

Franz Schubert Dreamt of Indians

Whenever I attempted to sing of love, it turned to pain.
And again, when I tried to sing of pain, it turned to love.

—Franz Schubert, “My Dream”

It is a very unsafe experiment . . . for a writer . . . to
trust to the inventive powers of any one but himself.

—James Fenimore Cooper, preface to the 1826
edition of *The Last of the Mohicans*

IN November 1828, Franz Schubert was suffering from tertiary syphilis, typhus, and perhaps a touch of mercury poisoning from the “medicines” used to treat venereal disease in his day. He was thirty-one years old, moderately well-known and admired in his native Vienna for his compositions and performances, but chronically short on funds. Though he had been suffering from syphilis for six years, his condition had recently worsened; his doctor advised him to go to the country for fresh air. Unfortunately for Schubert, his brother’s flat near the outskirts of town was as close to the country as he could get. So there he was. It was a squalid place, and this is probably where he contracted the typhus that hastened his end. According to his friend Josef von Spaun, who visited Schubert in his final days, the composer tried to keep working in spite of his illness, revising the manuscripts to his *Winterreise* song cycle, sometimes singing to himself or reading to pass the time. But things weren’t looking good for Schubert by 12 November 1828 when he decided to write a letter to his closest friend, Franz von Schober, back in Vienna:

Dear Schober,

I am ill. I have eaten nothing for eleven days and drunk nothing,
and I totter feebly and shakily from my chair to bed and back again.

Rinna is treating me. If ever I take anything, I bring it up again at once.

Be so kind, then, as to assist me in this desperate situation by means of literature. Of Cooper's I have read *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Spy*, *The Pilot*, and *The Pioneers*. If by any chance you have anything else of his, I implore you to deposit it with Frau von Bogner at the coffee house for me. My brother, who is conscientiousness itself, will most faithfully pass it on to me. Or anything else.

Your friend

Schubert.

He must have known then that he was dying. In fact, that seems to be the tacit point of the letter. Eleven days is an impossibly long time to subsist without food or water. Even if he was exaggerating in a bid for sympathy, he must have been in bad shape, and the only thing he asked for—the novels of James Fenimore Cooper—would not be much help. Seven days later, Schubert was dead.

I became interested in Schubert's music—falling in love with one particular piano sonata, the B-flat major, or D960 according to the official system for cataloging his works—when I was twenty-three. It happened one day when I took my lunch break from my first, rather tedious job. I went out to find a sandwich plus a pair of headphones and some kind of benign noise to block out the chattering of my co-workers in adjacent cubicles. When I purchased a recording of D960 performed by Alfred Brendel, I didn't know anything about the sonata or about Schubert; it was just sitting there on a display rack of classical music near the register, and Brendel's name was familiar to me. I did not anticipate that the music I selected would become more distracting than my colleagues' nattering.

The sonata is plaintive and insistent. I was arrested by it on first hearing, and this feeling was unfamiliar to me, though I have always been sensitive to music. Any of Beethoven's odd-numbered symphonies can leave me *verklemt*, although that happens to a lot of people, I suppose. More embarrassingly, I have cried at a commercial (for what? financial services? tissues?) that incorporated Barber's "Adagio for Strings," and I have surreptitiously dabbed away tears at a high school band performance of the "Nimrod" movement from Elgar's *Enigma Variations* when half the performers could not play in tune. But the feeling I got from Schubert's piano sonata was different, more than momentary

weepiness. I was haunted, though I cannot account for why this piece, among countless others perhaps equally powerful, had such a profound effect on me.

As I listened to the sonata over and over, I began to hear a story in it. Like every story, this one had a protagonist. I imagined a young man who looked like the drawing of Schubert I had seen in concert programs, with his cherubically round, bespectacled face and a dimple in his chin.

The first movement begins with a simple melody that makes me think of a routine but pleasant activity. Sometimes I imagine the protagonist walking along a damp path under clearing skies after rain; other times I imagine him tearing a loaf of bread and buttering it. After only a few bars, there is a break in the melody, then a pause followed by a low, ominous, but very soft trill. This is the first intimation that all is not well. The trill recurs throughout the movement, and each time I hear it, I imagine the protagonist's hand returning to a soft spot in his flesh—his abdomen or the base of his neck—to feel a small lump beneath the skin. He knows what it could mean, but he does not want to let himself become preoccupied with it, so he carries on with his business. But he cannot ever forget about the lump completely, and his fingers keep returning to this spot, worrying at it, as the trill rumbles again and again. His awareness of the lump colors everything else he does. He angers too easily, sometimes. He becomes nostalgic. He tries to behave normally. He grows a little antic. And yet—not in spite of the lump, but because of it—the protagonist sees beauty in everything around him.

