

200 Years Later, Composer Franz Schubert's Work Lives On

In his short lifetime, legendary Austrian composer Franz Schubert wrote over 600 Lieder, or poems scored to classical music. 200 years later, a young American musician living in Vienna reimagines Schubert's classical works whilst living a life of uncanny resemblance to the late composer's, proving the impact of great artistry lives on.

BY MEGHAN PALMER



American musician Bryan Benner in Vienna, his new home

If you would have told Austrian composer Franz Schubert that an ensemble of musicians, led by American expatriate Bryan Benner, would be reimagining his classical scores nearly 200 years later, he would not have believed you. In his short 31 years of life in Vienna, the now illustrious Schubert never rose anywhere near to fame or notoriety. In fact, he rarely played any of his works in front of a large audience during his lifetime. Instead, he would throw intimate musical soirées, inviting no more than a handful of trusted friends to gather for his performances. Like most things Schubert created in his lifetime, these gatherings would become posthumously famed—lovingly referred to as "Schubertiaden" and all the rage in 19th-century Vienna.

Schubert left behind a prolific body of nearly 1,500 works, but he is most celebrated for his Lieder, or poems scored to classical music. While Schubert transformed poetry into music, American expatriate Bryan Benner forged a similar transformation, turning Schubert's classics into contemporary versions of their original formats. The complicated process started with the formation of The Erlkings, Benner's first ensemble in Vienna, aptly named after one of Schubert's most famous Lieder, "Erlkönig." The Erlkings have given Schubert's Lieder a renaissance of sorts, translating the songs from their original German to English; setting the composition from piano to guitar, cello, tuba and drums; and boldly breaking tradition for the sake of creating authentic art—but making such drastic changes to the works of Benner's musical idol wasn't always seamless.



The Erlkings, Benner's first ensemble in Vienna, re-create Schubert's Lieder in English and play them with innovative folkloric instruments.

Bryan Benner arrived in Austria in 2011 to study at the acclaimed Music and Arts University of Vienna. As a composer, lyricist, opera singer, and musician, he felt immediately at home in the musical city of Vienna. Benner lived in the *Schubertviertel* at the time, the neighborhood where his musical idol was born. He spent his days exploring famed sights, like Schubert's birth home and final resting place; performing around small pockets of the city; and stumbling down the charmed cobblestone streets after long nights of drinking and making music with friends. Without realizing it, Benner was living a parallel life to that of his musical idol—trying to make it as a young musician in Vienna while being endlessly inspired by the essence of the place. When this unlikely congruence dawned on him, Benner wanted to honor Schubert's *Kunstlieder*, or art songs, by practicing them in the traditional format. Doing so required the accompaniment of a grand piano and a proficiency in German, which Benner did not yet have. He began carrying around a small German dictionary with him anywhere he went, determined to master Schubert's Lieder as they were originally written.

A strange thing began to happen: the more Benner studied Schubert's works and the longer he walked the very streets Schubert once did, the more his relationship with the late composer evolved. Where Schubert was once an untouchable icon, he was now a musical collaborator and colleague. The pressure to play Schubert's Lieder precisely as they were written gave way to a newer, more creative musical ambition. Benner leaned into his intimate knowledge of Schubert to begin the process of translating Schubert's Lieder from German to English, taking special care to distill the translations in attempts to convey what he thought Schubert was trying to say, and then setting the translations to guitar rather than piano. Through the process, Benner discovered just how much Schubert's classic works had in common with folk music, in that they could be performed with the same simplicity and directness while they told the grandest of stories.

Schubert's music newly interpreted by Bryan Benner



It was these profoundly personal artistic discoveries that led Benner to found his first ensemble in Vienna, The Erlkings. As the quartet's popularity grew, they began to perform at musical venues across Europe, and international Lieder festivals soon took notice. The Erlkings were eventually invited to play at the **Schubertiade Festival** in Austria's Vorarlberg region, a musical celebration featuring the world's best Lieder performers. This esteemed invitation served as further proof that The Erlking's interpretation of Schubert's classics resonated with traditional art song enthusiasts, granting those classical music lovers the unique feeling of experiencing Schubert's Lieder for the first time.



Der König in Thule, D.367

Franz Schubert, The Erlkings, Ivan Turkalj, Bryan Benner, Gabriel ...





The Erlkings on their way to the Schubertiade Festival in Vorarlberg, Austria.

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In no place but Vienna could such a full-circle musical renaissance take place—a city that has housed more famous composers than any other, from adopted sons like Beethoven and Mozart to native sons like Schubert. The legacy of music in Vienna continues to flourish, nurtured by the city’s appreciation and funding for the arts. “Music thrives when you have an intellectually curious public that is ready to be both entertained and challenged,” said Benner, “which is exactly what I love about the Viennese audience.” Everyone—rich or poor, young or old—has access to musical programs, world-renown artists, and live music venues. Perhaps this egalitarian approach to the arts explains why Franz Schubert was able to realize his destiny as a great composer, and why an American musician like Bryan Benner has been able to successfully reimagine those same songs over two centuries later.

What makes Vienna the world capital of music, and why have more famous composers lived there than any other city? The Erlkings have some inside knowledge of the subject, including insights and personal travel tips—especially regarding music and the arts—into the culturally rich city of Vienna. Get The Erlkings’ [Artist Guide to Vienna](#), brought to you by our partners at the Austrian Tourist Office.

To learn more about Bryan Benner’s life in Vienna visit austria.info.



Benner at Franz Schubert's birth house in Vienna.

Meghan Palmer

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