

## PROGRAM NOTES

### FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

#### *WINTERREISE*

Thirty years after Schubert's death, one of his closest friends, a man named Joseph von Spaun wrote down his memories of the first performance of this song cycle, a private performance in which the composer previewed his latest work for his circle of friends.

*For some time, Schubert appeared very upset and melancholy. When I asked him what was troubling him, he would say only, "Soon you will hear and understand." One day he said to me, "Come over to Schober's today and I will sing you a cycle of horrifying [schauerlicher] songs. I am anxious to know what you will say about them. They have cost me more effort than any of my other songs." So he sang the entire Winterreise through to us in a voice full of emotion. We were utterly dumbfounded by the mournful, gloomy tone of these songs, and Schober said that only one of them, "Der Lindenbaum" (The Linden Tree), had appealed to him. To this Schubert replied, "I like these songs more than all the rest, and you will come to like them as well."*

Schubert insisted that he had to have good poetry before he could compose good songs and he finally found the perfect subject for his purposes in works by the Prussian poet Wilhelm Müller (1794–1827).

Müller fashioned his wanderer's search for answers as a monodrama, with only one speaking character; we are never told his name, what he looks like (except his black hair), or personal history. Of his inner life, we learn much more—he is an aspiring philosopher, an atheist who cannot be comforted by appeals to a spiritual realm, a realist who knows that dreams are wish fulfillment, a being remarkably free from self-pity. By the end, he even understands his past love to have been illusion.

The wanderer takes us on this journey only to discover that he is condemned to a living death as a singer poet irrevocably set apart from society. He has yearned for reciprocated love and domesticity; when this precious, ordinary happiness is denied him, he longs for a nihilistic death. The prospect of an artist's lonely existence horrifies him, impelling once again the desire for death. At the end of the cycle, he "meets" the hurdy gurdy player, who is perhaps a nightmarish image of the wanderer's own future and a haunting statement of the absolute necessity for human bonds. It is crucial that this uniquely powerful figure is a beggar musician: music reduced to its most elemental state is all that is left to the wanderer.

When Schubert set these poems to music, he was confronting his own probable fate. Enough was known about the terminal stages of syphilis in the 1820s for Schubert to know it ended in horrifying dementia and paralysis. If death turned him away in the early stages of the disease, as it turns away the wanderer in "Das Wirtshaus," would he have to suffer the living death the wanderer endures, his creative faculties numbed and the stream of his music frozen? The cycle ends on a terrifying question mark, for which there is no answer—only the echoing silence following the dying away drone of the hurdy-gurdy. Despite the tragedy of his premature death, we can be grateful that he escaped the wanderer's miserable fate before his own gentler end.

—Susan Youens©