

LINER NOTES FOR A CYCLE OF TWELVE GREAT SCHUBERT SONATAS

A short chronology of Schubert's completed piano sonatas

Schubert completed eleven piano sonatas. Although much fine music can be found in ten further, partially finished works, it is sensible to credit Schubert with an artistic reason for discontinuing a composition, or leaving it aside indefinitely. Even simply 'neglecting' to complete a work would imply that he considered it of insufficient importance to do so. Through the last decade of his life we see him approaching big instrumental works with caution and with increasing self-criticism, a far cry from the indiscriminate naïvety still occasionally ascribed to him.

The earliest complete sonata (1817) is **D537** in A minor. Two finely concentrated allegros frame a variation-like middle movement, the theme of which Schubert revisits for the great finale of the 'late' Sonata in A. **D575** in the 'unusual' key of B (1818) prefigures the later sonatas in some of its peculiar moments of abrupt contrast, in its persistent use of vital dance rhythms, and in its glimpses of transcendent beauty – and desolation. **D664** in A (1819) is noted for its lyricism and charm; it dates from the same idyllic trip into the mountains of Upper Austria that produced the 'Trout Quintet', with which it shares a key signature. A few somewhat cryptic outbursts in this work are a nice indicator of the forces that emerge – even more convincingly integrated – in the later sonatas. The apparently simple, stark way in which essential germinal materials are presented with great effect in the darkly intense Sonata in A minor, **D784** (1823) marks a deep change and forms a bridge to the preoccupations and manner – if not to the sheer length – of the mature sonatas.

Schubert marks a 'fresh start' and new-found confidence in his powers with his publication, in 1825, of the substantial A minor Sonata, **D845**. Three piano sonatas of Schubert's were published during his lifetime: this work as *Première Grande Sonate*, **D850** as *Seconde Grande Sonate*, and **D894** – of which the autograph bears the title *IV. Sonate fürs Pianoforte allein*. It is now thought on stylistic grounds that the final version of **D568** in E flat – a very fine revision of an earlier incomplete sonata in D

fl at from 1817, D567 – dates from 1825 too and was intended as the third in the set; it was indeed published as *Troisième Grande Sonate* in the year after Schubert's death. The expansive, carnivalesque Sonata in D, **D850** dates, like the early autograph of the great C major Symphony, from a three-week stay at Bad Gastein in the summer of 1825. With the Sonata in G, **D894** (1826) we have the touching anecdote of Joseph von Spaun entering Schubert's rooms, the first movement just then completed: Spaun relates how Schubert sat down and played through (how did it sound?), dedicating the work to him there and then.

Johann Nepomuk Hummel, celebrated pianist-composer, and former pupil of Mozart, visited Schubert on several occasions in March 1827, and was deeply moved by Schubert's songs, performed there by Schubert's favourite singer Johann Michael Vogl. This encounter, during the month of Beethoven's death, perhaps forms the backdrop to Schubert's intention to dedicate to Hummel the set of three sonatas dated September 1828: **D958** in C minor, **D959** in A and **D960** in B flat. They were published ten years later, bearing a dedication (by the publisher Diabelli) to Schubert's early champion, Schumann. These works are the summit of Schubert's output as a sonata composer, and surviving sketches indicate a great artistic self-awareness. Each of their individual movements is a masterpiece distinguished by a remarkable degree of originality; thus we inevitably must muse on what kinds of music Schubert would have invented had he not died at the age of 31.

The 'late' instrumental works

Only one unfinished work is included in this cycle – the two expansive (finished) movements of **D840** in C (1825). It is an important fragment since it marks the most significant crisis in Schubert's quest to find his own voice in the large-scale four-movement form. It is one of a group of such works – the *Unfinished Symphony* and the *Quartettsatz* being the most significant others – that mark the divide between those works where Schubert adopts the sonata layout more or less retrospectively (as a relic of what we now call 'Viennese classicism' proper) – often with great beauties of craftsmanship and inspired material, but nevertheless with a somewhat derivative sense of their *raison d'être* as sonatas – and

those works where the kind of thematic material and harmonic devices, accompaniment figures and so on that Schubert favours seem fully at one with the disposition of that material.

