

TUESDAY EVENING CONCERT SERIES PRESENTS

Paul Lewis, piano

23 April 2024 at UVA's Old Cabell Hall

Program Notes by Laurie Shulman © 2024

Sonata in C minor, D. 958

Franz Peter Schubert (1797-1828)

In March 1827, the Austrian pianist and composer Johann Nepomuk Hummel traveled with his pupil Ferdinand Hiller from Weimar to Vienna. The purpose of the trip was to see Beethoven before he died. During their stay, they dined frequently at the home of Katharina von Lászny, a music-loving friend who had settled in Vienna. One of those evenings, the guests included Franz Schubert, who had just turned 30.

Hummel did not know much about Schubert or his compositions, but was most impressed with what he heard that evening. Schubert played some original piano pieces and accompanied several singers in his *Lieder*. Despite the difference in their ages and reputations - Hummel was 49, established, and famous – the two men hit it off well and Hummel was generous in his praise of Schubert's music.

Gratified by the older man's enthusiastic response, Schubert planned to dedicate three new keyboard works to Hummel. In a letter to his Leipzig publisher Heinrich Probst dated 2 October, 1828, he wrote: "I have composed, among other things, 3 sonatas for piano solo, which I should like to dedicate to Hummel." Seven weeks later he was dead.

One year after Schubert's untimely death, the Viennese publisher Anton Diabelli – yes, *that* Diabelli, the same one who wrote the insipid little waltz on which Beethoven composed his

splendid *Diabelli Variations* – purchased the manuscripts of three keyboard sonatas from Schubert’s brother Ferdinand. Diabelli had engraved the sonatas by 1831; however, he failed to issue them. Either unaware of the treasure he had acquired or preoccupied with other business dealings, he sat on them for a decade. When Diabelli finally published the sonatas in 1839, Hummel had also died. Diabelli issued the sonatas with a dedication to a composer who did more than anyone to further Schubert’s posthumous reputation: Robert Schumann.

The three sonatas that Mr. Lewis plays this evening crown Schubert’s achievement as a composer for piano. He finished all three in September 1828. The same month, he also completed the String Quintet in C Major, D.956, and several songs in the *Schwanengesang* cycle. His productivity is all the more astounding considering his declining health. Contemporary accounts from his friends and associates report that Schubert suffered in September from chronic headaches and dizziness.

Although all three of the final piano sonatas have found a place in the repertoire, the C minor is less frequently performed than the other two, perhaps because of its character. If the A Major Sonata may be summarized as lyrical and flowing and the B-flat Major as contemplative, the C minor is stormy, tempest-tossed, occasionally violent. Indeed, it is almost unrelieved in its tragic mien throughout four movements.

Schubert clearly had Beethoven’s 32 Variations in C minor on an Original Theme, WoO 80, in his mind’s ear when composing the Sonata’s aggressive opening Allegro. The parallels go beyond the shared key of C minor, a classic ‘heroic’ key for Beethoven. Schubert’s harmonic

progression, triple meter, rhythmic pattern, and thematic outline all bear a strong resemblance to Beethoven's. His treatment, however, is quite individual, specifically in the way he develops the thematic materials.

The opening is powerful: big chords, decisive rhythms, and a dramatic descending scale that will recur at key moments. Schubert pays attention to his transitional material, moving with grace to a gorgeous theme in E-flat Major that is as serene as the opening theme is tortured. He does not stay calm long, and his variants on the E-flat Major theme wander to a couple of distant key centers, hinting at the adventurous development section that lies ahead.

Everything about this movement speaks of late Schubert: sudden modulations, relaxed exposition, mini-variants on themes, and chromatic alterations that take surprising turns even when we hear them a second time. Schubert's harmonic invention finds new territory in a chromatic theme introduced in the development section. Never losing his narrative momentum, he drives the movement forward in ways both delicate and inevitable. The recapitulation and coda are all the more effective for his skill.

Such a movement requires contrast and relief. Schubert provides it with a modified rondo in A-flat Major. His pace is relaxed, though the episodes wander far afield harmonically and have considerable drama. They are barely controlled explosions; the returns of the A-flat Major section are not without their dark moments. Though he ends peaceably in a variation on the opening theme, Schubert clearly does not want us to forget that this is a *very* serious sonata.

