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## **The Life of Schubert (review)**

Brian Newbould

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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Book Review

*The Life of Schubert*

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*The Life of Schubert.* By Christopher H. Gibbs. (Musical Lives.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

In this new volume of the series *Musical Lives*, Christopher Gibbs presents a fluent, readable account of Franz Schubert's life, drawing on well-thumbed chronicles to shape a picture that, with its occasional new emphases, holds the reader by the sense of freshness illuminating many of its pages. The author is known for, among other things, his work on Schubert reception history, with a focus on the fortunes of the composed legacy in the posthumous period and well beyond in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These credentials bring one palpable benefit to the reader, in that the writer shows a particular interest in the emergence of the oeuvre--such as that emergence was--during the composer's lifetime, exploring how his reputation was built, his shifting concerns with popular (mainly domestic) products on the one hand and the "highest branches of art" (p. 62) on the other, and the possibility that in his later years, at least, he was writing not for the here-and-now audience but for posterity.

Was Schubert, then, becoming more of a Beethovenian figure at the end of his life? Was he, in the months left to him after the demise of his admired contemporary, poised to inherit the Beethoven mantle? Gibbs suggests that this was probably so, and his proposition that Beethoven's example (that is, the kind of composer he was) was as influential on Schubert as his actual note manipulations, if not more so, bears consideration. Beethoven's example, we are told, affected "Schubert's notions about the very function and status of the art of music. Beethoven showed him that music could go beyond the beautiful, into the sublime" (p. 153). In its treatment of the Beethoven-Schubert relationship, this book goes beyond, and thus complements, other biographies. Schubert's debt to another figure who trod the streets of Vienna a generation before him is, however, strangely underplayed: perhaps it is because Gibbs is less concerned with the roots of Schubert's art than with its efflorescence and goals that he tends to overlook the youthful indebtedness to, and indeed idolatry of, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

What is the reader to make of the paradox that Gibbs, like Elizabeth Norman McKay before him (McKay, *Franz Schubert: A Biography* [Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996]), has chosen to write about the life rather than the music--there are no music examples--yet claims that his is a "story more of the artist than the man" (p. 1)? In fact, he achieves that aim just about as well as one can without exploring the music in any depth. As he beats his path through the familiar biographical data, sometimes piecing together a sort of patchwork of quotations from the Deutsch documents (Otto Erich Deutsch, ed., *The Schubert Reader: A Life of Franz Schubert in Letters and Documents*, trans. Eric Blom [New York: W. W. Norton, 1947], British ed. published as *Schubert: A Documentary Biography* [London: Dent, 1947]; idem, *Schubert: Memoirs by His Friends*, trans. Rosamond Ley and John Nowell [New York: Macmillan; London: A. & C. Black, 1958]) to freshen his parlance (especially effective in the middle chapters), one notices the suppression of factual material having little bearing on the artistic progress. In chapter 5, inscribed with Eduard von Bauernfeld's words "a **[End Page 82]** black-winged demon of sorrow and melancholy" (quoted from *Schubert: Memoirs by His Friends*, p. 234), Gibbs is at his most persuasive in reconciling the musical products with the life events. Although there is no attempt to dig deeply into any musical work, he is well able to draw a sympathetic response from the reader who knows the music and can use the inner ear to substantiate a comment made.

The author's approach to the more contentious issues that have surfaced in Schubert...

it helped me to see the poem through the eyes of an intelligent, sensitive and diligent reader. That is not at all to say that he saw the poem through my eyes, or that his account has anything to do with the experiences that led up to my writing it, or with anything I experienced in the process of writing it" (Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* [London: Faber and Faber, 1957], 114; [New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957], 126-27). What finally carries the day in any act of criticism is the coherence and power of the critic's creative vision. Despite its shortcomings, the present volume stands as testimony to the abundance of fresh insight that emerges from close engagements with these songs in recent times. I should like to think that Schubert, too, might have derived some pleasure from them.

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**The Life of Schubert.** By Christopher H. Gibbs. (Musical Lives.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. [xiii, 211 p. ISBN 0-521-59426-X (cloth); 0-521-59512-6 (pbk.). \$44.95 (cloth); \$14.95 (pbk.).]

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