

Laura Sewell Matter

an excerpt of

Franz Schubert Dreamt of Indians

Whenever I attempted to sing of love, it turned to pain.
And again, when I tried to sing of pain, it turned to love.

—Franz Schubert, “My Dream”

It is a very unsafe experiment . . . for a writer . . . to
trust to the inventive powers of any one but himself.

—James Fenimore Cooper, preface to the 1826
edition of *The Last of the Mohicans*

IN November 1828, Franz Schubert was suffering from tertiary syphilis, typhus, and perhaps a touch of mercury poisoning from the “medicines” used to treat venereal disease in his day. He was thirty-one years old, moderately well-known and admired in his native Vienna for his compositions and performances, but chronically short on funds. Though he had been suffering from syphilis for six years, his condition had recently worsened; his doctor advised him to go to the country for fresh air. Unfortunately for Schubert, his brother’s flat near the outskirts of town was as close to the country as he could get. So there he was. It was a squalid place, and this is probably where he contracted the typhus that hastened his end. According to his friend Josef von Spaun, who visited Schubert in his final days, the composer tried to keep working in spite of his illness, revising the manuscripts to his *Winterreise* song cycle, sometimes singing to himself or reading to pass the time. But things weren’t looking good for Schubert by 12 November 1828 when he decided to write a letter to his closest friend, Franz von Schober, back in Vienna:

Dear Schober,

I am ill. I have eaten nothing for eleven days and drunk nothing,
and I totter feebly and shakily from my chair to bed and back again.

Rinna is treating me. If ever I take anything, I bring it up again at once.

Be so kind, then, as to assist me in this desperate situation by means of literature. Of Cooper's I have read *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Spy*, *The Pilot*, and *The Pioneers*. If by any chance you have anything else of his, I implore you to deposit it with Frau von Bogner at the coffee house for me. My brother, who is conscientiousness itself, will most faithfully pass it on to me. Or anything else.

Your friend

Schubert.

He must have known then that he was dying. In fact, that seems to be the tacit point of the letter. Eleven days is an impossibly long time to subsist without food or water. Even if he was exaggerating in a bid for sympathy, he must have been in bad shape, and the only thing he asked for—the novels of James Fenimore Cooper—would not be much help. Seven days later, Schubert was dead.

“Assist me in this desperate situation by means of literature,” Schubert wrote—and then he asked for James Fenimore Cooper? The mysteries of character run deep.