I don't mean to suggest that the music denotes a wet path, buttered bread, or a mysterious lump. The music is just music, full of palpable feeling but devoid of meaning in the strictly literal sense. As Oliver Sacks put it in *Musophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*, “while it is the [art] most closely tied to the emotions, music is wholly abstract; it has no formal power of representation whatever.”

Goethe, one of Schubert's muses, had a vocabulary for discussing the meaning of a work of art. The content—defined, in the case of a sonata, by the notes and rests, the pitches and rhythms, the melodies and harmonies, the timbre of the instruments—creates what Goethe would call the *Gestalt* of the piece. And to be sure, the *Gestalt* is more than just the sum of its sound waves; we perceive it as a coherent whole. But the composition also conveys a feeling that cannot be attached to any particular combination of notes or rests or any other aspect of the content. This ineffable feeling is the real meaning of the

work; Goethe called this the *Gehalt*. When I heard D960, I felt like I got the *Gehalt*. I was sure this piano sonata was written by someone close to death.

I wanted to play it, to experience the beauty and poignancy of this sonata as viscerally as possible. To feel the sadness and the joy vicariously, by listening, wasn't enough. I also felt differently about the music than Brendel did. To my ear, he wasn't sufficiently elated about the glimmers of beauty; he seemed more reflective in his playing, more resigned than I felt one ought to be in the face of death. So I bought two more recordings by other renowned pianists, Murray Perahia and Radu Lupu. Each rendition was admirable in its own way, but neither seemed to capture the sense of wild, erratic uplifting that I felt should be there. I wanted to play what *I* felt.

But then there was the question of skill. The sonata is not a virtuoso piece, but it isn't trivial either, and I am not an accomplished pianist. I studied piano for seven or eight years in my childhood but was never a serious student. I always loved playing, but I generally disdained practice in favor of galloping through a favorite piece over and over until I could play some approximation of the correct notes—almost always *molto vivace* in contempt of the composer's tempo markings, *fortissimo* in contempt of all other members of my household. I might have outgrown my adolescent histrionics, but I could not, unfortunately, simply grow into more refined technique.

Even so, I would have risked butchering the sonata, at first, if I could eventually master it—if only I had a piano. I was still in that decade of my life when I moved once every year or so through a series of one-bedroom apartments, sometimes shifting between cities or even continents. I was too poor and too untethered to own a piano; that would have to wait until I settled down, found a job, and got to a place where I could imagine staying for a while.

I was thirty by the time I took out my first mortgage, but I got myself a piano the same month. As soon as it was delivered, I went off to find the music for the sonata. The only edition I could find that day was in an omnibus of all of Schubert's piano sonatas—one fat volume that was impossible to lay open on the piano without tearing apart the spine. Flipping through to find the B-flat major, I noted that the pieces were arranged chronologically by date of composition. D960 was the very last one in the book.

I set to work on it immediately. I needed a couple of months just to work out most of the notes to the first two movements—to be able to play them through from beginning to end, however imperfectly. My fear about my lack of technique proved well founded. The sounds my hands were able to produce

rarely matched the ideal I heard in my head—the softness and subtleness I wanted in the trills. Instead of a small tumor beneath the skin, I produced the sound of a festering boil; I imagined a tender, reflective palpation of the lump, but I made a sound like splattering pus.

This was frustrating. I would often get up from the piano in disgust, and then, wanting to do more at the piano keyboard but not knowing how, I would go to the computer keyboard to do what came more naturally to me: to seek information. I knew the date of the sonata—September 1828—and quickly determined that its composition preceded Schubert's death by just two months. I searched further, and the basic facts of his demise yielded themselves immediately. Though it's doubtful, given the nature of his illnesses, that Schubert had a lump per se, I was heartened to find corroboration that the significance I had attached to the trills—the grim possibility of an impending end—was not just the product of my imagination.

By this time, the piece had become a virtual lump beneath my own skin. I could not stop prodding. I wanted to really understand the object of the obsessive interest that was growing inside of me, and I felt that if I could understand what Schubert was trying to convey when he wrote it, I might better understand why it was affecting me so deeply.

It was not enough to know that Schubert was dying when he wrote the sonata; I wanted a more intimate understanding of the nature of his death, and the nature of his life. I hold the conviction that the lives of artists matter when one wants to really understand their work. After all, art arises from the consciousness of its creator and is a product of his emotions and experiences—indeed, it is completely dependent on his perceptions for its existence. Certainly, we can *appreciate* art without any knowledge of the person who gave rise to it, but if we are to really *understand* it, we must try to know its creator.

