

Death and the Maiden

I used to tease my friend Gil he was a dead
ringer for the young Schubert
when he was composing the *Lieder*

we loved when we were young
lifted by their spare lines
and delicate colors, the marriage

of music and verse, the rush
of feeling, the sharp pain
of beauty that catches your breath.

But now we're old enough to enjoy
the Schubert of *Death and the Maiden*,
his masterpiece which began as a song

and slowly grew into a dark terror
after he realized he was dying
from syphilis. In terrible pain,

penniless and despairing, he wrote
to a friend that love and friendship
had become torture, and even

his enthusiasm for the beautiful
had vanished. In *Death and the Maiden*
he's a man looking into darkness and singing.

Thinking he'd accomplished his greatest work,
he asked his friend the famous violinist
Ignaz Schuppanzigh to lead the quartet.

The old maestro, who by this time was so fat
he could barely play in tune, pretended
to be unimpressed. *Brother, this is nothing at all,*

let well enough alone: stick to your Lieder.

Schubert was crushed and put the sheets away
They weren't published until three years after his death.

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*And what, my friend Gil asks, did I do
that warrants this punishment
of guilt and worry? I once pulled*

*the car over and told Maria
we wouldn't leave until she kissed me.
So she kissed me. Was that so awful?*

*We lay down in the grass
and I taught her the stars
but never touched her*

*I swear. And now she's writing
letters condemning me.
Other women are stepping forward*

*to accuse me as well, but it was only
Maria I loved. She was my muse,
my inspiration. With her I felt young.*

*Maria writes: He was sixty. I was sixteen.
He was my teacher and I trusted him.
No man should behave this way.*

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Schubert's quartet takes its name
from the poem by Matthias Claudius
which appears in the second movement

where the Maiden protests while Death
seduces her with terror and comfort.
The Maiden cries *Oh! leave me!*

*Prithee, leave me! thou grisly man
Of bone! For life is sweet, is pleasant.
Go! leave me now alone! Go!*

Leave me now alone!
And Death responds:
Give me thy hand,

*Oh! maiden fair to see, for I'm a friend,
Hath ne'er distress'd thee.
Take courage now, and very soon*

Within mine arms shalt softly rest thee!
The composition races
through pain, terror, resignation

and ends with a tarantella
to ward off madness, the endless

dance of pitiless desire.