

FRANZ SCHUBERT AS PAINTED BY GUSTAV KLIMT AND JULIUS SCHMID

By Janet I. Wasserman

“Friday 17 March [1899] Party and private viewing - at the Secession. Klimt took me personally to look at his ‘Schubert’. It’s indisputably the best picture at the exhibition.”¹ At the Secessionist Exhibition of 18 March -31 May 1899 in the Künstlerhaus -- the fourth such exhibition by the Secessionists -- Alma Schindler, author of the above quote, and the Viennese public saw an astonishing portrait of the composer, *Schubert am Klavier*, done in Gustav Klimt’s (1862-1918) inimitable *Secessionstil* rendering. (The Austrians have used *Sezession* and *Secession* interchangeably; *Jugendstil* is the general term used for the German and Austrian Art Nouveau movement.)

The Schubert seen in Klimt’s painting is in full left profile, seated foreground at a piano with both hands on the keyboard and his gaze directed at the music stand with its sheet of music. Around him are three very attractive young women and a man, all dressed in evening clothes. Schubert is dressed in a dark, high-collared formal coat of his own era. The women are elegantly attired in a style appropriate to Klimt’s *fin-de-siècle* Vienna; their gowns appear to be of the 1890s. The other man in the painting, dressed in a formal high-collared coat similar to Schubert’s, stands behind the women. His coat is partly hidden leaving only Schubert in darkened contrast with the light around him.

The painting shimmers, as the women’s dresses appear to reflect a silvery shine from candles and mirror. A lighted candelabrum on the piano spotlights Schubert’s face, and candles gleaming on a mirrored mantel cast all the figures in their glow. The woman standing alone on the left is Marie Zimmermann who was one of Klimt’s mistresses and the mother of two sons by the artist.² She is the only one of the three female figures to be shown frontally - the others are in profile. Marie is wearing a hairstyle and dress that was quite popular in Vienna’s Habsburg Nineties. The other women are also in 1890s costume with leg-of-mutton sleeves and waistlines not seen in the *Biedermeier* era. Clearly, Klimt was not committed to historical accuracy. He is painting his own conception of the composer that places Schubert outside of time. The way Klimt used colour and light in *Schubert am Klavier* was evolving, and in his succeeding works he went on to develop his far better known style of the years until his death.

Despite Alma’s assertion in her diary (below), it is not clear that the women are all singing -- one or two may be singing. Marie is clearly standing alone in regal beauty, not singing, quite distant and apart from Schubert sitting at the piano. He is obviously playing, from the position of his hands on the keys as he looks intently at the music stand. Marie is very much a focal point since she stands as the lone figure on the left of the painting. She is looking straight ahead at the viewer not at Schubert, her face void of expression. Marie is present in the painting, but not part of the event depicted. She is glowingly lovely and poised. This is quite possibly Klimt’s *hommage* to his mistress. The other figures are standing attentively, singing or listening. Over all is a rosy effulgence that is intensified by the rose-colored gown of the female figure at centre-right. The feathery, muted colouristic surface of the canvas, of Schubert playing piano in the candlelit music

¹Alma Mahler-Werfel, *Diaries 1898-1902*, selected and translated by Antony Beaumont. From the German edition transcribed and edited by Antony Beaumont and Susanne Rode-Breymann, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999, p.105.

²Catherine Dean, *Klimt*, London: Phaidon, 1998, p.56.

room, is a mood portrait of the composer and his admirers in reverence for the music, leaving the viewer with a sense of repose.

Nikolaus Dumba (1830-1900), a Viennese industrialist, politician, art patron and collector of Schubertiana, originally commissioned the Klimt 150x200cm oil on canvas painting as a *sopraporta* for the music room in his castle.³ As for the nineteen-year-old Alma Schindler (1879-1964), soon to become Alma Mahler in 1902 when she met and married Gustav Mahler, her critical judgment, while counted by some as quite discriminating as befitted the daughter of painter Emil Jakob Schindler (1842-1892) and step-daughter of Secessionist painter Carl Moll (1861-1945) -- both recognized and esteemed artists of their eras -- may have been influenced by her growing feelings for Klimt and his continuing pursuit of her. Alma may well have been aware of Marie Zimmermann's relationship with Klimt. Before the exhibition closed, Alma, who had made many visits to the exhibition, visited it once more on 23 May. Her diary entry reads:

Kl.'s paintings are indisputably the finest on display. I spent a long time looking at them [*Schubert am Klavier* and *Nuda Veritas*] and thinking about his artistic standing. His 'Schubert' is wonderful, but in those surroundings I would have preferred to see Schumann. Schubert sits at the piano, surrounded by ultra-modern young ladies singing. The whole thing bathed in dim candlelight - hence in fact alien to Schubert's melody, which is so primary and healthy. It's Schumann's music that's the more sickly and ultra-romantic, hence also the more modern.⁴

