

# The BobCasts



## Franz Schubert's *Winterreise*

Welcome everyone. I'm Bob Greenberg, Music Historian-in-Residence for San Francisco Performances, and the title of this BobCast is *Franz Schubert's Winterreise*.

Franz Peter Schubert was born on January 31, 1797, in the city of Vienna. The Schubert family lived in a one-room apartment on the first floor of a building that was then called "The Red Crayfish", which can now be found 54 *Nussdorferstrasse*.

Schubert died there in Vienna just 31 years, 9 months, and 20 days later: on November 19, 1828, at his brother Ferdinand's flat at no. 6 *Kettenbrückengasse*. During his terribly short life, this tiny, short-sighted, rather plump man wrote an amount of music—an amount of really special music—that leaves us shaking our heads in wonder to this day. In just the last 16 years of his life—from the age of 15 to 31, Schubert composed among other works: 9 symphonies, 10 orchestral overtures, 22 piano sonatas, 6 masses, 17 operas (yes! 17 operas!), over 1000 works for solo piano and piano four hands, around 145 choral works, and 45 chamber works, including 13 string quartets and 1 string quintet.

But pride-of-place among all of Schubert's music must go to his over 630 songs, works that lie at the heart and soul, the *sonar plexus* (if you'll excuse me!) of his extraordinary compositional art. His earliest masterworks were songs, and the lyricism, directness of expression and dramatic power of his song writing informed every other genre of music he composed: from his piano sonatas and string quartets to his masses and symphonies. If you want to know Schubert, you have to start with his songs.

Schubert began his formal music training at the age of nine with a local organist by the name of Michael Holzer. The lessons with Holzer included piano, violin, organ, singing and harmony. Of his young charge Holzer said:

"If I wished to instruct him in anything fresh, he already knew it. Consequently, I eventually stopped giving him actual lessons but merely conversed with him and watched him with silent astonishment."

At the age of eleven—in 1808—Schubert was admitted to the "Imperial and Royal City College": the Vienna *Stadtkonvikt*. Among those who auditioned Schubert for admission was Music Director for the Viennese Court, none-other-than Antonio Salieri.

Yes, that Salieri. Pupil of the great Christoph Gluck. Friend of the prodigious Joseph Haydn. Sometimes rival of the incredible Wolfgang Mozart. Vocal music tutor for the irksome Ludwig van Beethoven. And future composition teacher of the extraordinary Franz Liszt.

And despite his reputation, a heck of a good composer and an altogether fine and upright *paisan!*

Eventually, Salieri took over the supervision of Schubert's musical education, a relationship that would extend beyond Schubert's college years.

Schubert's first compositional masterwork was the song *Gretchen am Spinnrade* ("Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel") which he composed on October 19, 1814 at the age of 17. What makes it a masterwork? Well, along with his otherworldly gifts for melody and harmony and his brilliant dramatic instincts, what immediately set Schubert's songs apart from what came before them is his use of the piano. The piano is no mere accompaniment in Schubert's songs but a full partner to the voice, providing imagery and dramatic context to the words: what costumes, scenery, lighting, and the orchestra provide in the opera house. In *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, the piano portrays Gretchen's spinning wheel, its continuous movement a metaphor for Gretchen's obsessive thoughts about her beloved Faust. Here are the opening three verses of the song:

Meine Ruh' ist hin,  
Mein Herz ist schwer,  
Ich finde sie nimmer  
Und nimmermehr.

My peace is gone,  
My heart is heavy,  
I shall never find rest  
never again.

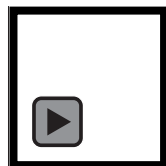
Wo ich ihn nicht hab  
Ist mir das Grab,  
Die ganze Welt  
Ist mir vergällt.

When he is not with me,  
It is like death,  
The whole world  
Is bitter to me.

Mein armer Kopf  
Ist mir verrückt,  
Mein armer Sinn  
Ist mir zerstückt.

My poor head  
Is crazy to me,  
My poor mind  
Is torn apart.

Let's hear these first three verses of Schubert's *Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel*.

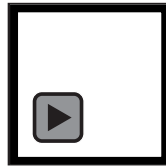


*Schubert, Gretchen am Spinnrade, opening, Christa Ludwig*

Here's another example of Schubert's use of the piano to provide "aural scenery" in a song. *Erkönig*—The Elfking—of 1815 is an ultimately soul-shattering tale of a father riding through the night, holding his terrified son as the Elfking and his daughters attempt to wrest him away. The pounding of the horse's hooves is portrayed by the piano, a pounding that does not stop until

the very end of the song when, having finally arrived home, the father realizes that his son is dead. Here's that final verse:

Dem Vater grauset's, er reitet geschwind,	Fear grips the father, he rides like the wind,
Er hält in Armen das ächzende Kind,	He holds in his arms the moaning child;
Erreicht den Hof mit Müh und Not;	With effort and toil he reaches the house;
In seinen Armen das Kind war tot.	The child in his arms was dead.



*Schubert, Erlkönig, conclusion, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau*

Schubert began his working life at the age of 17 as a first grade teacher. He lasted 3½ years—from 1814 to 1818—at which point he did that one thing musicians are told never to do: he quit his day gig and taught no more. He had decided to follow his muse and devote himself entirely to composing.

Writes musicologist Donald Grout:

“Without wide public recognition, sustained only by the love of a few friends and his family, constantly struggling against illness and poverty, Schubert composed ceaselessly.”

