

Annual Review of Schubert's Life

1817

1817 began with the makings of a fine year for Schubert. He had written more than 150 songs in 1815, a further 100 in the past year, and by the middle of 1817, together with 30 or so other far from negligible songs, had completed 13 fine songs to words by Mayrhofer. By this time he had no doubt forgotten the seemingly imprudent step he had taken the previous autumn, not only of giving up his job, which of course he hated, but also relinquishing his income and his home – a sure recipe for disaster. "Schubert was proposing to support himself as a freelance composer in a world which knew nothing of such a species"^[1], notes John Reed, to which Brian Newbould adds a further cautionary note: "gaining one's professional freedom is one thing, sustaining it and justifying it is another."^[2] The lifeline thrown to him by his friend Anton von Schober saved him from almost certain catastrophe. Persuading his mother to take in the penniless Schubert and offering him free board and lodging meant that Schubert was now settled in largely worry-free comfort, the potential trauma now unremembered.

The presence in the Schober household of a full six-octave piano gave impetus to a new direction that his music was about to take. Schubert had again begun to look to Beethoven as a rôle model; Beethoven had been the one to break away from the 'system' to become a freelance composer, and his piano and chamber works not only stamped this man as a great composer, they were also proving to be financially rewarding for him, and it is estimated that he could command more in fees for a piano sonata than for a symphony. Schubert by this time had grown fully aware of his own outstanding gifts, in particular the gift to write great melodies and fine songs, but he was also beginning to recognise that these skills alone could not make his name as a great musician, nor yet provide the income he needed. Indeed thus far he had failed to publish a single song; although that would be remedied early in the following year, when *Erlafsee* (D586) made its appearance in print as a free insert in an art and nature lovers almanac.

Schubert was recognising now that if he was to have any claim to attention on the world stage of music he would have to embrace and master the larger musical forms. Considerable social change in Vienna had seen the dwindling of aristocratic patronage and a new and prosperous professional and mercantile class had grown. A large number of this expanding middle class had strong cultural, and most especially, musical tastes – a happy characteristic of the Viennese. The demand for pianos in homes ran high, in turn creating a strong demand for newly published music. It was in this climate that Schubert became aware of both the artistic and financial success that Beethoven had enjoyed with his Op.10 set of three piano sonatas, and doubtless he hoped to steer a similar course by composing, and having published, a comparable set of three sonatas.

That this was not a thoroughly happy period of composition is evidenced by the fractured and disorderly nature of the fragments that resulted, exposing the composer's dissatisfaction as he fought to master this medium – "showing Schubert struggling to adapt the traditional form to his own idiom."^[3] Out of this summer's struggle eventually emerged six sonatas, not all of them satisfactory or even complete, but nonetheless three of which can have some claim to success: the 1817 *Sonata for Piano No.1 in A minor*, D537 (lacking other satisfactory ways of numbering these early sonatas, this for the present may suffice); 1817 *Sonata for Piano No.4 in D flat major*, D567, and particularly the later reworking of that piece in the key of E flat, D568 in 1825-26; and the 1817 *Sonata for Piano No.6 in B major*, D575.

Around the time that Schubert was striving to find the technical means to extend into larger musical forms he had been working on a dozen or so poems of Mayrhofer, either immediately before or around the time of his approach to this first piano sonata. Mayrhofer was of a melancholic and depressive disposition and ultimately was to take his own life (in 1836), but what he achieved for Schubert with these poems was to reinforce Schubert's natural inclination towards the more transcendental modes of thought, and there is no doubt that his writing encouraged Schubert to find musical expression for that Romantic longing for the unattainable which the Germans call *Sehnsucht*. A list of the principal Mayrhofer songs of this year is attached to these brief notes.

In February Schubert set *Der Tod und das Mädchen* (D531) to a poem by Claudius, and what was intended as a companion piece by Spaun, *Der Jüngling und der Tod* (D545) soon followed. The famous setting of Schober's poem *An die Musik* (D547) and Schubert's *Die Forelle* (D550) appeared in March. In August there was a return to the piano with *13 Variations on a theme by Anselm Hüttenbrenner* (D576).

It was probably in August that Schober introduced the distinguished opera singer Johann Michael Vogl to Schubert, rather than earlier in the year as had previously been thought^[4]. Schober had some connection with the Kärntner-Theater and as a result was acquainted with Vogl, but it still required rather more than gentle pressure on Schober's part to interest Vogl in examining any of Schubert's songs, and when he did he was at first less than enthusiastic. However, as he tried out more songs, including *Memnon* (D541) and *Ganymed* (D544), his enthusiasm increased. Thereafter Vogl was to become convinced of the special nature of these songs, became a good friend to Schubert and soon became the principal exponent of his songs.

