A Moment in Time Schubert

Christian Blackshaw

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

	Four Impromptus, D. 899	
1	I. Allegro molto moderato (C Minor)	11. 38
2	II. Allegro (E-Flat Major)	5. 08
3	III. Andante (G-Flat Major)	7. 09
4	IV. Allegretto (A-Flat Major)	8. 03
	Piano Sonata No. 21 in B-Flat Major, D. 960	
5	I. Molto moderato	22. 25
6	II. Andante sostenuto	11. 07
7	III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace con delicatezza	4. 25
8	IV. Allegro ma non troppo	8. 34
	Total playing time:	78. 34

Christian Blackshaw, piano

The genius of Franz Schubert
Resonance and Reverence

Four Impromptus, D. 899

In the hands of Franz Schubert the Impromptu reaches new heights. The collection of Four Impromptus, D. 899 were written down in 1827 whilst pausing work on the song cycle Winterreise. They form a harmonically connected cycle of unparalleled beauty. Whilst the noun 'Impromptu' suggests improvisation, diverse composers in the early decades of the 19th century found many ways to express their thoughts in shorter pieces for piano. Schubert, with incomparable vocal line allied to supreme harmonic structure elevates each piece to a universal sphere. It is deeply touching to read the modest Schubert tell his parents, following a performance for friends in July 1825, "several people assured me that my fingers had transformed the keys into singing voices." Schubert's publisher, Tobias Haslinger, appears to have been responsible for naming this first cycle and it seems inconceivable to us today that only the first two Impromptus were published in his lifetime. Haslinger's son Carl would publish numbers three and four twenty nine years later, in 1857. To know that the Impromptu no. 3 in G-Flat Major was first published in the key of G Major for the sake of amateur pianists defies belief. Mercifully its restoration to the original key continues to entrance all lovers of Schubert's genius.

The first Impromptu, in C Minor, (Allegro molto moderato), begins dramatically with ominous dominant octaves in each hand, immediately transporting the listener to a place of mysterious apprehension. What follows is reminiscent of a funeral march with dotted rhythm and repeated notes implying benediction, the material oscillating between minor and major, finally finding absolution at its conclusion in C Major. From my personal exploration of this magnificent work, I can only write that it has taken years to approach and articulate its profound depths, work that will never cease. The second Impromptu, in E-Flat Major, (Allegro), shimmers and radiates in its free flowing style, seemingly inhabiting a different universe from its predecessor. The shift to B Minor with its syncopated drama reminds us forcefully of a gathering storm and whilst reprieved, darkness descends with the piece concluding, uniquely, in its minor relative. The third Impromptu, in G-Flat Major, (Andante), surely one of Schubert's most beloved creations, immediately transports the listener to a place of calm, the singing upper melody combined with the flowing alto figuration suggests a paean to nature, water and humanity. Not even the darker material of the minor variant (in E-Flat Minor) can overshadow the spell created by the master of the lied. The fourth Impromptu, in A-Flat Major, (Allegretto), opens with rippling arpeggios in the minor key followed by the welcome respite of the major crowned by a heartfelt melody in the tenor voice of the left hand. The soprano right hand develops the melodic line further whereupon Schubert introduces a Trio. Here he characteristically contrasts minor key material of pathos and despair with a vocal line of sublime submission in the major, only to be consumed once again by darker forces. The glorious piece concludes with a sense of triumph overcoming adversity.

Sonata No. 21 in B-Flat Major, D. 960

Many distinguished performers and musicologists have written extensively about the final sonata in Franz Schubert's compositions for solo piano, the great Sonata in B-Flat Major, D. 960. Indeed, this work, alongside the companion sonatas in C Minor, D. 958 and A Major, D. 959 respectively, comprise his last major works in this form for the instrument, miraculously written during spring and autumn 1828. During the autumn of his final year in Vienna Schubert moved lodgings from his friend Franz von Schober to the home of his brother Ferdinand. His health was of great concern, not least the ongoing effects of syphilis allied to dizziness, headaches, weakness and blood problems. Even his beloved friends would comment on his erratic changes of mood. The three sonatas offer to the listener music of autobiographical expression, the structure of each bearing similarities of form, with second movements of a slower tempo. Publication proved problematic though providentially they were finally published by Diabelli in 1839, his dedicatee being Robert Schumann. Whilst Schumann had voiced concerns over Schubert's compositional style in the sonatas, it is well documented that his admiration for the Viennese genius, for whom he became a universal champion, knew no bounds. Schumann's noble and heartfelt tribute to Schubert from his own Collected Writings (volume two) is particularly poignant : "If only he could have known the renown that now is his, he would have been inspired to the highest achievements. But since he is long at rest, let us carefully collect and register what he has left to us. There is nothing among it that does not testify

to his spirit : it is a rare life-work that bears so clearly the stamp of its creator as does his." Widely known amongst music lovers of Schubert's veneration of Beethoven an inevitable comparison began to emerge between both composers final three sonatas for piano. To my mind such comparisons are irrelevant as each great genius embodies his characteristic and individual world of sound and harmonic structure. Regarding Schubert's thoughts expressed in this, his final sonata, are we to speculate on a valedictory interpretation or one of hope in the face of adversity? With this work in particular, I find the enigma of great human fascination. My own association with it stretches back many years, at least thirty of which were spent in thought and awe, not performance. What is set before us is a summation of life. The opening movement (Allegro moderato) at the outset hopeful, ominously interrupted by a left hand trill, leads us through peace and despair, light and darkness. If I may write a few words regarding the first movement repeat I note them here. As Schubert wrote out these nine extraordinary bars, imbued as they are with intense foreboding, I am compelled to play them both in concert and for this recording. The second movement, (Andante sostenuto), surely one of Schubert's greatest miracles, sings to us of farewell, the minor material finally finding repose in the major. A Scherzo and Trio third movement, (Allegro vivace con delicatezza), at once optimistic soon fades into uncertainty and concludes with a shadowy departure. The finale, (Allegro ma non troppo), presents initial material of repeated notes filled with nervous tension, outbursts of desperation follow, light returns, rages interrupt.

A Presto coda of hopeful optimism propels this extraordinary masterpiece to its inexorable conclusion.

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