Thus we have no lighthearted Scherzo, but rather a somber Minuet with irregular phrase lengths; silences are as important as the music. We are meant to *think*. Schubert is reinforcing the overall tragedy of the sonata. His Trio is an *Ländler*, a salute to Schubert's Austrian roots and his connection to the sturdy, simple melodies of country folk.

The finale is perhaps the most amazing of all: a galloping tarantella that, like the first movement, calls to mind Beethoven. In this case, it is the Beethoven of the *Kreutzer* Sonata finale, or perhaps that of the Piano Sonata Op. 31, No. 3 – but this finale is much darker than either of those works. Actually, it is closer in spirit to Schubert's own finale to the *Death and the Maiden* String Quartet, sharing that intense drama. Insistent rhythm drives this movement, which is closer to an expanded sonata form than the rondo it initially appears. It is a minefield for any pianist to learn, let alone memorize.

Overall, the C minor Sonata is a brooding work on a grand scale. Here is a different side of the Schubert we thought we knew – and more of him to love.

Sonata in A Major, D.959

Franz Peter Schubert (1797-1828)

Schubert's three piano sonatas of 1828 are triple colosses that tower over the entire balance of his solo keyboard works. They were part of an astounding group of masterpieces from his last two years, including the song cycles *Die Winterreise* and *Schwanengesang*; the F-minor Fantasy and *Lebensstürme*, both for piano, four hands; the two Piano Trios Opp. 99 and

100; the C Major String Quintet; and *Der Hirt auf dem Felsen* ["The Shepherd on the Rock"] for soprano, clarinet, and piano. This outpouring is noteworthy for its emphasis on instrumental music. Schubert had established his reputation as a writer of songs. During his teenage years and early twenties, he was less secure writing for instruments and managing large forms.

Several factors prompted the renewed interest in keyboard and chamber music. One was his declining health. Schubert's syphilis had been diagnosed in 1823, and by 1827 his bouts with the disease were increasingly prolonged and severe. He sensed he would not live long and composed in a near frenzy. Another catalyst for his intense productivity was Beethoven's death in March 1827. The passing of this great titan, whom Schubert idolized, somehow seems to have freed him to explore genres he had previously regarded as Beethoven's domain.

Like its two siblings, the A Major Sonata is an expansive, four-movement work in the classical tradition. Its character is at once stentorian and songful, turbulent and tranquil. Schubert compresses the widest imaginable spectrum of moods and textures into this sonata. Its opening theme chimes majestically, embedded in inner voices between pedal points in the high and low registers. Schubert responds with an arpeggiated triplet figure that furnishes the material for much of the movement. Wide leaps, double thirds, and hand-crossing take us on a journey that maintains its majesty and lyricism.

The slow movement starts as a barcarolle but becomes tempestuous in its chaotic middle section. John Reed calls it "probably the wildest outburst of fantasy Schubert ever committed to paper." Chromatic scales, trills, *tremolandi*, and thunderous broken octaves pepper this central

episode, before Schubert returns to the tragic quietude of his opening. His Andantino is a forerunner of Chopin's dramatic *Nocturnes*.

The scherzo/trio provide much-needed release. Playful triads dart around the keyboard, requiring quick shifts in hand position and a light touch. The trio section is cut from the same bolt of cloth as the analogous movement in the C Major String Quintet; no surprise since he worked on the two pieces simultaneously.

The sonata concludes with a classically proportioned sonata-rondo in the mode of middle Beethoven on a rare benign day. Its theme reworks a melody from the slow movement of the early A minor Sonata, D.537. Refined in this later iteration, the theme appears in both hands, with rippling accompaniment, mostly in triplets. At 392 bars, this is a lengthy movement, but Schubert carries us so smoothly through his episodes and modulations that we are more attuned to the glorious aural scenery than to the journey's duration. Flowing lyricism predominates, underscoring the overriding message of this magnificent sonata.

Sonata in B-flat Major, D. 960

Franz Peter Schubert (1797-1828)

The opening measures of Schubert's final piano sonata bear a startling resemblance to the beginning of Beethoven's *Archduke* Trio. They share not only the key of B-flat Major, but also a sense of spaciousness, serenity, and nobility that verges on the sublime.

Whether consciously or not, Schubert paid homage to Beethoven in other ways in this sonata. The most obvious is form: four traditional movements, complete with a minuet/trio inserted between the slow movement and the finale. Schubert's musical *modus operandi* is a different matter, however. Where Beethoven emphasized motivic development and architecture, Schubert's building blocks were melodies and a startling sense of tonal migration. He was first and foremost a composer of songs. His gift for melody informs all his instrumental music. This piano sonata has an embarrassment of melodic riches that links it to Schubert's *Lieder* – and it alludes to several of his songs.

