy.’<sup>6</sup> He then continues with a sentence that makes clear where the inspiration for his music comes from: ‘My compositions exist because I understand music and because of my pain [*Schmerz*].’ He concludes: ‘Those that have produced the pain alone seem to please the world the most.’<sup>7</sup>

If his compositions were supposed to achieve even better results, Schubert felt that his ‘pain’ had to be incorporated in them. With this reasoning, he gave this ‘pain’ a crucial place in his composing. What exactly did this *Schmerz* consisted of?

### **Schubert’s multiple ‘pains’**

Talking only about a single *Schmerz* in his diary, it appears in the plural in his letter to Kupelwieser:

In one word, I feel like the unhappiest, most miserable man in the world. Imagine a man whose health will never recover, and who out of despair about this does his work worse and worse instead of better, imagine a man, I tell you, whose great hopes come to nothing, to whom happiness of love and friendship offer nothing but the greatest pain [*Schmerz*], for whom enthusiasm for beauty threatens to wither away, and I ask you, is not that a miserable, unhappy man?<sup>8</sup>

To clarify, he quotes the text of Goethe’s poem *Gretchen am Spinnrade* (Gretchen at the spinning wheel), which he used as early as 1814 for his song, with the girl desperately singing: ‘My rest is gone, my heart is heavy, I will never, never find him again ...’

In one long sentence, Schubert mentioned no less than four reasons for his deep unhappiness. First of all, there was his health, which would not recover.

We know already for some time that he had contracted syphilis before his twenty-sixth birthday. At each stage of his illness (i.e. at intervals), he suffered more and more pain and discomfort from this venereal disease, which was slowly wearing him down. In the first year of his syphilis, he initially withdrew from his friends, but afterwards did so only periodically and never became fully socially isolated. In the last few years before his death, the 'jolly Franz' of old turned into a friend who was, for those around him, all too often an ailing person, while the composer in him was doing everything he could to finally receive the much-desired recognition.

In his letter, Schubert took stock of each complaint or 'pain point'. First of all, it was his illness's turn. Imagine a person, he asked Kupelwieser, whose 'illness' had brought him despair to such an extent that his 'work' (*Sache*) was getting worse, not better. By this 'work' he seems to mean his composing work. In the description of his second and fourth *Schmerz*, he asked Kupelwieser to imagine a person whose great expectations did not materialize and whose 'pain' consisted in his enthusiasm for 'beauty' fading away. Among these complaints, the third one – about his love happiness and friendship being nothing more than the 'greatest pain' – seems to be of a different order.

Kupelwieser's reply to Schubert's letter has been lost. In a letter dated between 8 and 12 May 1824, he writes from Rome to his wife Johanna Lutz, pianist and accompanist to Schubert's songs: 'The good Schubert complains to me that he is ill again. I have just written to him ...'.

In this letter Kupelwieser spoke of Schubert's 'illness', which can refer only to his syphilis. Something in his answer to Schubert might have made the composer decide not to complain any more to anyone about his *Schmerzen*. After 31 March 1824 he refrained from complaining openly in his letters. At the most, in a letter to his friend Schober half a year later, he asked what they should do with 'happiness' if 'unhappiness' was the only 'charm' in life. From then on he kept note in his diary even more strictly that he composed because of his *Schmerz*. Only through his music did he write about his *Schmerz*.

The letter of 31 March 1824 contains yet another ominous announcement. The sentence '*Meine Ruh ist hin ...*' (My peace is gone) is followed by the outcry: '... every night, when I go to sleep, I hope not to wake up again, and every morning only announces yesterday's misery'.

This sentence further highlights Schubert's concerns about his 'pains'. It makes clear that his 'pains' did not stand for melancholy or *Weltschmerz* (world weariness), a common complaint in his time. In his case, it was more than a kind of deep pessimism. In fact, Schubert felt not only ill but also a failure, and he longed for death. In order to uncover how this crisis of 1824 came about, and the kind of solution Schubert was looking for and how it turned out for him, we must travel through his life from his early childhood to 1824, his year of crisis. On this journey, we will encounter harbingers of the 'pains' he later reported.

# ‘Late’ start

## **Child prodigy?**

Franz Peter Schubert was not a child prodigy, unlike Wolfgang Amadé Mozart (1756–1791). Mozart was taught by his father from the age of three, began composing at the age of five, and from that age gave concerts at home and abroad.

Schubert (1797–1828) received music lessons from his father at the age of eight but started composing at about the same time. From the age of 21 onwards, his songs were increasingly appreciated. At the time, he was successful mainly among a small circle of friends and like-minded people, who organized for years so-called *Schubertiaden* (sg. *Schubertiade*) for the performance of his music. It was only in the last few years of his life that he became a renowned song composer in Vienna.

Of all the composers who died young around Schubert’s time (Mozart at 34, Chopin at 39, and Mendelssohn at 38), Schubert was the very youngest, dying at 31, but in just over fifteen years he produced an impressive oeuvre of nearly 1,000 individual opus numbers.

Apart from his shorter lifespan, there was another difference between Schubert and the other three composers: unlike Mozart, Chopin, and Mendelssohn, Schubert never really became a performing musician. Besides their compositions, the other three were famous as pianists and performers of their own works.

Schubert was able to accompany his own songs on the piano – and sometimes he took care of the singing part – but when it came to difficult passages in his own piano compositions, he was not always able to demonstrate the required technique. We know from sources how he performed a work of his own around 1824. When he played his *Wandererfantasie* (1822) for a group of friends, he got stuck in the last part, the technically quite difficult fugue, after which he jumped up from the piano bench, with the words “The devil should play this thing [*Zeug*]!”

On the other hand, Schubert was in the same hurry as Mozart. Like Mozart, who allegedly worked on his *Requiem* on his deathbed, Schubert on



*Illustration 4. Schubert's birthplace in Liechtenthal (around 1920).*

*Photo: Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien.*

his own deathbed made final corrections to the second part of his song cycle *Winterreise* one week before his death.

If we compare Schubert's musical career with that of Mozart, who started five years younger, then Schubert seems to have started somewhat late. Was Mozart, who spontaneously started playing the violin at the age of three, a super child prodigy and Schubert, who started playing the violin at the age of eight, a prodigy who was relatively late in demonstrating his genius?

A child prodigy is a child who publicly demonstrates in any field of art, science, or sport at a young to very young age that he or she has special abilities that one would not expect at that age. Child prodigies come in all shapes and sizes. But to rank real and less real child prodigies based on age is difficult, because the environment in which these children grow up has a lot to contribute. On second thoughts, therefore, the notion that Schubert was not a Mozart-type prodigy may be open to question.

In order to see how both composers interacted between their supra-ordinary talent and their environment, we will make a comparison between Mozart's musical upbringing and that of Schubert.

Concerning Mozart's musical environment we know that his father, Leopold, recognized Wolfgang's exceptional talent at an early age and gave