MUSICAL DEBATE

Was Schubert Gay, and Does It Matter?

In 1989 the American musicologist Maynard Solomon stirred the pot of Schubert studies with an essay concluding that Schubert was promiscuously gay. The composer, said Solomon, lived sequestered in a bohemian and homosexual circle of male friends so that he could avoid the drab realities of life in favor of abandonment to beauty and pleasure. For fear of exposure, members of Schubert's circle are said to have communicated in a code. For example, Schubert’s friend Eduard Bauernfeld remarked in his diary in 1826: “Schubert is out of sorts—he needs ‘young peacocks,’ like Benvenuto Cellini.” The sixteenth-century sculptor Benvenuto Cellini was an admitted homosexual, and in his famous Autobiography of 1562 he talks of hunting peacocks, which Solomon interprets as searching for homosexual partners, especially boys dressed as women.

Solomon’s conclusions did not go unchallenged. Rita Steblin countered that Cellini hunted game for its medicinal value, and this was what Schubert also apparently needed. Ultimately, the evidence concerning Schubert’s lifestyle does not allow for any definitive conclusions about his sexuality. In his youth Schubert had apparently contemplated marriage to the singer Therese Grob, and he was later genuinely attracted to his student Karoline Esterházy. It also seems likely that experiments with a libertine sexuality—including homosexuality—were practiced within Schubert’s circle. Later musicians, including Claude Debussy and possibly Robert Schumann, made similar experiments in similar circumstances.

Is any of this important for our understanding of Schubert’s music? For those who love Schubert and believe his premature death to be a great tragedy, the answer is yes because Schubert’s sexual practices contributed to his untimely demise. Schubert’s song texts—as in his ravishing Ganymed discussed in this chapter—sometimes allude distantly to the theme of homosexuality and thus have relevance to his musical oeuvre. But there is no other overt connection between the composer’s homoerotic lifestyle, such as it may have been, and the music.