

PAUL LEWIS
TUESDAY 29 NOVEMBER 2022

Schubert Piano Sonata No 7 in E flat, D568

Schubert Piano Sonata No 14 in A minor, D784

Schubert Piano Sonata No 17 in D, D850

Following the publication of *Erlkönig* and his 36 Original Dances of 1821, Schubert began to build a reputation as a composer of lieder and *gemütlich* piano music. But his dreams of recognition for his more ambitious works were to be continually frustrated by the indifference of publishers whose commercial interests were drawn to satisfying public demand for what he contemptuously dismissed as 'Miserable Mode-Waare' ('wretched fashionable stuff'). Only after his death did he gain acknowledgement for his chamber and symphonic music, due initially to the advocacy of Robert Schumann from the 1830s. The celebrated String Quintet in C received its first performance only in 1850, and of Schubert's twenty or so piano sonatas just three were published during his lifetime. Given the poor prospects for his large-scale piano works, it is not surprising he left a number of incomplete movements, and numerous torsos probably belonging to unfinished sonata projects.

While his sonatas have never achieved the same stature as Beethoven's, they offer their fair share of technical challenges, and possess emotional depths as intense as anything by the Bonn-born composer. Perhaps it was because Schubert's sonatas were written within Beethoven's shadow (literally just a few streets away in Vienna) that the younger man struggled to complete many of his early attempts. Yet over the last dozen years of his life his completed works in the genre reveal a highly personal journey, encompassing much that is fundamental to human experience. Between the charm and *joie de vivre* of his first sonatas, including D568, through to the transcendent masterpieces that emerged during his last year, there are moments of despair, resignation and fist-shaking eruptions where the composer seems to 'rage against the dying of the light'. But it is in the ebullience of his Sonata in D major (D850) that a sense of hope is unequivocally conveyed.

Piano Sonata in E flat, D568
Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

- 1 Allegro moderato
- 2 Andante molto
- 3 Menuetto: allegretto
- 4 Allegro moderato

Schubert's first significant attempts to grasp the inherited models of sonata structure date from 1817, a highly productive year that saw the completion of a string trio, some sixty songs, and a determined effort to bring order to the lyrical and the epic in six piano sonatas. In the event he completed just three, of which that in

E flat was originally conceived in the key of D flat before being transposed, revised and completed in 1826. Whilst written on a grand scale, the frequency of *piano* and *pianissimo* markings within its four movements conveys a gentle bearing, aided and abetted by the prevalence of its song-like melodies. But if neither storm clouds nor profound feelings exist, its lyrical invention allows sufficient light and shade to provide occasional glimpses of the mature artist.

Cast in four movements, the first comprises three main melodic areas, each with a different character; the first is a blameless and well-balanced tune, the second a blithe Viennese waltz, and the third (launched in the left hand) is purposeful in its forward momentum. Most of the movement's material stems from these distinctive ideas, yet the harmonically rich development is largely occupied by a new vaulting figure derived from the opening theme's rising contours. The return of the first theme, now modified as a canon, signals the concluding section.

The elegiac 'Andante molto' (a compressed sonata form design for the technically minded) is built on two main ideas – one plaintive, the other more vigorous, and identified by its sequential descent, first outlined in the left hand. Between these is a passage that might be loosely likened to a decorated tolling bell figure, prescient of his music some six years later. A graceful 'Menuetto' follows with a smoothly curving melody crowned by a jaunty rhythmic tag, later recycled in the quietly gambolling Trio. Its buoyant rhythm is pressed into service for the finale ('Allegro moderato'), and while the convivial mood soon darkens with an arresting key change into B flat minor, the overall character is one of bonhomie, tinged by a sense of longing suggested in the appoggiatura figure of the movement's opening bar.

Piano Sonata in A minor, D784

- 1 Allegro giusto
- 2 Andante
- 3 Allegro vivace

Within Schubert's piano sonatas, it would be hard to find a greater contrast than that between the E flat work and this Sonata in A minor. By the time he completed it in February 1823, the confidence and dynamism of the 'Wanderer' fantasy (D760) from four months

earlier had all but vanished. Until the previous year, Schubert's career had been flourishing: substantial musical advances appeared with his *Quartettsatz* and the 'Unfinished' symphony, and his songs and lighter choral works were regularly performed at the Thursday evening entertainments of Vienna's Philharmonic Society. As a steadily emerging composer he had become 'the darling of the public', but his unfulfilled operatic plans, generated by two commissioned works *Alfonso und Estrella* and *Die Verschworenen*, left him deeply frustrated. As if that wasn't disappointing enough, he then learned of an unambiguous diagnosis of syphilis (then endemic in Vienna) and towards the end of February confided to a friend, 'the circumstances of my health still do not permit me to go out-side the house'.

Little wonder this Sonata (the second of three in A minor) opens in such startlingly bleak tones, as if Schubert's numbed feelings are embedded in its austere theme heard at the outset. No less sombre are the tolling bell figures and ominous trills in the left hand, both impetuously swept aside by a defiant *fortissimo* passage referencing the initial unison figure. Its storm and stress is eventually pacified by a tender march in the warm embrace of E major, a heart-easing passage where Schubert seems to smile through tears. (Only he can contrive to convey celestial contentment and melancholy simultaneously.) Descending scales return with a vengeance in the central development, where fury is soon subdued by a now-transformed 'celestial' theme. Fierce interruptions aside, the recapitulation unfolds with brooding reminiscences and the movement closes quietly. The introspection of the 'Andante' offers a glimpse into a remote world, unsettled by mysterious rhythmic murmurings that regularly haunt its otherwise placid demeanour. By contrast, the helter-skelter finale seems bent on escape. Scurrying figuration makes way for a touching theme of wintry smiles, but it is the movement's dramatic frenzy that colours a finale of Beethovenian defiance.

