

FRANZ SCHUBERT

by Harriet Browner

In the old Lichtenthal quarter of the city of Vienna, in the vicinity of the fortifications, there still stands an old house. It is evidently a public house, for there hangs the sign--"At the Red Crab." Beside this there is a marble tablet fastened above the doorway, which says that Franz Schubert was born in this house. At the right of his name is placed a lyre crowned with a star, and at the left a laurel wreath within which is placed the date, January 31, 1797.



FRANZ SCHUBERT

This then was the birthplace of the "most poetical composer who ever lived," as Liszt said of him; the man who created over six hundred songs, eight symphonies, operas, masses, chamber works and much beautiful piano music, and yet only lived to be thirty-one. It is almost unbelievable. Let us get a nearer view of this remarkable musician.

His father kept a school here; there were five children, four boys and a girl to provide for, and as there was nothing to depend on but the school-master's pay, it is easy to see the family was in poor circumstances, though the wife managed most carefully to make ends meet. They were a very devoted family altogether. Little Franz early showed a decided fondness for music, and tried to pick out bits of tunes of his own by ear on an old dilapidated piano the family possessed. He made friends with a young apprentice who took him sometimes to a piano wareroom in the city, where he was allowed to play his little tunes on a fine piano.

When Franz was seven he began to have music lessons at home, the father teaching him violin and his big brother Ignaz, the piano. Franz, in his eagerness to learn soon outstripped his home teachers, and told them he could go on alone. It was then decided he should go to the parish choir master, Holzer, to learn piano, violin, organ, singing and thorough bass. Soon Holzer was astonished at the boy's progress. "Whenever I begin to teach him anything I find he knows it already; I never had such a pupil before." By the time Franz was eleven, his voice had come out so well that he was given the place of head soprano in the parish church, and played violin solos whenever they occurred in the service. He had even begun at home to compose and write down little piano pieces and songs. The parents considered that this remarkable talent should be cultivated further, if possible, in order that it might assist the slender purse of the family. There was a choir school, called the Convict, which trained its boys for the Imperial Chapel. If Franz could prove his ability to enter this school, he would receive free education in return for his services.

One fine morning in October, 1808, Franz in his homespun grey suit, spectacles shielding his bright, near-sighted eyes, his bushy black hair covered by an old fashioned hat, presented himself for examination by the Court Capellmeister and the singing master. The other boys jeered at his odd appearance, but he kept his good humour. When his turn came to sing, after solving all the problems

given, his singing of the trial pieces was so astonishing that he was passed in at once, and ordered to put on the uniform of the imperial choristers.

The boy soon found plenty to fill his time and occupy his mind. There was the school orchestra, in which he was able to take a prominent place. There was daily practise, in which the boys learned the overtures and symphonies of Mozart and Haydn, and even Beethoven. He loved best Mozart's "Symphony in G minor," in which he said he heard angels singing. The leader of the orchestra was attracted to the lad's playing the very first day he entered, for he played with such precision and understanding. One day Franz mustered courage to talk a little to the big conductor, whose name was Spaun, and confessed he had composed quite a good deal already, adding he would like to do it every day, only he could not afford to get the music paper. Spaun received this burst of confidence with sympathy, and saw to it that the boy was, in the future, supplied with the necessary music paper.

Franz had soon made such progress on the violin, that he began to take the first violin parts and when the conductor was absent he was asked to lead the orchestra. Indeed by his deep earnestness and sincerity, as well as ability, the gifted boy had become a power in the school.

When he went home to see his people, which could only be on Sundays and holidays, it was a happy reunion for all. If he brought home a new string quartet, the father would get out his 'cello, Ignaz and Ferdinand would take first and second violins and the young composer the viola. After it had been played through, then all the players discussed it and offered their criticism. Indeed Franz was composing at such an astonishing rate, that it was difficult to keep him supplied with music paper. One of his works of this time was a fantasia for four hands, in twelve movements. Then came a first attempt at song writing, a long affair which also contained twelve movements, and was in melancholy mood.

Five years the boy Franz Schubert remained at the Convict School and as he had decided to give himself entirely to music, there was no reason for his remaining longer in the school. At the end of the year 1813, he left, and his departure was celebrated by the composition of his first Symphony, in honor of Dr. Lang, the musical director. The lad, now seventeen, stood at the beginning of his career; he was full of hope and energy, and determined to follow in the footsteps of the great masters of music. Of all his compositions so far produced, his songs seemed to be the most spontaneous. He probably did not guess that he was to open up new paths in this field.

