

Annual Review of Schubert's Life

1808-1813

At the age of eleven in 1808, having completed an entrance examination and an audition, Schubert entered the *Stadtkonvikt* (the Imperial City Seminary) as a boarding member, and was selected to join the trebles in the Court chapel choir. Vienna at the time was suffering the privations of the war with Napoleon, life was hard in the city and discipline inside the establishment strict. However, fortune favoured Schubert as musical interests were encouraged, the *Stadtkonvikt* having its own orchestra capable of playing overtures and symphonies and before long he was playing in the second violin section. It was there that he met Joseph von Spaun who led the second violins, and who took the 'serious and not very amiable' boy, as he then thought him, under his wing. He soon came to be impressed by the young Schubert's talents.

Not many months later, with Napoleon's army approaching Vienna, the Emperor Franz fled the city, the Court chapel closed and all musical activity there ceased. By 9th May 1809 the French army had reached the city walls and on the evening of 12th May the bombardment of the city began. With the occupation of Vienna by the French the daily orchestral rehearsals ended and it was only after the departure of the occupying army in October that normality slowly returned. Schubert, having suffered the trauma of the siege at just twelve years of age, and having lost the release that music gave him from the daily grind of life at the Seminary, was now about to lose the companionship of the one friend he had made there. Spaun completed his course of studies at the end of that academic year.

Spaun left Vienna for a period to pursue his career, and then returned in 1811 to take up a post as a government official. Revisiting the *Stadtkonvikt* he was excited by the progress that Schubert, aged now fourteen, had made. He had moved to playing first violin in the orchestra, was composing freely and indeed could scarcely refrain from composition, writing his music during study periods to the detriment of his education in other subjects - not unexpectedly to the anger of his father when he discovered what was happening, an anger that Schubert was to provoke many times during the course of his short life. Although Spaun was nine years older the relationship between the two soon became close and was to develop into a lifelong friendship. Discovering that the young Franz was composing his music on scraps of paper on which he was having to draw the music lines by hand Spaun started smuggling manuscript paper in to him.

It was at fourteen that Schubert composed the first song of his that has survived intact, *Hagars Klage* (D5). Schubert's setting is episodic, as was his model in Zumsteeg's setting of the same words, but reveals an early characteristic in a predilection for passing through many keys. From his years thirteen to fourteen there survive fragments for a variety of instrumental combinations including string quartet, piano solo and piano duet as well as unfinished pieces for orchestra in emulation of the overtures and symphonies he played in the *Stadtkonvikt* orchestra every day after supper.

In the previous year (1810) Schubert had completed the first piece that would ultimately appear in the catalogue created by Otto Erich Deutsch of Schubert's entire output as Deutsch No.1 (D1). If one were to expect the first piece recorded there to be nothing more than a fragment then it can come as a surprise to discover that this composition, a *Fantasie for Piano Duet in G* amounts to close on 1200 bars of music. The thirteen-year-old Schubert is already establishing his

ability to write freely and at length, to move harmonically through a wide range of keys - and also revealing something of a problem that would continue to occupy him for many years, that of holding a long piece together.

Schubert's musical experience was expanded greatly when in 1811 Spaun, on his return to Vienna, began to take the young Schubert to the opera, buying his tickets for him although Spaun as a junior civil servant was but poorly paid. In this way he was to hear *Die Schweitzerfamilie* (Weigl); *Médée* (Cherubini); *Jean de Paris* (Boieldieu); *Cendrillon* (Isouard) and Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*. He was overcome with admiration for the voice of Vogl and would ultimately meet the great singer towards the end of 1817. Most of all he was impressed by *Iphigénie en Tauride* by Gluck and by Pauline Milder's performance in that work, so much so that at supper afterwards, when derogatory remarks about Milder were made from the next table, Spaun records that:

'Körner [the poet, who joined them on leaving the theatre] and Schubert sprang up in a rage and, in doing so, the latter knocked over his glass, which was full of beer, and there was the most violent exchange of words which, because of the opponent's obstinacy, would have turned to blows if some calming voices, which came in on our side, had not appeased us'.^[1]

Schubert already felt fiercely about music.

Before the end of that year, 1811, at fourteen, Schubert began the composition of an opera himself, to a libretto taken from Kotzebue's *Der Spiegelritter* (The Looking-Glass Knight, D11), of which the first act only was completed. The nature of the text was perhaps not a good choice however, for in the words of Dr McKay, "Kotzebue's irony and parody of Romantic Ideas in both plays was completely lost on the teenage composer"^[2]. The second play referred to was *Des Teufels Lustschloss* which we shall meet when Schubert embarks on his second Kotzebue opera. In the meantime *Der Spiegelritter* occupied him in short periods over most of a year that was interrupted by the death of his mother (May 1812), and then subsequently by his twice-weekly visits to the Court *Kapellmeister* Salieri for lessons in counterpoint; all this at a time when he was heavily committed to his studies at the *Stadtkonvikt*.