The works of various musicologists that I read were of little help to me. This is not the fault of the musicologists themselves, who were merely faithful to the practices of their discipline; they were as objective as possible in their dissection of the technical and aesthetic qualities of the piece, noting, for example, the original nature of the transitions, the subtle evolution of themes, and the mysterious melodic gestures. In sum, they did an expert job of characterizing the *Gestalt* of the D960 but left me no closer to being able to fully characterize the *Gehalt*, or to understand what Schubert felt when he wrote it.

The music (being music, and thus devoid of specific denotative meaning) was never going to tell me directly and unequivocally about Schubert, any more

than the musicologists would. And so I began to seek Schubert's words. Luckily these are amply recorded. There is a volume, originally compiled by one Otto Erich Deutsch, which includes virtually every scrap of primary-source documentation on Schubert's life. In *Schubert: A Documentary Biography*, one can read the composer's letters to his friends and family, as well as their replies; his poetry; his journals; his business papers; his school report cards; and even his morning-after accounts of his dreams. Quickly I was caught up in the *Gestalt* of Schubert's life.

Because I was preoccupied with Schubert's death, I started reading Deutsch's book near the end, and that's where I came across the letter to Franz von Schober.

"Assist me in this desperate situation by means of literature," Schubert wrote—and then he asked for James Fenimore Cooper? The mysteries of character run deep.

Though still widely remembered as the author of *The Last of the Mohicans*, Cooper is rarely read for pleasure today. His racist portrayals of savages, both barbaric and noble, provoke contemporary distaste, and his prose is terrible. Virtually all his sentences drip with redundancy, verbosity, implausibility, opacity, and even a hilarity that is quite unintentional. I know this because *The Last of the Mohicans* is on my bedside table right now. When I learned of Schubert's fascination with these novels, I ordered a two-volume set containing the entire Leatherstocking series: five full-length works that share a common protagonist, Natty Bumppo—a.k.a. Leatherstocking, Hawkeye, Pathfinder, Deerslayer, or *La Longue Carabine* (The Long Rifle). Bumppo is a ruggedly individualistic frontiersman—an eighteenth-century American who has chosen to withdraw from society and live at the wild periphery, developing close fraternal ties to the indigenous people. Notably, he has one faithful companion and helpmeet, Chingachgook—the model, no doubt, for the Lone Ranger's Tonto and others.

I bought these books with the intention of reading everything that Schubert had, and I tried earnestly for more than a year. I got through two hundred pages (a little more than a third) of *The Last of the Mohicans*—far enough to discern that this was a story set in the Hudson River valley at the time of the French and Indian wars when there were lots of battles and skirmishes about. But I couldn't figure out what half of the characters were doing—most notably the two young maidens, Alice and Cora Munro, and their farcical clergyman companion David Gamut. It seems the main purpose of their journey across

the frontier is to supply a nominal pretext for all subsequent action by the real protagonists, the men who continually rescue them from peril. One such man, Major Heyward, appears to have been included in the novel principally as a love interest for Alice, so as to leave Bumppo and Chingachgook free to perform acts of valor for their own sake.

At first, I thought my confusion was the result of my own inattentiveness, so I went back and re-read carefully from the beginning. I decided then that the problem might not be with me. Cooper hadn't supplied plausible explanations. With basic questions of character motivation insufficiently answered, I grew reluctant to believe anything else. "Who *are* these people?" I would think when I read a sentence like this:

The ingenuous Alice gazed at his free air and proud carriage, as she would have looked upon some precious relic of the Grecian chisel, to which life had been imparted, by the intervention of a miracle; while Heyward, though accustomed to see the perfection of form which abounds among the uncorrupted natives, openly expressed his admiration at such an unblemished specimen of the noblest proportions of man.

Still not entirely trusting my own powers of discernment, I turned to literary scholars for help in parsing and appreciating Cooper's work. I figured somebody would have insights to help me understand Schubert's appetite for the stuff. My initial impressions, however, were mostly corroborated.

Mark Twain wrote the most famous critique of these novels, an essay entitled "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses" in which he berated the author's obliviousness to laws of physics, his deafness to natural human speech patterns, his imprecise use of language, and his excessive reliance on broken twigs as plot devices. (This from a man whose own novels are not best known for their *vérité*—at least not where plots are concerned.) Twain went so far as to say, "Now I feel sure, deep down in my heart, that Cooper wrote about the poorest English that exists in our language. . . . in truth, it seems to me that *Deerslayer* is just simply a literary delirium tremens."