Hardly had he left the school when he was drafted for the army. This meant several years of virtual captivity, for conscription could not be avoided. The only other thing he could do was to return home and become a teacher in his father's school. He chose the lesser evil and qualified at once to become his father's assistant, which would also assure him a certain amount of leisure. We can imagine him installed as teacher of the infant class, and realize how distasteful was the daily round of school work, and how he longed to have it over, that he might put on paper all the lovely themes that had come to him through the school day. Other bright spots were the happy hours he spent with the Grob family, who lived also in the district of Lichtenthal.

The family consisted of a mother, a son and daughter. They were all musical. Therese Grob had a fine voice and she enjoyed the songs Schubert brought her to sing, while her brother Heinrich could play both piano and 'cello. Many evenings filled with music were passed by the young people. His friends at the Convict too, welcomed each new piece he wrote. Nor did he forget his old master Holzer, the organist of the little church where the composer himself regularly attended.

During 1814, Schubert composed his first mass, which was performed October 16. It excited so much interest that it was repeated ten days later at the Augustine church. Franz conducted, the choir was led by Holzer, Ferdinand sat at the organ, and Therese sang the soprano solos. In the audience sat old Salieri, Court Capellmeister of Vienna, with whom Beethoven had studied. Salieri praised Schubert for his work, and said that he should become his pupil. He kept his word and gave the young composer daily lessons for some time. The father was so proud and happy that he bought a five octave piano for his boy, to celebrate the event.

Schubert added many compositions to his list this year, among them seventeen songs, including "Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel." His acquaintance with the poet Johann Mayrhofer, with whom he soon became intimate, was of benefit to both. The poet produced verses that his friend might set to music. The following year, 1815, he wrote a hundred and thirty-seven songs, to say nothing of six operas, and much music for church and piano. Twenty-nine of these songs were written in the month of August. One day in August eight songs were created; on another day seven. Some of the songs were quite long, making between twenty and thirty pages when printed.

A new friend came into Schubert's life the next year. His name was Franz Schober, and he intended entering the University in Vienna. Being a great lover of music and also familiar with some of Schubert's manuscript songs, he lost no time, on arriving in Vienna, in seeking out the composer. He found the young musician at his desk very busily writing. School work was over for the day, and he could compose in peace. The two young men became friends at once, for they felt the sympathetic bond between them. They were soon talking as though they had always known each other. In a few words Schubert told his new friend how he was situated at home, and how he disliked the daily drudgery of school teaching. On hearing of these trials Schober suggested they should make a home together, which arrangement would free the composer from the grinding life he was living and enable him to give his whole time to his art. The proposal delighted Franz, and the father willingly gave his consent. And so it came about that the composer was free at last, and took up his abode at his friend's lodgings. He insisted on giving him musical instruction, to make some return for all his kindness, though this did not last long, owing to the dislike Franz always had for teaching of any sort.

Schubert, at the age of twenty-four, had composed a great quantity of music, but none of it had as yet been published. He was almost unknown, and publishers were unwilling to undertake issuing the work of an unknown man. When his songs were performed by good artists, as had been done a number of times, they won instant recognition and success. Seeing that the publishers were unwilling to print the work of an unknown musician, two of Schubert's friends undertook to publish the "Erlking," one of his first songs, at their own risk. At the Sonnleithner mansion, where musicals were regularly held, the "Erlking" had been much applauded, and when it was decided to have it published, the decision was announced. A hundred copies were at once subscribed for, and with this encouragement the engraving of the "Erlking" and "Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel" was forthwith begun.

The pieces were sold by the music publishers on commission. The plan succeeded beyond expectation, so that other songs were issued in the same way, until, when seven had appeared the publishers were willing to risk the engraving of other songs themselves. Before all this had taken place, Johann Vogl, an admired opera singer in Vienna at the time, had learned Schubert's "Erlking," and had sung it in March, 1821, at a public concert patronized by royalty. The song was received with storms of applause. Schober, who knew the singer, constantly talked to him about the gifts of his friend and begged him to come and see Schubert. At last one day he consented. They found the composer hard at work as usual, music sheets covering the floor as well as the table and chair. Vogl, used to the highest society, made himself quite at home and did his best to put Schubert at his ease, but the composer remained shy and confused. The singer began looking over some manuscripts.

When he left he shook Schubert's hand warmly, remarking; "There is stuff in you, but you squander your fine thoughts instead of making the most of them."

Vogl had been much impressed by what he had seen that day, and repeated his visit. Before long the two were close friends. Schubert wrote to his brother: "When Vogl sings and I accompany him, we seem for the moment to be one." Vogl wrote of Schubert's songs that they were "truly divine inspirations."