It was Schumann who coined the phrase “heavenly length” in praise of Schubert's music. He was thinking about pieces like the “Great” C Major Symphony, the two piano trios, and this B-flat sonata. At nearly forty minutes, the sonata unfolds on a symphonic scale. With the repeat in the exposition, the opening *Molto moderato* is a proto-Mahlerian 14 minutes long – one of Schubert's lengthiest movements. Yet there is not a moment of boredom. Schubert's magical patterns of modulation, his elegiac atmosphere of calm resignation, and the profusion of themes sustain and nourish the listener. Biographer John Reed calls this “the most personal and poetic of all [the piano sonatas].”

One simply needs to surrender to the flow. The music is not virtuosic. Schubert was primarily a string player of both violin and viola. He also played piano his entire life and regularly accompanied singers in the salon gatherings known as Schubertiades; however, his piano writing in the solo works is often awkward. This makes them difficult rather than flashy. That stated, the music is also gorgeous, with a spiritual quality enhanced by Schubert's fluid

tonal landscape.

About the music

The spacious *Molto moderato* opens with its theme of Beethovenian “Archduke” nobility. After the initial, partial statement, a sepulchral trill interrupts in the lowest register of the piano. At first it seems like a throwaway gesture. Is it just mysterious, or a trifle ominous? The lyrical theme resumes, and Schubert carries us off on the harmonic adventure of unexpected modulations that marks his music as his own. The interplay between the home tonality of B-flat Major, the submediant of G-flat, and D minor recurs with some regularity. And that bass trill – “like a distant roll of thunder,” as Denis Matthews has observed – recurs at key moments during the movement.

After the expanse of a fourteen minute opening movement in relaxed tempo, Schubert was courageous to proceed with an *Andante sostenuto*: another eleven minutes at an even slower pace. It is a remarkable feat of musical wizardry that he succeeds. Introspective, even private, this movement vacillates between C# minor and A Major in music both solemn and profound. Some listeners consider this movement the summit of Schubert’s piano writing. John Gillespie calls it “a marvel of introspection with its strains of pathos and resignation.”

The Scherzo provides both contrast and welcome relief. Bright, brisk, chirpy, and short, it is the ideal tonic at this juncture. Its central trio, in minor mode, benefits from lopsided syncopations that keep us waiting for resolution.

Schubert's finale is a synthesis of rondo and sonata. After a clarion call on an octave sounding two Gs, he launches into a false statement that implies C minor. (Beethoven used the same ploy in the last movement of his String Quartet in B-flat, Op.130, the movement that replaced the *Grosse Fuge*.) Soon enough, B-flat Major emerges as the principal key center. Jovial dialogue alternates with a couple of explosive outbursts, but good humor prevails. Recapturing the unhurried pace of his opening movement, Schubert ties it all together in this satisfying finale, even adding a brisk coda for an exciting close.

SCHUBERT'S SONATAS AND POSTERITY

Schubert's bread and butter was his songs. What little money he earned came almost exclusively from his *Lieder*. Yet he cultivated almost every instrumental genre, writing enormous quantities of music in large and small forms. For whatever reason, he returned repeatedly to the piano sonata, composing twenty-one of them between 1815 and 1828. The few that garnered any attention were compared unfavorably to Beethoven's sonatas.

Suffering from that comparison, Schubert's piano sonatas never became fashionable. Nineteenth-century virtuoso pianists did not consider them suitable material for the concert hall. If they played Schubert at all, they chose the character pieces: the Impromptus, the Ecossaies, the *Moments Musicaux*. Among his larger works, only the *Wanderer-Fantasie* attracted the high-profile pianists.

After the Schubert centennial in 1928, the piano sonatas began to draw more attention, gradually leading to their advocacy by some of the mid-century's greatest pianists. Schubert's

sonatas have now worked their way into the standard repertoire. The B-flat work that concludes this evening's program became a signature piece for many of the 20th century's legendary artists, including Artur Schnabel, Clifford Curzon, Wilhelm Kempff, Dame Myra Hess, and Alfred Brendel. Today, D.960 and several of the other Schubert Sonatas are central to the keyboard literature, beloved by both pianists and audiences.

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