From 1824 Schubert finds himself increasingly sure-footed on this path of marrying 'form and feeling' (as John Reed puts it) – succeeding first in the string quartet, then in the symphony – and in the piano sonata. The later, completed four-movement instrumental works (i.e. the six piano sonatas D845–960, two piano trios, three quartets, the C major Quintet, and the final symphony) share important structural paradigms, procedures and strategies – and one is almost tempted to speak of a 'mould'. Together they form a very convincing and powerful alternative solution to the fundamental question of what a sonata can be; alternative, that is, to Beethoven's works.

The 19th and earlier 20th centuries read Schubert as perhaps lovelier but also 'weaker' than Beethoven: Schubert the master of song and of impromptu, Beethoven of symphony, quartet and sonata. And yet the power that Schubert's most substantial works have exerted and continue to exert begs a revised reading, a reading that is even now still in its earlier stages, both in performance and in analytical musicology. It is true that if we judge Schubert on Beethoven's terms, he 'fails'. Schubert's music sometimes seems to lack the obvious dialectic urgency, cohesion and sense of logical resolution of Beethoven's. Its power must reside elsewhere.

Some insight can be gained by listening again to the last movements of these works – after all, the 'crisis' works are unfinished, that is, they lack endings. How did Schubert harness his natural gifts for spinning a magical line, for entrancing through imagery and mood, to solve the problem of concluding large works? The finales of all six of the later sonatas have in common the use of characterful, 'vernacular' (such as the typically Viennese or *alla zingarese*), dance-like material that is laid out in extended, simplified rondo forms. These materials are typically allowed to unfold seemingly spontaneously, with some memorable markers (melodically, motivically; sometimes shapes or gestures or textures), but

often without strong conventional profiling of key hierarchies or transition passages. Thus it can sometimes feel that 'new' material is chanced upon and that returns and reprises happen without deliberate design; as if we find ourselves quite unexpectedly either in fresh terrain or circled back to where we started. We may sense the music as a voyage of discovery, revelation and recollection rather than as a quest to subject contrasting materials to cerebral rigour. (And in such an environment, violent interruption, dispensing with transition altogether, does not seem out of place either). In the simplest terms, we could maybe say the music involves the way our memory works rather more powerfully than our faculties of argumentation. The significance of the folk-like, dance-like material comes into play: folk music a powerful, universalising, binding force, with its associations of shared identities rooted in the deep past; the dance itself hypnotic, about forgetting the here and now.

Thus, where Beethoven's large forms may represent a triumph of will/belief/affirmation over encroaching forces of doubt and chaos, Schubert *subjects* himself to a universal will. Thus he can, and does, abandon himself to beauty and joy as much as to fear and bleakness. Thus he can bring the whole of the expressive sensibility of the songs to the instrumental domain. (How marvellously significant, for example, the repetitive accompaniment figures to Schubert's most rapt melodic ideas are in these sonatas – just as in the songs; and how adroit the changes in *bewegung* / 'gait' and pace he finds for each new idea – just as the impassioned singer and accompanist would do.) What much of the bourgeois 19th century read as weak – even as a 'dangerous' yielding to pleasures and pains – has become in our time more and more compelling and liberating.

As with all the very greatest musicians, the influences and associations that inflect Schubert's language are of an immense range and complexity. Haydn (especially the Haydn of the 1790s) and Mozart and Beethoven loom large, but it is evident in the music that Schubert was well aware too of Hummel, Weber, Rossini and Paganini (even though the latter two were not aware of him). His interest in contrapuntal techniques are there too, but of course it is *what* he chooses, *how* he

chooses to use it, and its complete assimilation to unique, unified ends that make the music distinctively Schubertian. Very significant is the use of 'horror' music, material that without the psychological penetration and naked commitment of a Schubert would degenerate into 'bad taste'. These episodes of descent into the abyss, often unprepared and short-lived, are an important feature of the later instrumental works, never more so than in the extraordinary Andantino of the A major Sonata D959. This kind of piano writing seems to prefigure some of the techniques used by Liszt in his later works, which express the same sense of genuine despair, or that which is beyond despair. Mozart had shown that the most extreme beauty lies so dangerously close to fear and the pain of loss, Beethoven that meaningfulness is not necessarily compatible with beauty. Schubert inherited both viewpoints, and he shares with both composers an extraordinary physical energy, but he was also of the new, early Romantic generation.