For those familiar with the contemporary and later portraits of Schubert done by Wilhelm August Rieder (1796-1880), Josef Teltscher (1801-1837), Leopold Kupelwieser (1796-1862), and Moritz von Schwind (1804-1871), Klimt's portrait is immediately recognisable as Schubert of the early 19th century, as evidenced in the works of these four earlier artists. Julius Schmid's (1854-1935) oil painting of a Schubertiad, *Ein Schubertabend in einem Wiener Bürgerhause* (172x255cm), is said to have won a Gold Medal in Berlin in 1894, but this puts into question when the *Schubertabend* was actually produced. Did Schmid's *Schubertabend* precede Klimt's *Schubert am Klavier*, completed by 1897? Both entries were prompted by an art competition honouring Schubert's 100th birth centenary. The forthcoming centenary celebration accounts for the Dumba commission of Klimt's portrait. Klimt's painting was submitted to the competition as was Schmid's painting. Schmid's entry won the competition and was exhibited at the 1897 Vienna Schubert exhibition.⁵ The *Schubertabend* is today in Vienna's Rathaus.

Klimt was a portraitist in the 1890s before founding and leading the Vienna Secession. His success as a portraitist is seen in his *Schubert am Klavier*. Klimt's style soon underwent a change after the Schubert painting into the one now most familiar -- his use of geometric designs and Secession decorative accents, his portraits of women, and his other paintings such as *The Kiss* where he applied gold leaf to the painting surface to enhance light, texture and colour. Klimt's Schubert looks very much the right Schubert. Rieder and Schwind are the acknowledged benchmark artists of the

³Peter Vergo, *Art in Vienna 1898-1918: Klimt, Kokoschka, Schiele, and Their Contemporaries*, London: Phaidon, 1975, pp.45-46; plate 41, *Schubert at the Piano*, p. 47; Alma Mahler-Werfel, *Diaries 1898-1902*, pp. 37n, 117, 269.

⁴Alma Mahler-Werfel, *Diaries 1898-1902*, p.143.

⁵Friedrich von Boetticher, *Malerwerke des Neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, Dresden: Schmidt & Günther, 1891-1901, II.2, p.587; The source of the Gold Medal reference is Heinrich Fuchs, *Die oesterreichischen Maler des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Wien: Fuchs, 1972-74, 4 vol.; Schmid: IV, K22. Fuchs is considered reliable: "Für sein Gemälde 'Schubertabend in einem Wiener Bürgerhause' wurde er im Jahre 1894 in Berlin mit der Goldmedaille ausgezeichnet."

closest and truest renderings of Schubert. In fact, Rieder did several likenesses of Schubert.⁶ According to Schubert's friends, Rieder's portraits are considered the most authentic resemblances of Schubert known. Schwind's first portrait of Schubert may also be considered as a very close living likeness, having been done after a chance meeting between artist and composer.

Like Klimt, Schmid had a successful career as a portraitist but stylistically they were oceans apart, as Klimt's formation of the Secession attests -- a movement the academy-oriented Schmid did not join. Schmid's *Schubertabend*, reminiscent of Schwind's *Ein Schubertabend bei Ritter von Spaun* (1868: studied closely by Schmid for his preliminary sketches), is an accurate rendering of earlier Schubertiads, but somehow a depth of feeling and passion is absent. The facial likeness of Schmid's Schubert seems a bit off despite Schmid's intensive research of the available art depicting Schubert and the famous personages shown in earlier paintings of Schubertiads. Schmid's likeness of Schubert seems accurate yet somehow Schmid does not capture Schubert as do Schwind and Rieder. Schmid, of course, never had the opportunity to see Schubert alive as had Schwind and Rieder. On the other hand, Schmid's own fine portraits of his living subjects capture them as warm and noble beings, conveying a sense that artist and subject were simpatico. Klimt, for that matter, never had the living Schubert to study either, and his portraits, especially the later portraits of women, are infused with his own personal statements in a highly idiosyncratic, often ahistorical, style.

Schmid's chandeliered salon is crowded with over two dozen lively attendees elegantly dressed for the evening's music making. Here Schubert is half turned from the piano, one hand on his thigh. Using Rieder and Schwind as templates, Schmid's painting is an accurate, reconstructed near-Schubert while Klimt gives the viewer the impression that he observed the composer alive at the piano. Klimt's portrait seems eerily reminiscent of Schubert's death mask -- the sole indisputable artifact of the composer's features aside from the drawings done in his lifetime. (Photographs of the 'death' mask actually seem quite life-like, without evidence in the features of the eleven-day period before Schubert died, when he was unable to eat or retain fluids. One might expect that a prolonged eleven-day fast would have left some structural changes in facial tissue. The mask is of a stout, relaxed man, and whether it is a life or death mask is open to question.) Schmid's great success as a portraitist was due to his ability to capture the essential personality of his lone sitter. In his large Schubert group portrait, a dynamic interaction between the figures seems lacking -- each figure is a posed, static, historic snapshot.