Well, Schubert *was* delirious at the end. All of the possible medical conditions from which he might have suffered—tertiary syphilis, mercury poisoning, and typhus—include some form of mental derangement among their symptoms. But he still seemed in possession of his faculties when he sent Schober his plea for reading material. There had to be something to Cooper's

work that a sane nineteenth-century musical genius could appreciate. I just couldn't see what it was.

Nevertheless, I decided to give Cooper the benefit of the doubt and consider him an artist. Thus, according to my own philosophies about understanding art, I was obliged to try to learn something about Cooper himself, too.

As artists, he and Schubert could not have been more different. Schubert's musical genius was apparent from the age of five, when his father—a schoolmaster and modestly talented amateur musician—first began to teach him the violin. Recognizing that the boy's gifts surpassed his own, the father eventually sent him for instruction to a local church organist and choirmaster, who promptly declared that he could teach the boy nothing he didn't already know. By the time Schubert was nine, he had earned a spot in the choir of the court chapel, which enabled him to enroll as a student at the Imperial and Royal City College to study music under Antonio Salieri. Schubert was sensitive, thoughtful, and much admired by his teachers and other students for his singing, violin playing, and composition, as well as for being a decent and trustworthy young man. In spite of his prodigious talents, however, he would have to rely heavily on the goodwill of his close associates and admirers for the rest of his life as a musician, because the marketplace was slower than his friends to recognize his genius.

By contrast, Cooper was a problem child and a lucky son of a bitch. His father was a wealthy landowner—the namesake of Cooperstown, New York, now best known as home of the Baseball Hall of Fame. The Coopers moved there from New Jersey in 1790, when little James Fenimore was just a year old. By that time, central New York was no longer quite the battleground depicted in *The Last of the Mohicans*, though it was still at the fringe of the new American nation.

Cooper was shipped off to Albany for schooling at eleven, then two years later to New Haven. He had an undistinguished (though obviously precocious) career at Yale, allegedly spending more of his time fighting than studying; he was expelled after three years for exploding a classmate's door lock with gunpowder. Following his dismissal, he took to the sea in merchant vessels for a couple of years, until he was eighteen and could enlist in the navy. He never did finish his formal education nor show a glimmer of intellectual or artistic promise as a youth.

Cooper did not even consider writing until misfortune befell his family. After his father died in 1819, Cooper and his brothers discovered that their

inheritance amounted to some considerable debts. A lawsuit filed by one of their father's old business partners stripped the family of their ancestral home in New York and many of the other assets surrounding it. By this time, Cooper had left the navy and married; with a family of his own to support, he was forced to devise a new way to maintain the gentlemanly lifestyle to which he had always assumed a right. And so, at the age of thirty-one (the age Schubert was when he died and the age I was when I learned all that I here relate), Cooper began writing. It was not artistic compulsion but financial speculation that inspired him to begin.

Thinking of Schubert and the great number of other talented artists who have died destitute, one wonders at the prudence—or the audacity—of Cooper's plan to attain personal wealth with his pen. And, yet, he had a sound sense of what the book-buying public was after, and he was helpfully unencumbered by notions of artistic purity that might have conflicted with his pecuniary goals.

Cooper chose, as his primary subjects, tales of the sea and the American frontier, and he consciously modeled his efforts after the romanticism of Sir Walter Scott, which had proven so popular in the marketplace during the preceding few years. Cooper's first book, *Precaution*, was published in 1820, followed a year later by *The Spy*. With this second book he attained financial success. That is, with the sales of his books in America, he made enough money to support his family, though not enough to restore him entirely to the leisure class.

Cooper would have to expand his readership to achieve that goal. One motivation for moving his family to Europe in 1826 was to find greater markets. Indeed, there his books found a somewhat more popular reception than in the United States. (Cooper's work has provoked a degree of enthusiasm on the far side of the pond that I find difficult to fathom. In the nineteenth century, some popular German writers styled themselves after Cooper, among them Karl May; later, Cooper-inspired Indian clubs arose among the Nazis. Stalin is rumored to have been such a fan that he was inclined to play the savage from time to time—once introducing himself to an English translator with the line: "Big chief greets paleface!")

Cooper used his social connections to secure a minor diplomatic post in Paris and spent a couple of years there, living in hotels and attending dinners with European nobles. He also wrote prodigiously, penning the novel *The Prairie* (composed in a French hotel room but set in the American Midwest—a region that Cooper never actually visited) and beginning his *Gleanings*, or

travelogues, about this time in Europe. In the latter, he expressed modesty and surprise at finding his “humble self” in such surroundings.