Then with alarming suddenness, at the end of August, came the news that was to cause Schubert's world to collapse. He had to leave his lodgings at the Schober's in a hurry to make room for Franz von Schober's brother Axel, who whilst serving in the Austrian army had become ill and was to be brought home from Paris. The prospect of finding cheap, even tolerable lodgings, was beyond Schubert's means and the only possible course of action, compelled by events, was for him to return to his father's home, to the dreaded schoolroom, and inevitably back to teaching in order to pay for his keep. For Schubert this was a return of the trauma from which he had so narrowly escaped in the previous year – and by the end of this year his situation was to become worse.

For the present Schubert sought consolation in composition. "Now once again he had to settle back into the dreary routine of teaching, becoming increasingly demoralized both mentally and spiritually."^[5] Having lost the pleasure of Schober's company Schubert penned a poem expressing that loss, and set it as *Abschied von einem Freunde* (D578), the only song to Schubert's own words. There follow a few settings of Schiller, the delightful A major *An den Frühling* (D587/1), an episodic *Der Alpenjäger* (D588), a rhetorical *Der Kampf* (D594), and a lyrical *Thekla: Eine Geisterstimme* (D595) plus a fragment of a Körner song *Lied eines Kindes* (D596); all these of October or November. In November Schubert composed two *Overtures in the Italian style* (D590-1), paying some homage to Rossini. October had seen the beginning of a new symphony which he originally headed '*Grosse Sinfonie in C*' (D589), but later removing the word *Grosse* when he completed the work in February 1818. It is now frequently referred to as the 'Little' Symphony in C.

In December Schubert's father finally obtained his sought-after advancement, becoming the director of the elementary school in the Rossau district, and into which he and his family moved in January 1818. The school had been open only a year when the previous director was

dismissed for some misdemeanour, and Schubert's father as the new incumbent was firmly determined to make his own appointment a success. Becoming even more of a disciplinarian than hitherto he succeeded in making everyone's life uncomfortable, bringing about a near breakdown in Schubert who now could see no means of escape to artistic freedom. "In the first half of 1818 his spirits, and his creative genius, were at a low ebb. Apart from the completion of his Sixth Symphony hardly anything of importance survives from this period."^[6]

Notable works of 1817:

D516 C major *Sehnsucht* Mayrhofer song 1817
D524 E major *Der Alpenjäger* 3 Versions Mayrhofer song 1817
D525 D minor *Wie Ulfru fischt* 2 Versions Mayrhofer song 1817 Jan
D526 D minor *Fahrt zum Hades* Mayrhofer song 1817 Jan
D527 F major *Schlaflied* 2 Versions Mayrhofer song 1817 Jan
D537 A minor 1817 *Sonata for Piano No.1 in A minor* (Sonata 4) 1817 Mar
D531 D minor *Der Tod und das Mädchen* Claudius song 1817 Feb
D536 Eb major *Der Schiffer* 2 Versions Mayrhofer song 1817 Mar
D539 B major *Am Strome* Mayrhofer song 1817 Mar
D540 B minor *Philoktet* Mayrhofer song 1817 Mar
D541 Db major *Memnon* Mayrhofer song 1817 Mar
D542 C major *Antigone und Oedip* Mayrhofer song 1817 Mar
D544 Ab major *Ganymed* Goethe song 1817 Mar
D547 D major *An die Musik* 2 Versions Schober song
D548 Eb major *Orest auf Tauris* Mayrhofer song 1817 Mar
D550 Db major *Die Forelle* 4 Versions Schubart song 1817
D553 Eb major *Auf der Donau* Mayrhofer song 1817 Apr
D554 D major *Uraniens Flucht* Mayrhofer song 1817 Apr
D561 F major *Nacht einer Gewitter* Mayrhofer song 1817 May
D567 Db major *Sonata for Piano No.4 in D flat* 1817 Jun
D573 Gb major *Iphigenia* Mayrhofer song 1817 Jul
D574 A major *Duo Sonata* vn,pf 1817 Aug
D575 B major *Sonata for Piano No.6 in B major* (Sonata 9) 1817 Aug
D576 A minor *13 variations on a theme by Anselm Huttenbrenner* 1817 Aug
D583 C minor *Gruppe aus dem Tartarus* 2 Schiller songs 1817 Sep
D585 A minor *Atys* Mayrhofer song 1817 Sep
D586 F major *Erlafsee* Mayrhofer song 1817 Sep
D589 C major *Symphony 6 - 'Little' Symphony in C* 1817 Oct - 1818 Feb
D590 D major *Overture im italienschen Stile* 1817 Nov
D591 C major *Overture im italienschen Stile* 1817 Nov

Notes

[1] Reed: [Schubert](#), p59.

[2] Newbould: [Schubert The Music and the Man](#), p64

[3] Newbould: [Schubert The Music and the Man](#), ibid

[4] Elizabeth Norman McKay: [The Schubertian No.26](#), September 1999, p4; and McKay: [Franz Schubert: a biography, Corrected paperback edition](#), p70.

[5] McKay: [Franz Schubert: A biography](#), p73.

[6] Reed: [Schubert](#), p67

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