Schubert's residence with his friend Schober only lasted six months, for Schober's brother came to live with him, and the composer had to shift for himself. Teaching was exceedingly distasteful to him, yet as his music did not bring in anything for years after he left home, he had to find some means of making a living. In these straits he accepted a position as music teacher in the family of Count Johann Esterházy. This meant that he must live with the family in their Vienna home in winter, and go with them to their country seat in the summer. The change from the free life he had enjoyed with his friends who idolized him and his beautiful music, to the etiquette of aristocratic life, was great. But there were many comforts amid his new surroundings; the family was musical, the duties were not heavy, and so Schubert was not unhappy.

At the Esterházy country estate of Zelésh, he heard many Hungarian melodies sung or played by the gipsies, or by servants in the castle. He has employed some of these tunes in his first set of Valses. In his present position he had much leisure for composition. Indeed Franz Schubert's whole life was spent in giving out the vast treasures of melody with which he had been so richly endowed. These flowed from his pen in a constant stream, one beautiful work after another. He wrote them down wherever he happened to be and when a scrap of paper could be had. The exquisite song "Hark, Hark the Lark" was jotted down on the back of a bill of fare, in a beer garden. The beautiful works which he produced day after day brought him little or no money, perhaps because he was so modest and retiring, modestly undervaluing everything he did. He had no desire to push himself, but wrote because impelled to by the urge within. So little did he sometimes value his work that a fine composition would be tucked away somewhere and quite forgotten. His physical strength was not robust enough to stand the strain of constant composition. Then too, when funds were very low, as they often were, he took poor lodgings, and denied himself the necessary nourishing food. If he could have had a dear companion to look after his material needs and share his aims and aspirations, his earthly life might have been prolonged for many a year. With no one to advise him, and often pressed with hunger and poverty, he was induced to sell the copyrights of twelve of his best songs, including the "Erlking" and the "Wanderer," for a sum equal to about four hundred dollars. It is said the publishers made on the "Wanderer" alone, up to the year 1861, a sum of about five thousand five hundred dollars. It is true that "everything he touched turned to music," as Schumann once said of him. The hours of sleep were more and more curtailed, for he wrote late at night and rose early the next day. It is even said he slept in his spectacles, to save the trouble and time of putting them on in the morning.

In Schubert's boyhood, the music of Mozart influenced him most. This is seen in his earlier compositions. Beethoven was a great master to him then, but as time went on the spell of his music always grew stronger. In 1822, he wrote and published a set of variations on a French air, and dedicated them to Beethoven. He greatly desired to present them in person to the master he adored, but was too shy to go alone. Diabelli, the publisher, finally went with him. Beethoven was courteous but formal, pushing paper and pencil toward his guest, as he was totally deaf. Schubert was too shy to write a single word. However he produced his Variations. Beethoven seemed pleased with the dedication, and looked through the music. Soon he found something in it he did not approve of and pointed it out. The young author, losing his presence of mind, fled from the house. But Beethoven really liked the music and often played it to his nephew.

Five years later, during his last illness, a collection of some sixty of Schubert's songs was placed in his hands. He turned them over and over with amazement and delight. "Truly Schubert has the divine fire," he exclaimed. He wanted to see the composer of such beautiful music. Schubert came and was allowed to have a talk with him first, before other friends who were waiting. When Schubert paid another visit to the bedside of the master, it was almost the end of his life, though he could recognize all who stood about him. Overcome with emotion, Schubert left the room.

A couple of weeks after this Schubert was one of the torch bearers who accompanied the great master to the last resting place. Little did the young man of thirty dream that he would soon follow after. His life at this time was full of disappointments. He had always longed to write for the lyric stage. He composed numerous operas; but they were always rejected, for one reason or another. The last, "Fierabras," which was on the point of being produced, was finally given up. The composer became very dejected, and believed himself to be the most unfortunate, the most miserable being on earth. But, fortunately for Schubert, his cheerfulness again asserted itself and the stream of production resumed its flow. With his temperament, at one moment he would be utterly despairing, the next his troubles would seem to be forgotten, and he would be writing a song, a symphony or a sonata. At all events, constant work filled his days. The last year of his life was productive of some of his finest works.

About the end of October, 1828, he began to show signs of a serious breakdown. He was living at the home of his brother Ferdinand, in one of the suburbs of the city. Although he revived a little during the early part of November, so that he could resume walks in the neighbourhood, the weakness increased, and eleven days passed without food or drink. Lingered till the nineteenth of November, he passed peacefully away, still in his early manhood. The old father, the schoolmaster at the old home, hoped to have his son buried in the little cemetery near by. But Ferdinand knew his brother's wish, to be placed near Beethoven in Währinger Cemetery. The monument, erected by his friends and admirers the following year, bears, above the name, this inscription: "Music has here entombed a rich treasure, but much fairer hopes."