By the fall of 1828, when Schubert lay dying in obscurity, Cooper had attained enough popularity and wealth to leave his post in France and travel to Italy for a few years before returning to America as one of the most widely read authors in the Western world.

I finally found a critic who actually *liked* Cooper in D. H. Lawrence, whose quirky *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923) presents a defense of Cooper’s work, crediting him with having done more to present the Red Man to the White Man than any other writer, even if he did it in a way that was not strictly to be believed. “The Leatherstocking books are lovely,” Lawrence writes. “Lovely half-lies.” And then he goes on to have a bit of fun at Cooper’s expense—not bothering to disguise his bemusement when imagining the author sitting in a Parisian hotel, wearing a coat with silver buttons and a ruffled shirt while writing about a grizzled, buckskinned outdoorsman. Even Lawrence’s “defense” of Cooper is slightly backhanded—though no more insulting than the words of Daniel Webster, who delivered Cooper’s eulogy, stating, “as far as I am acquainted with the writings of Mr. Cooper, they uphold good sentiments, sustain good morals, and maintain just taste.” (Apparently Webster couldn’t bring himself to read the books either.)

“But,” Lawrence adds, “I have loved the Leatherstocking books so dearly. Wish-fulfillment!” He leaves this last, elliptical interjection ambiguous for a moment, inviting the reader to ponder whether these fulfilled wishes are Cooper’s or Lawrence’s—but perhaps they are the wishes of all who find escape in these novels.

Further on, Lawrence helpfully supplies a chart to illustrate how Cooper’s own wishes may be manifest in his Leatherstocking books:

<i>Wish Fulfillment</i>		<i>Actuality</i>
THE WIGWAM	vs.	MY HOTEL
CHINGACHGOOK	vs.	MY WIFE
NATTY BUMPPPO	vs.	MY HUMBLE SELF

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of this fantasy, at first glance, is the replacement of spouse with noble savage. Lawrence goes on to explain in more detail:

Why, in his immortal friendship of Chingachgook and Natty Bumppo, [Cooper] dreamed the nucleus of a new society. That is, he dreamed a

new human relationship. A stark, stripped human relationship of two men, deeper than the deeps of sex. Deeper than property, deeper than fatherhood, deeper than marriage, deeper than love. So deep that it is loveless. The stark, loveless, wordless unison of two men who have come to the bottom of themselves.

Years after Lawrence wrote this, the scholar Leslie Fiedler would publish his famous and controversial *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), in which he would posit the notion that homosexual miscegenation is a seminal theme in American literature, recurring from Natty and Chingachgook, to Ishmael and Queequeg, to Huck and Jim. I remember encountering this theory for the first time in a college lit class and thinking it was absurd to insist that there was anything more than friendship between Huck and Jim, or any of the others. And yet, coming across the idea again here, in Lawrence's pre-Fiedler critique of Cooper, I did wonder—not least about Schubert and his friend, the recipient of his last letter, Franz von Schober.

The two Franzes met in Vienna in 1815, when Schober came to Schubert's native city to study law. Unlike Schubert, Schober came from money. Half Swedish and half Austrian, he was a spoiled aristocrat who put on bohemian airs, a playboy, a dilettantish poet and painter, a socialite. Schubert's old school friend Josef Kenner would attest (following Schubert's death) that Schober was a man of great moral defects who seduced women without care for their virtue and encouraged his male friends both to worship and to emulate his profligacy and dissipation.

There is an apocryphal story that Schubert and Schober met when the latter decided to seek out the composer after hearing some of his songs. He found Schubert, who worked at that time as a teacher, in a room of his father's school, correcting students' papers.

Schober was partly responsible for persuading Schubert to quit teaching. Others may have encouraged him just as much to develop his talents, but Schober backed up his encouragement with an invitation to come live with him at his affluent mother's house, thereby enabling Schubert to leave his own parents' house and the suffocating work at his father's school. This arrangement didn't last; Schubert eventually had to give up his room to make way for Schober's brother, who had fallen ill. Schubert moved back in with his own parents to resume teaching for one more year—but Schober had shown him freedom of a sort and inspired him to pursue his artistic ambitions. When the

opportunity arose for the composer another year later to abandon his father's school once and for all, he took it.

Schubert was hired as a music master to the children of Count Johann Esterházy in what is now Hungary. This was, in fact, another form of teaching, but closer to his aspirations, with the added benefit of supplying some potentially valuable social connections. He took the job readily, but during the year he spent away from Vienna he wrote affectionate letters to Schober telling him how much he disliked his position. He felt socially isolated because there were few German-speakers around—and worse, as he put it, “not a soul here has any feeling for true art, or at most the countless now and again (unless I am wrong).” He missed his friends and fellow artists in Vienna, and swore he would stay away from the city no longer than absolutely necessary.