Unfortunately, Klimt's *Schubert* was destroyed in a fire in 1945, with many other Klimt works, but post-1945 extant colour reproductions based on a photograph, even with the limitations of that state, are astonishingly real, alive, warm and sensitive. Patron Dumba had to be pleased with Klimt's tribute to his revered Schubert.⁷ Thanks in part to the Internet, Klimt's reputation has become worldwide and immediate and appreciation for Art Nouveau / Jugendstil as a movement has waned and waxed since the First World War. The movement was given new life starting in the 1960s, and

⁶Peter Clive, *Schubert and His World; A Biographical Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1997, pp.165-166; see also Appendix I: Iconography in Otto Eric Deutsch, *Schubert: A Documentary Biography*, London: Dent, 1946, published in America as *The Schubert Reader: A Life of Franz Schubert in Letters and Documents*, New York: Norton, 1947, pp.926-928.

⁷Klimt's paintings for Nikolaus Dumba and the August Lederer family were stored for wartime safekeeping in Schloss Immendorf. In 1945, retreating S.S. troops set the castle afire in order to forestall it from falling into the hands of advancing

Russian troops. The Soviet Army entered and occupied Vienna. Thus, part of Austria's artistic patrimony was lost; Peter Vergo, *Art in Vienna 1898-1918*, pp. 61-62.

it had an especially welcome exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art in the late 1980s.⁸ Although not among the most popular of Klimt reproductions, *Schubert am Klavier* is available for purchase online from numerous art and poster vendors who have found a new, cyber-nourished generation of art lovers, yearning for Klimt's unabashed and stylish erotica.

Schmid's art is extremely difficult to find in general art museum collections aside from the known institutions in Austria, although he is listed in many late 19th and 20th century authoritative artist lexicons and dictionaries. With great and steady frequency a reproduction of Schmid's *Schubertabend* turns up in books and magazines about Schubert or about the Romantic era in music, and on CD covers of Schubert recordings. Unlike Klimt, no *catalogue raisonné* has been compiled for Schmid. Examples of Schmid's artwork are in Vienna's Albertina; the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, the Schottenkirche, the Raimund Theatre, the Archdiocesan Museum, the Hofburg, the City Museum, and the Rathaus. Schmid's commissioned wall enamels and ceiling frescoes are in the music rooms of the Graz Convention Centre.

A query of an international auctions database for the period 1990-2000 found just art eight works of Schmid belonging to private owners offered at auction, almost all portraits. As recently as January 2001, a Schmid portrait of a Viennese banker was offered at auction. Schmid's *Schubertabend* is an academic work of its era by an artist whose reputation and name, if not his *Schubertabend*, have all but disappeared from view.⁹ Why? Possibly because Schmid was quite simply left behind as the ferment in the arts and in the Old Order began to mutate into the 20th century. The Habsburg empire of the 1890s and early 1900s was a wreck in the making. Secession gave way to Expressionism. Schmid had achieved all that an ambitious young man of rather middle rank (his father was a merchant) could achieve based on his talent, intelligence, and persistence. For him to leave behind the stature that he had gained as an art professor and a portraitist of Vienna's moneyed elite by joining the Secession, a movement that held no aesthetic or intellectual appeal for him, was not a viable option. He remained solidly entrenched in the academy where he was known and appreciated. After 1914, Schmid might not continue to flourish as a society portraitist but he still had a place that anchored him in society. However, it was a society that was beginning to slide into irreversible dissolution. On balance, both Klimt and Schmid left us portraits of Schubert, and no matter one's personal aesthetic opinion of these *Bildnisse*, they are each endearing in their own way to Schubertians.

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⁸See Kirk Varnedoe, *Vienna 1900: Art, Architecture & Design, July 3-October 21, 1986*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1986; Susan Margolis, "Expressions of Vienna, Circa 1900", *The New York Times Magazine*, June 22, 1986.

⁹Note that the Grazer Congress is located in Graz's Old Town, which has recently been added to the UNESCO World Heritage list. The Convention Centre has among its many rooms a chamber music hall (Kammermusiksaal) with a ceiling decorated by three Julius Schmid paintings, described as *seccomalereien*, indicating a fresco painted on dry plaster. Among the scenes are Beethoven and the Schuppenanzigh Quartet, a Mozart trio with Haydn, and, especially interesting, Schubert shown with Vogl and two of the four Fröhlich sisters. The Convention Centre is a monumental late 19th century building, built by a local bank, with a palatial interior that has been carefully conserved, including the Schmid ceiling paintings done around 1908 and restored in 1980 when the building was converted to a meeting centre. No full-scale reproductions of the ceiling lunettes other than long-shot photographs have yet been found.