A great divide

It might be said that, following the repeated failures of his operatic projects, and his first serious illness in 1823–24 (most experts now think that Schubert may have contracted syphilis), Schubert started to consider his instrumental music as the main stage for 'striving after the highest in art'. Perhaps sensing that the kind of success that a Rossini enjoyed was to evade him (at least for a while), and also realising that a lofty reputation could not then be forged with songs and piano pieces for the salon, he turned his full attention to the challenges of composing 'serious' instrumental works, writing more and more for himself – and perhaps for an imagined audience that he would reach through publication. Thus he could work undeterred by the political, logistical, and financial problems attendant on theatre productions, and within an artistic frame of mind to emulate the admired, older Beethoven (one too easily skims over the fact that the two composers lived in the same city for all of Schubert's life). Also at this time, his song output becomes more concentrated and consistently sublime – and naturally, sometimes less easily appealing: even here he would now less readily rely on his supreme intuition, but be concerned to direct that intuition to grapple with tough artistic questions. His health would 'never be right again' he

writes in March 1824, the glorious times of the 'Schubertiades' were over; not so many of those friends remained in close contact. Indeed, it is doubtful that any of these friends had a true awareness of the extent of Schubert's parallel efforts as a song *and* instrumental composer, or the real musical insight to appreciate them. Christopher Gibbs talks of a composer seemingly productive from beyond the grave, referring to the great number of unknown works coming to light in the decades after Schubert's death.

But even now, with the entire body of work open before us, we – on balance one would have to say, wrongly – still tend to think of two Schuberts: the composer of songs and short instrumental diversions, and the composer of large-scale sonatas and chamber works and symphonies. One reason may be that, because Schubert was no virtuoso pianist–performer himself, and knew no such advocate for his work, the six last piano sonatas D845–960 have no performance tradition or history of appreciation rooted in the composer's lifetime or the first decades after his death (very much unlike the songs). The somewhat perplexed critical reception of these works in the latter half of the 19th century likewise discouraged the development of cohesive schools of interpretation that widespread studying and performing engender.

Thus (having 'reclaimed' him as a great sonata composer), there now still seems to be two Schuberts when it comes to performing too: Schumann's talk of 'heavenly lengths' in Schubert's instrumental music and the reverence in which he is held in our own times as one of the supreme Viennese masters have perhaps discouraged bringing the (very human) expressive variety and abandon of the songs to the wonderfully rich piano sonatas too. Instead, they are too often held up either as the mysterious productions of a kind of Holy Spirit in music, or as prescient excursions into modernist abstraction. Yet it is precisely in the unique ways in which large time spans are allowed to accommodate the expressive worlds of the Romantic lied – that is, of the solitary, ardently sensitive and passionate poet – that the power of these works resides.

Performers who want to immerse themselves in this world, who choose to take this material at face value, are confronted with the inescapable fact of our distance (the past being 'a foreign country') from the original freshness of the songs and dances, from the inherent, the ingrained, from the naturalness and the sometimes domestic and ordinary condition of Schubert's music. Multiple layers of irony and artifice accrue in that distance, and ultimately it becomes near-impossible for the performer to directly access a simple authenticity of feeling, and this in a music that above all others calls for emotional truth and immediacy. But perhaps it is in this very crisis (which at times might feel like panic) that our own truth and the expressive legacy of our own time lie: on the one hand, in the painful recognition of coming to such material so long after the historical actuality and immediacy of it, but on the other, in how that very same awareness may spur our own imaginations in fresh and interesting ways.

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