By 1821 Schubert was back in Austria, doing just what he wanted: composing, selling some of his work to publishers (albeit not for much money), performing, and drinking himself silly with his friends—a bunch of poets, painters, and other musicians. They were a close and devoted group who all referred to Schubert affectionately as *Schwammerl*. (In Austrian dialect, the word denotes a type of mushroom; it is related to the German word for sponges of the ocean-dwelling kind. Schubert was less than five feet tall and somewhat pudgy.) Because Schubert never married or established a permanent residence of his own, he relied on his friends for domestic support. He spent much of his adult life traveling, rooming occasionally in boardinghouses but more often staying for extended periods in the homes of his friends in Vienna. They were the closest thing to a family of his own that Schubert would ever have.

The group frequently organized intimate evening parties, which came to be known as Schubertiads, where they performed his music. These events serve as the basis for what is possibly the most famous portrait of the man, *Schubert-Abend bei Josef von Spaun* (Schubert Evening at Josef von Spaun's), drawn years after Schubert's death by his friend Moritz von Schwind. It depicts forty or so people crowded around a piano, with the instrument itself at the very center of the page. The diminutive Schubert is seated to play, though all we can see of him are his face and his hands; the rest disappears behind the famous baritone Johann Vogl, whose head is thrown back and whose arms are raised expressively. Nearly all of the other people surrounding them either close their eyes in rapt concentration or gaze appreciatively at the performers. According to Schubert scholar Maurice Brown, in an essay about this portrait,

“Only one person in the whole assembly is not absorbed in the music; he turns to philander with the girl beside him. It is Schober.”

Schubert liked him anyway. Indeed, he was devoted to Schober, and he must have respected his poetic talents, too, because in September 1821 they decided to collaborate. The two Franzes went away to the castle of Ochsenburg (owned by one of Schober’s wealthy relatives) to work in seclusion on an opera called *Alfonso und Estrella*. Schober contributed the libretto while Schubert wrote the score. According to Schober, they shared a snug room “with twin beds, a sofa next to the warm stove, and a fortepiano [that] made it all very domestic and cozy.” They spent their days working and their evenings reading and smoking, or discussing their work on the opera, until they returned to Vienna together in October.

Alfonso und Estrella did not exactly meet wide acclaim, though latter-day critics have praised Schubert’s score. The work’s failure is often blamed on Schober’s contributions; even their friend Vogl thought the libretto to be “thoroughly bad.” The opera was rejected for performance in Vienna, and the Franzes had difficulty selling it to publishers.

This sort of rejection was familiar to Schubert. He seems to have felt increasingly that his work was undervalued—both financially and emotionally. He received some affirmation from his friends and other musicians, but he couldn’t sell his work for what he believed it was worth. Publishers would sometimes comment that it was good but too difficult to market, so they would offer to buy it for half of what he had asked or would simply reject it outright.

Schubert’s growing frustration at his financial troubles may partly explain why he spent so much of 1822 in a rotten mood, and the fact that he was starting to feel sick couldn’t have helped. Josef von Spaun’s brother reports that Schubert spent much of that year quarreling with both Schober and Vogl, sometimes acting like a petulant child. And yet it was the year when Schubert wrote one of his greatest masterpieces: the “Unfinished” Eighth Symphony. This brooding piece is so well known and so often played nowadays as to require no description to those who listen to classical music. But if you haven’t heard it, imagine the circumstances of the composer’s life at that time, and you may begin to understand what the piece is like. An emotional, talented young man has just learned that he has syphilis and is experiencing rashes, clumpy hair loss, aches, pains, and fever; he now realizes that his career is perhaps never going to be as exalted as he hoped; his bills accrue slightly faster than he

can write his way out of them; his social life is fraying. In spite of it all, he is in love with someone or something that words cannot name.

Nobody can say for certain why Schubert did not finish this piece. He surely had enough musical ingenuity to come up with some material for two more movements; indeed, he continued composing prodigiously for years after this piece was set aside. He apparently just chose not to go on with it.

Many of Schubert's biographers and musical interpreters, and even a handful of musicologists, have said they are at a loss for a purely artistic or technical explanation for why Schubert never finished this symphony, but some will venture out onto a psychological limb to suggest that his state of mind and the onset of his syphilis probably had something to do with it. Perhaps Schubert just felt that he had nothing more to say about the matter after the ominous *allegro moderato* and the alternately forlorn and resolute *andante con moto* movements. The great, yawning reminder of mortality that came with his illness was probably enough to encourage him to flout the conventions that demand all symphonies shall be of four movements—to live according to his own rules, for a while.