The breaking of his voice effectively saw the end of Schubert's career as a chorister. Written into the Third MS. Alto Part of Peter Winter's First Mass in C are these words in his own hand: '*Schubert, Franz, crowded for the last time, 26th July 1812.*' No longer being committed to choral duties now left him a little more time for composition and on the very next day he started a *Trio in B-flat*, called *Sonata Movement for Pianoforte, Violin, and Cello* (D28, 27th July - 28th August). On the 25th September he wrote a *Kirie in D minor* (D31). Although there had been earlier trial runs, his *First String Quartet* (in mixed keys, D18) dates from 1812, as does the *2nd String Quartet, in C* (D32 - end of September) and also the *3rd String Quartet, in B-flat* (D36 - started on 19th November 1812 and completed the following year, 1813, on 21st February).

By 1813 Schubert had lost all interest in academic studies, now paid little attention to the lectures in Latin and Greek, and 'as a result'. Spaun tells us, 'his progress in school work, notwithstanding his talents, was negligible and that eventually the school discipline would inevitably become intolerable to him.'^[3] Sixteen now, he determined to spend his energies pursuing his natural musical

inclination. His studies suffered further in consequence and he was only getting 'second grades'. Salieri continued to retain an interest in his musical progress, and in this period Schubert's settings of words clearly reveals his tutor's preference for Italian texts, although these would seem to have had little appeal for the composer. His own preference was for the setting of German texts to which he felt drawn, especially those of Schiller at this time, mainly using the medium of the male-voice trio (two tenors and a bass).

During this year his interest in the string quartet grew considerably and, in spite of what might have seemed to be the lack of opportunities occasioned by his studies, or maybe taking advantage from his lack of commitment to them, he was able to find time to write four or five quartets during the year, one of them perhaps lost to us now, and one being of just two movements. Schubert was practising hard to acquire the special skills needed for handling and varying quartet texture, and with the benefit of performances by the family quartet was doubtless discovering some of the techniques needed to hold together his longer pieces. The last of these, written in November, *String Quartet in E-flat* (D87), has today found a frequent place in the string quartet repertoire. This piece had been immediately preceded by a very bold work for a young man to undertake, the *Symphony No.1 in D* (D82), completed in October.

For choristers whose voices had broken there were endowments available at the Konvikt to permit further studies, but Schubert was deemed to have failed to qualify for these by having 'relapsed into the second rank'. He was offered the opportunity to remedy this if he undertook to study through the vacation and take a further examination, when an endowment would be available to him if he then advanced beyond the second grade - which Schubert clearly had no inclination to do. Deutsch notes that 'the fact that he was now to leave was not due to the mutation of his voice, but to his failure in his studies and the circumstances that he did not wish to advance conditionally to the second humanities class.'^[4] Schubert wanted to get away from the Stadtkonvikt at almost any cost. He was in consequence to be drawn into the profession of teaching pursued by his father and his brothers.

Notable works of 1808-1813:

D1 G maj *Fantasie* for Piano Duet 1810 8 Apr-1 May
 D5 C min *Hagers Klage* Schucking song 1811 30 Mar
 D7 D min *Leichenfantasie* Schiller song 1811
 D8 C min Overture 2vn,2va,vc 1811
 D18 (Gmin) String Quartet 1 (in mixed keys) 1810 or 1811
 D32 C maj String Quartet 2 (Correct number, 3) 1812 Sep/Oct
 D36 Bbmaj String Quartet 3 (Correct number, 4) 1812 19 Nov - Feb 1813
 D44 E min *Totengräberlied* 2 Hölty song 1813 19 Jan
 D46 C maj String Quartet 4 (Correct number, 5) 1813 3-7 Mar
 D59 A min *Verklärung* Pope song 1813 4 May
 D68 Bb maj String Quartet 5 (Correct number, 6) 1st movement and finale 1813 8 Jun - 8 Aug
 D74 D maj String Quartet 6 (Correct number, 7) 1813 22 Aug - Sep
 D77 D min *Der Taucher* [2 Versions - b (1815) was D111] Schiller song 1813 13 Sep - 1814
 D79 Eb min Wind Nonet *Eine kleine Trauermusik* 2cl,2bn,dbn,2hn,2trbn 1813 19 Sep
 D84 F maj *Des Teufels Lustschloss* Overture & 2 Acts Only Kotzebue Opera 1813 30 Oct - 1814 22 Oct
 D94 D maj String Quartet 7 (Correct number, 2) previously thought to be 1814 ? 1811

Notes

- [1] Deutsch: *Schubert: Memoirs by his friends*, p.129
- [2] McKay: *Franz Schubert: a biography*, p.24
- [3] Deutsch: *Schubert: Memoirs by his friends*, p.19
- [4] Deutsch: *Schubert: Memoirs by his friends*, p.41

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