

LORRAINE BYRNE BODLEY, *SCHUBERT: A MUSICAL WAYFARER* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2023). ISBN 9780300204087, 736pp, \$40 (hardback).

Composer biographies have a long history of mythologising their subjects, and Schubert biographies are certainly no exception. Many images of Schubert have appeared in biographies since his death. There is the sentimental image of Schubert as an innocent child savant: a tragic, impoverished figure. From the 1990s we begin to confront a new hedonistic, bohemian Schubert. His sexuality was scrutinised and debated by musicologists and easily read into his music, which so often deals with unfulfilled desire.

Lorraine Byrne Bodley's biography of the composer, then, must shoulder the weight of a considerable historiographical burden. This is a challenge to which she ably rises, carefully situating her book within the considerable literature of previous Schubert biographies and clearly carving out her place and her contribution in the prologue. It is an important contribution that attempts to separate the man from the myths through rigorous research, which draws together disparate material from repositories across Europe, and which situates Schubert and his music within the rich social, historical, and cultural contexts of his time.

A common trope of biographies of composers is to isolate artificially the compositional process from outside influences, particularly from the influence of teachers (think of the often-underplayed teacher-pupil relationship between Haydn and Beethoven). Doing so heightens the originality of the composer's oeuvre and contributes to the Romantic image (analysed by Peter Kivy in *The Possessor and the Possessed: Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, and the Idea of Musical Genius*)¹ of the composer as divinely inspired. Byrne Bodley happily resists this trope. One approach she uses is to pay tribute to Schubert's teachers, particularly Salieri (see Chapter 3). She carefully examines Schubert's exercises in counterpoint and *partimento* (a common Italian teaching tool that provided the student with a bass line that the student was required to work up into a fully-fledged piece through improvisation) alongside Salieri's corrections of Schubert's work. In doing so, she unearths new insights into Schubert's compositional processes, especially his ability to improvise piano dance music and compose opera at pace. Similarly, she highlights previously overlooked intertextual connections between Schubert's symphonies and those of contemporaries, including Johann Baptist Wanhal, Florian Leopold Gassmann, Georg Christoph Wagenseil, Wenzel Pichl, Michael Haydn,

¹ Peter Kivy, *The Possessor and the Possessed: Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, and the Idea of Musical Genius* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008).

Adalbert Gyrowetz, and Leopold Hofmann (103–106). In this way, Schubert's music is reconnected to the time and place of its composition and performance.

The biographer of a composer must make difficult decisions regarding how to approach issues with which the genre by its very nature must directly engage. They include how to deal with the composer's intentions and their centrality or otherwise to the work's meanings, how to decide upon the contexts in which the music should be situated, and how present the scholar's voice and stance should be in the book. For the most part, Byrne Bodley's approach to these questions is to carefully interpret the documentary evidence against sensitively researched historical context, and to remove her own voice as far as possible. Her voice is perhaps most present when she argues convincingly for rehabilitating Schubert. For example, she situates criticisms of Schubert's continual revisions of his work against the emerging *Werktreue* ideal (188). She also engages carefully with his record as an opera composer, acknowledging that this is 'difficult to assess' given the small number of operatic works in Schubert's oeuvre compared to other genres, but nonetheless highlighting his practical experience through apprenticeships in Viennese theatres, his successes, and his ambitions (194–211).

A particularly thorny challenge for any biographer is how to structure and situate life and work and create a meaningful relationship between the two. Some biographies sidestep the issue. The format of OUP's traditional series of biographies *Master Musicians* (published 1899–present) has often kept life and work relatively separate, sometimes in two distinct sections, or in alternating chapters. On the whole, books in the series have tended to avoid making explicit connections between the two. From the 1990s musicologists tended to bring life and work into direct dialogue with the risk of over-interpreting and sentimentalising the music.

In *Schubert: A Musical Wayfarer* Byrne Bodley takes a flexible approach to chronology that avoids the pitfalls of determinism and teleology that arranging a life into a narrative often entails. The structure is built around themes and works but remains loosely chronological. Byrne Bodley sensitively connects Schubert's work to his life in a way that enables the work to speak all the more effectively against the newly unearthed contexts. For example, in her discussion of Schubert's engagement with the genre of the symphony, she reads his music against the changing social function of the genre, highlighting the semi-private salon performance contexts and the music's interactions with Vienna's cosmopolitan classicism (223–232). In doing so, she offers new means of interpreting the works themselves, and also reminds the reader of an often-neglected aspect of the symphony's history, overshadowed as it has been by the more public profile of Beethoven's symphonies.

At other times, she relates life and work in a more personal manner. For example, she connects the death of Schubert's mother to the composer's *Marienlieder* (songs

addressed to the Virgin Mary) and his settings of the Salve Regina texts (130–9). Byrne Bodley's reading of "Gretchen am Spinnrade" is characteristically multifaceted and nuanced (156–166). She moves deftly between Schubert's personal life, description of the music, and broader historical contexts. She begins by relating the piece to Schubert's 'intense desire' for the soprano Therese Grob and his uncertainty about marriage and his future, then a psychological reading of the piece ensues foregrounding Schubert's likely bisexuality and premonition of his own tragedy. This is followed by an examination of how Schubert responds to Goethe's text and contextualisation of the original Gretchen of the poem. Finally, Byrne Bodley returns to Schubert's life by reading his interpretation of Gretchen (who in the poem expresses her anguish that she is pregnant and foresees the horrors of her future) as shaped by the experiences of his mother and maternal aunt who both abandoned children by the men they subsequently married. All of this gives the reader multiple ways of approaching the song in response to Schubert's personal and cultural experiences.

One of the most admirable aspects of the biography is Byrne Bodley's ability to approach potentially controversial or mythologising aspects, such as Schubert's sexuality and his early death from syphilis, in a measured way that leaves the reader able to draw their own informed conclusions. Accordingly, she contextualises Schubert's sexuality by examining the norms of same-sex friendships in the nineteenth century (242). Her description of Schubert's illness and death is informed by clear descriptions of his symptoms based on the available documentary evidence and Byrne Bodley's research into the progression of the disease. These passages leave the reader in no doubt of the awful suffering Schubert experienced (both physical and psychological) and the obvious effects on his ability to work, but they are written with sensitivity rather than sentimentality (359–369, 529–536).

Biography as a genre has a long (and at times chequered) history but continues to fascinate readers. One of the uppermost reasons for its appeal is a desire to understand how exceptional individuals felt, thought, lived, and created what they did. Another is that biographies place these individuals at the heart of a story. This is a genre that deals in history but also fiction, too (this tension is one of the reasons why biography has often seemed suspect to scholars). Lorraine Byrne Bodley's biography of Schubert falls into the former camp. This is history researched and written by a highly skilled and impressive scholar. The risk is that the reader can lose sight of Schubert the man – his voice, his thoughts, and feelings – and his story in amongst this impressive scholarship. Nonetheless, the result is a scholarly biography that makes an important original contribution to Schubert studies and to the genre of composer biographies.

Joanne Cormac
University of Nottingham