Nobody knows for certain how he caught his disease. It seems, from his letters to his family and friends, that he never had an enduring romantic relationship with a woman. He was briefly engaged to a Therese Grob, who purportedly called off the plan because he didn't make enough money, and a few letters suggest he had an unrequited crush on the young Countess Esterházy, to whom he gave music lessons, but it seems unlikely that he had a sexual relationship with either of them. Some people speculate that his syphilis may have come from a prostitute. Others think he got it from Schober, who is reported by some biographers to have shown symptoms of the disease himself.

Schubert may well have been gay, though some scholars are as prudishly resistant to the idea as others are enthusiastic to accept it. All those who debate his sexuality do so on the basis of circumstantial evidence. In all likelihood we will never know for sure if there was a sexual relationship between him and Schober—but who cares? Sex aside, what matters is how Schubert felt—for example, when he wrote to Schober in November 1823, "Only you, dear Schober, I shall never forget, for what you mean to me no one else can mean, alas!"

I am wary of reading too much into these declarations, and yet there is a risk too in dismissing them as overwrought expressions of friendship.

Sure, Schubert was prone to florid speech. He had ingested his share of *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress)—a school of eighteenth-century German literature, exemplified by the works of Goethe and Schiller (many of whose poems Schubert had set to music), in which all emotional expressions seem excessive to contemporary tastes. Schubert lived, too, on the brink of the Romantic movement, when art and literature alike grew ever more ardent. But ignoring his grandiloquence for a moment, I believe what Schubert is saying to Schober in this letter is simple: he cares for him more deeply than he cares for anyone else. The way I read it, that means he was in love.

Though Schubert did recover somewhat toward the end of 1822, a bout of secondary syphilis in 1823 continued to darken his spirits as well as his health. It moved him to write angst-ridden verse, including a ditty he composed while a patient at Vienna's general hospital. A single stanza of "My Prayer" conveys the tenor of the whole poem:

See, abased in dust and mire,
Scorched by agonizing fire,
I in torture go my way,
Nearing doom's destructive day.

Schubert is not remembered for being a poet, and translation never does good things to rhyming verse, and anyone in his condition might understandably be depressed. Still, this is pretty bad.

"My Prayer" raises, again, the question of Schubert's literary taste. I would not be the first of his admirers to claim that he lacked discernment in this department. Scholars have asserted that he often set "greeting-card poetry" to music, and many of today's listeners would agree. I once attended a symphony performance at which some *lieder* were performed; when I happened to run into a German acquaintance in the lobby afterwards, I asked him what the lyrics had been. "Some rubbish about streams and trees," he told me.

Perhaps it is unfair to expect someone to be a great judge of literature just because he is a musical genius. We all have our blind spots. I am not only a very mediocre pianist but am also emotionally blind to most paintings, drawings, and other visual arts. I can see what's there, but I rarely feel anything much from the act of inspecting it, and I can never formulate any conviction that what I'm looking at is really wonderful. I can't tell a great painting from a bad one at all.

Consider, too, Nabokov—an anti-Cooper for sure—who composed some of the most virtuosic prose ever written in English. By all accounts, he seems to have been a sensitive artistic soul. He was a synesthete who saw letters as having colors—“huckleberry *k*, azure and mother-of-pearl *s*”—every sentence a kaleidoscopic wonder. He also wrote of his appreciation for the phonological qualities of words; he reveled in the rushing of fricatives, the whispering of sibilants, and the percussive pops of labial consonants, creating prose that is nothing if not lyrical. You would think, then, that music might also appeal to him. Yet, in his memoir *Speak, Memory* he writes, “Music, I regret to say, affects me merely as an arbitrary succession of more or less irritating sounds. Under certain emotional circumstances I can stand the spasms of a rich violin, but the concert piano and all wind instruments bore me in small doses and flay me in larger ones.”

I would be unjust to condemn Schubert for his general lack of literary taste. I grant him his strange and lame literary affinities, yet I still want to understand why he felt as he did—especially at the end.

According to Otto Erich Deutsch—he of the *Documentary Biography* I first consulted early on in my search—Schober probably did send a few books along to Schubert, though he did not deliver them himself for fear of infection. In any case, Schubert likely never got the chance to read any of them. According to his friend Spaun, who was less fearful than Schober of contagion and therefore willing to visit Schubert in his final days, the great musical genius passed his hours in delirium, unable to maintain a conversation but singing constantly.