According to his friend and fellow composer, Ferdinand Hiller:

“It was clear that he really did nothing but music—and lived by the way [incidentally], as it were.”

Regarding his work-habits Schubert wrote:

“I work every morning. When I have finished one piece I begin another.”

To which we might add, “and another, and another, and another.” Schubert was a workaholic, one who combined the amateur's pure joy of music making with a professional's discipline and technical abilities.

Truth be told, Schubert was one of those “artistic types” who really just wanted to be left alone to compose. He was a terrible businessperson, naïve and inept when dealing with publishers and concert producers. For Schubert, composing the next piece was much more important than having the last one performed, to say nothing for published. So his musicespecially his larger works—languished in obscurity until well after his death. As Schubert got older—or less young, as the case may be—he became increasingly aware of all of this. His poverty and obscurity made him angry and depressed. By his mid-20's he was abusing both alcohol and tobacco; by the time he was 30 he had grown so fat that one contemporary attributed his death at age 31 to:

“Schubert's obesity, an inclination to alcoholism, and the poor water and sanitary conditions in the Widen district [of Vienna, where Schubert lived during his last months].”

But it wasn't obesity, alcohol, the water, or even reruns of *Hogan's Heroes* that killed Schubert; it was an infection that killed him when his immune system collapsed due to tertiary syphilis.

He contracted syphilis in 1822 when he was 25 years old, almost certainly during one of his many nocturnal pleasure-jaunts with a friend, a totally unsavory character named Franz von Schober.

The first symptoms of the disease appeared in January of 1823. Schubert was terrified as the disease took its familiar and agonizing course. Periods of remission were followed by periods of painful lymphatic swelling, pustules, rashes, hair loss, lesions in the mouth and throat, debilitating muscle aches, and so forth. Depression and despair accompanied the periods of relapse. In March of 1824 a despondent Schubert wrote his friend Leopold Kupelweiser:

"I feel myself to be the most unhappy and wretched creature in the world. Imagine a man whose health will never be right again, and who in sheer despair over this ever makes things worse and worse, instead of better; imagine a man, I say, whose most brilliant hopes have perished, to whom the felicity of love and friendship have nothing to offer but pain, whose enthusiasm for all things beautiful [is gone], and I ask you, is he not a miserable, unhappy being? 'My peace is gone, my heart is sore, I shall find it never and nevermore', I may well sing every day now, for each night, on retiring to bed, I hope I may not wake again, and each morning but recalls yesterday's grief."

Schubert's brief life divides into two parts: before his diagnosis and after.

Certainly, that's true of Schubert's compositional output: there's a depth and range of expressive substance in Schubert's post-diagnosis music that he would likely never had achieved had he not been looking death in the face during his last six years of life.

Awful though it is to observe, Schubert's terrible pain was posterity's great musical gain. And among Schubert's most personal, despairing, autobiographical, post-diagnosis works is the song cycle *Winterreise*, or "Winter Journey."

From the fall of 1824 until mid-1827 or so, Schubert's syphilis entered its latency, during which he was symptom free and noninfectious. Nevertheless: he still suffered from debilitating depression, exacerbated by his fear that the disease would return; and thus he self-medicated with vast amounts of nicotine and by drinking way too much alcohol, at which time the ordinarily mild-mannered Schubert became vulgar, abusive, and physically destructive. Physically destructive. While under the influence, Schubert liked nothing more than to smash glassware and crockery, making him—understandably—a less-than-welcome guest in most homes and hostelryes. Wilhelm von Chezy observed that when he drank, Schubert was subject to uncontrollable rage.

"As soon as the blood of the vine was glowing in him, he liked to withdraw into a corner and give in to anger, during which he would create some sort of havoc as quickly as possible, for example, with cups, glasses and plates, and as he did so, he would grin and screw up his eyes tight."

In 1827, Schubert's latency came to an end as his syphilis began, once again, to advance. Depressed and deflated, Schubert completed the heartbreaking song cycle *Winterreise* in the fall of 1827. According to Schubert's friend Johann Mayrhofer, Schubert wrote the cycle because:

"winter was upon him."

In its 24 songs, *Winterreise* tells the story of a rejected, lost, grieving, alienated young man, wandering aimlessly through the world, a man whose progressive emotional disintegration mirrored that of Schubert's own disintegrating health. Frankly, it's hard to imagine a set of poems Schubert could have identified with more powerfully than with those of *Winterreise*.

Schubert's friend Josef von Spaun recalled the first performance of *Winterreise* sometime in late November or early December of 1827:

"One day he said to me 'Come over today, and I will sing you a cycle of horrifying songs. I am anxious to know what you will say about them. They have cost me more effort than any of my other songs'. So he sang the entire *Winterreise* through to us in a voice full of emotion. We were utterly dumbfounded by the mournful, gloomy tone of these songs".

In an opinion shared by many of Schubert's friends, Spaun believed that the composition of *Winterreise* actually shortened Schubert's life, that writing *Winterreise*:

"affected him and were conceived in suffering. There is no doubt in my mind that the state of excitement in which he composed his *Winterreise* contributed to his early death."

On Saturday, February 20, 2021 Angelika Kirchschlager will perform Schubert's *Winterreise* in Herbst Theater. Bring with you a box of tissues; you will need them.

I'll see you there.

Thank you.