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Schubert: A Musical Wayfarer
Lorraine Byrne Bodley

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In her famous essay ‘The Art Of Biography’, Virginia Woolf writes: ‘The art of biography, we say – but at once go on to ask, is biography an art? The question is foolish perhaps, and ungenerous certainly, considering the keen pleasure that biographers have given us. But the question asks itself so often that there must be something behind it. There it is, whenever a new biography is opened, casting its shadow on the page; and there would seem to be something dead in that shadow, for after all, of the multitude of lives that are written, how few survive!’ Woolf wrote those words in 1939, so she may have been referring to André Maurois’s

Aspects de la biographie, published little more than a decade earlier, in which the writer (*nota bene* the future author of a well-known biography of George Sand, *Lélia, ou la vie de George Sand*) considers this very question: on what research methods is a modern biography based and, above all, should it be regarded as an art, as one of the subgenres of the novel, or as belonging to the field of scholarship.¹ According to Maurois, one argument in favour of assigning the biography to the domain of belles-lettres is the fact that it arouses emotions, just like a novel – and even more powerfully, since the reader is aware of learning about the life of a real figure. On the other hand, the very fact that a biographer presents the protagonist, rather than constructing them, as occurs in a novel, and makes use of actual historical documents, like a scholar, inscribes the biography within the realm of scholarly, academic works (from this point of view, the biographer is seen as more historian than writer).

Ultimately, Woolf does not resolve this question unequivocally. The biography is too complex to be pigeonholed. ‘By telling us the true facts – she summarizes – by sifting the little from the big, and shaping the whole so that we perceive the outline, the biographer does more to stimulate the imagination than any poet or novelist save the very greatest. For few poets and novelists are capable of that high degree of tension which gives us reality. But almost any biographer, if he respects facts, can give us much more than another fact to add to our collection. He can give us the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders’.

One might say that similar premises and reflections form the starting point for Lorraine Byrne Bodley’s monograph of

¹ The history of research into the biography genre is traced by Anita Ciałek in her book *Biografia naukowa: od koncepcji do narracji. Interdyscyplinarność, teorie, metody badawcze* [The academic biography: from concept to narrative. The interdisciplinary aspect, theories and research methods] (Kraków, 2013).

Franz Schubert, *Schubert. A Musical Wayfarer*, published in 2023 by Yale University Press. ‘Since the nineteenth century – the author begins – Schubert has been subjected to considerable invention on the part of his biographers, acolytes and friends. Memoirs from some of Schubert’s friends and contemporaries labelled him as a kind of cherubic idiot savant – a “guileless child romping among giants”, as Robert Schumann famously remarked’ (p. 1). And she develops this idea: ‘What is important is not only what is true about Schubert’s life and works but what has been taken for truth by those who were in the process of constructing an image of Franz Schubert. Oscar Wilde believed “what is true in a man’s life is not what he does, but the legend that grows up around him [...] you must never destroy legends. Through them we are given an inkling of the true physiognomy of a man”. Such legends and anecdotal accuracy are also relevant to Viennese historians Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz in their seminal study of the intersections of artistic history and psychoanalytic theory, *Die Legende vom Künstler: Ein historischer Versuch*, where they claim: “The only significant factor is that an anecdote recurs, that is recounted so frequently as to warrant the conclusion that it represents a typical image of the artist. In other words, public history claims its own reality: it functions as a counterpart to the historical life”’ (pp. 1–2).

Bodley has been studying Schubert for almost a quarter of her century; her first articles on the composer appeared in 2000, and a few years later she first summed up her research in the study *Schubert’s Goethe Settings* (Ashgate, 2003). The monumental *Schubert. A Musical Wayfarer*, in which the narrative is spread over more than 700 pages, may confidently be deemed, as the author herself declares, her magnum opus; and, let us add, one of the finest publications on Schubert to have appeared over the past two hundred years.

The book is divided into four main parts – *Bearings, Friendships, Crises and Essence* – and comprises a total of 24 chapters. Bodley combines a thematic with a chronological arrangement most effectively. Successive stages in Schubert’s life are defined through his key works, acting as milestones or turning points on the path from his carefree beginnings to the moving last masterworks of a dying genius (‘His final works – writes Bodley – express a preternatural wisdom refined in the crucible of experience’, p. 518). This tale of Schubert’s life, not eschewing reflection on his emotions or the quoting of even subjective and semi-anecdotal recollections from his loved ones and acquaintances (recollections that tell us so much about the artist and his milieu!), is entwined with insightful analyses and interpretations of his works. Bodley’s compendium, written with erudition and considerable beauty, fulfils, in my opinion, all the hopes invested in it.