Delirium cannot explain Schubert’s love of James Fenimore Cooper; he read those books before he declined and lapsed out of verbal contact with the world. He may have loved the books for the adventure, the exoticism, the thrill of escape. Perhaps, as for Lawrence or Cooper himself, they represented some sort of wish fulfillment. When Schubert was singing deliriously through his final days, he might even have fantasized about Natty Bumppo in fringed leather and a five o’clock shadow, and imagined himself creeping through the forest beside him in nothing but moccasins and a loincloth. Or perhaps he simply imagined himself in the cave with Bumppo, in that scene from the early chapters of *The Last of the Mohicans* when the protagonists are hiding beneath a waterfall of the mighty Hudson, trying to avoid detection by the barbaric Mingo.

In the book, of course, the party consists of the hero, Bumpo; the noble savages, Uncas and Chingachgook; the two young maidens, Alice and Cora; the useless army officer, Heyward; and the awkward clergyman, David Gamut. As they hunker in the cave, Gamut begins to sing—to assist the party in their desperate situation by means of music—and at the sound of his voice, even the hardened Bumpo begins to cry. Or, as Cooper put it: “His roving eyes began to moisten, and before the hymn was ended, scalding tears rolled out of fountains that had long seemed dry, and followed each other down cheeks that had oftener felt the storms of heaven, than any testimonials of weakness.” Perhaps Schubert was willing to overlook a strained metaphor or two when he read that passage because the idea of the transcendent power of music was there clearly enough.

Considering the scene beneath the thundering waterfall, I can just about imagine the appeal of James Fenimore Cooper to Franz Schubert. But in the end, I suspect he only asked for the books on his deathbed because he was hoping that his dearest friend Schober would want to see him one last time. Delivering the books would have given Schober a pretext to visit, against Schubert’s injunctions to leave them at the coffeehouse, if only he had been willing to deliver them himself. This is what I imagine Schubert was asking for when he concluded his letter with the phrase “Or anything else.”

Cooper’s preface to the original 1826 edition of *The Last of the Mohicans* claims that the work is not fiction, but rather “a narrative”; he must therefore explain some of the obscurities that his readers will shortly encounter, lest anyone be inclined to doubt his authority. He must do so, he says, because readers often mistakenly believe that they know the subjects of his writing better than Cooper himself. (Methinks the author doth protest too much.) But here’s what interests me: he adds the curious remark that “it is a very unsafe experiment either for a writer or a projector to trust to the inventive powers of any one but himself.” This is either an attempt at irony or an expression of extreme self-confidence. I pondered it for a while, and then, I confess, I decided that it didn’t really matter too much to me what Cooper was trying to say. And it may be that what is *really* unsafe is to take the writerly philosophies of James Fenimore Cooper too seriously, or even to seek too much sense in one of his sentences. But I mention his remark here because it provoked me to think of something that continues to bother me.

Somewhere along the way, I stopped focusing on the B-flat major sonata itself and began trying to come up with a story that could explain it. I started with the imaginary lump and continued with more factual research. Using my own “inventive powers,” I delved into Schubert’s life and came up with a thesis that could explain what he might have felt toward the end, when he wrote that last work. My theories might not be entirely accurate, but they are satisfying to me. Telling the story brings me closer and closer to the truth of the music—until each time I stop and just listen to the sonata. Then I am filled with uncertainty again; I am reminded that words fall short when the object is to describe the meaning of a piece of music.

The meaning of music is pure emotion. Indeed, music describes emotion far better than language is able to, because every note *can* be about radically divergent things—like love and pain—all at once. Words, each of which is obliged to denote something more particular, cannot. While writers and clever speakers may sometimes manage to say several things at once through ambiguity and verbal acrobatics, we cannot convey or conjure the tremendous range of meanings with a single word that a musician can with a single note. The only truth I can lay claim to, after all my research and imaginative hypotheses about what made Schubert’s last piano sonata vibrate with such sadness and such hope, is that the reasons elude articulation. They are unknowable not just because Schubert is now dead, but because he could not have told us in words what the sonata “meant” even while he lived.

And so I return to the music itself, again and again. I still try to play the B-flat major sonata whenever I sit down at the piano, though I stopped improving long ago. I am always distracted by the image of a small, pale man—the one who once walked a damp path and buttered a hunk of bread, and who is now propped in a bed, sweat-soaked sheets pulled up to his chest, with a wavering quill in his hand. I still don’t know quite how to express it. My fingers falter as I struggle to imagine the longing he must have felt when he penned his plea for literary diversion in the face of death. Or anything else.

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