INTERVAL

Piano Sonata in D, D850

1 Allegro vivace

2 Andante con moto

3 Scherzo: Allegro vivace

4 Rondo: Allegro moderato

With the confirmation of his illness and subsequent depression, Schubert's music matured almost overnight. From his Octet, the string quartet 'Death and the Maiden' and the 'Grand Duo' sonata (all belonging to 1824), a new depth of feeling emerged suggesting he was on the threshold of an extraordinarily productive final phase. This was to include a renewed interest in piano writing, notwithstanding earlier failures to secure critical attention and the rejection of his Sonata in A minor (D784). Remission from his symptoms brought Schubert some relief and a certain optimism, and in May 1825 he set off on an extended tour of the Austrian Alps, joining his singer friend Michael Vogel at Gmunden before going on to the spa town of Gastein, a resort deemed the best place to cure his friend's gout. It was here, amid fearsome mountain scenery where 'towers and palaces appear one by one', that the D major Sonata was written, its publication bearing a dedication to the virtuoso pianist Carl Maria von Bocklet.

If echoes of the 'Wanderer' fantasy's bravura can be heard in this work, no other sonata shares its boundless energy, and without preliminaries, the first movement 'Allegro vivace' is launched by an urgent summons. Assertive chords immediately yield to a unison triplet figure, then an abrupt change to D minor, its impetuosity signifying much of the startling harmonic behaviour in an exposition of tonal wandering. Harmonic surprises aside, an unexpected slower tempo for just seven bars

emerges after the arrival of the yodelling second subject. However, it is the insistent rhythm of the Allegro's main theme that dominates the movement, its repeated-notes translating into an Alpine horn-call at the start of the development. Thereafter, horns return in the coda, where a faster tempo brings further animation to the final furlong.

Schubert turns to A major for the neighbouring 'Andante', an extensive variation movement in rondo form (ABABA). A pensive main theme alternates with a fiercely syncopated episode, tamed half-way through each of its appearances. The first reprise of the main theme is allocated to the pianist's left hand and supports quasi-violin writing evocative of birdsong, while the final return incorporates earlier syncopations, unifying the two contrasting ideas with considerable artistry. A rhythmic impetus propels the ensuing 'Scherzo', its emphatic main theme alternating with a scintillating answering phrase, a metrical juxtaposition that swings between two and three beats to the bar. Proceedings are calmed in the central Trio, but its repeated chords build towards a ferocious climax before subsiding and returning to the previous momentum. Playful elements from the Scherzo spill over into the finale, evident at the outset in the charming 'tick-tock' accompaniment to the child-like march. Set in another rondo mould, there are two contrasting episodes, one built from scale figures, the other a nostalgic creation (at least initially), and after one final reprise of the opening march, Schubert signs off with a quiet leave taking, earlier grandeur replaced by gentle benediction.

David Truslove, 2022

Paul Lewis is one of the foremost interpreters of the Central European piano repertoire, his performances and recordings of Beethoven and Schubert receiving universal critical acclaim. He was awarded CBE for his services to music, and the sincerity and depth of his musical approach have won him fans around the world. This global popularity is reflected in the world-class orchestras with whom he works, including the Berlin Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony, London Symphony, Philharmonia, Bavarian Radio Symphony, NHK Symphony, New York Philharmonic, LA Philharmonic, Royal Concertgebouw and Leipzig

Gewandhaus orchestras. His close relationship with Boston Symphony Orchestra led to his selection as the 2020 Koussevitzky Artist at Tanglewood.

With a natural affinity for Beethoven, he took part in the BBC's three-part documentary *Being Beethoven* and performed a concerto cycle at Tanglewood during summer 2022. He has performed the cycle all over the world, including with Orquestra Simfonica Camera Musicae, the Melbourne Symphony, São Paulo State Symphony and Royal Flemish Philharmonic orchestras, and was the first pianist to play the

complete cycle in a single season at the BBC Proms in 2010.

Beyond many award-winning Beethoven recordings, his discography with Harmonia Mundi also demonstrates his characteristic depth of approach in Romantic repertoire such as Schumann, Mussorgsky, Brahms and Liszt. In chamber music, he is a regular at Wigmore Hall, having played there more than 100 times. He works closely with tenor Mark Padmore in lied recitals around the world – they have recorded three Schubert song cycles together. Between 2022 and 2024, Paul Lewis embarks on a new Schubert Piano Sonata Series when he will present the completed sonatas from the last 12 years of Schubert's life at Turner Sims and venues around the world.

Lewis is co-Artistic Director of Midsummer Music, an annual chamber music festival held in Buckinghamshire, UK. He is a passionate advocate for music education and the festival offers free tickets to local schoolchildren. He also gives masterclasses around the world alongside his concert performances. He himself studied with Joan Havill at Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London before going on to study privately with Alfred Brendel. In 2021 Paul Lewis became an Irish citizen.

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