

Paul Lewis | Schubert III

Thursday 7 December 8pm

Schubert

Piano sonata No 4 in A minor, D537

Piano sonata No 9 in B, D575

Piano sonata No 18 in G, D894



Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata in A minor, D537

Piano Sonata in B major, D575

Piano Sonata in G major, D894

Franz Schubert was the last of the great 19th century composers for whom the writing of piano sonatas was of central importance. Of the outstanding figures that followed him, including Chopin, Liszt and Schumann, none wrote more than three works in the genre, with Schumann declaring the form had outlived its life cycle. Yet piano composition occupied Schubert intermittently for a dozen or so years, his first concerted efforts to grasp the principles of sonata structure dating from 1817, a landmark year that saw the completion of five sonatas and a handful of fragments, abortive efforts left in an unfinished state. There followed four more sonatas between 1825-26, each conceived on a grand scale with three in four movements (including D894), and in the autumn of 1828, he

completed his three last masterpieces, transcendent works belonging to what Benjamin Britten once described as the composer's 'richest and most productive eighteen months in music history'.

Tonight's programme spotlights the fascinating transformation between a pair of sonatas from 1817 (D537 and D575) when the 20-year-old Schubert was still experimenting with the form, and the Sonata in G (D894), completed nine years later in October 1826, a work inhabiting a new depth of feeling and written during a period when he was on the threshold of an extraordinarily productive final phase.

Schubert's two early sonatas both coincide with Beethoven's first jottings for the monumental 'Hammerklavier' Sonata. While neither storm clouds nor profound feelings significantly occupy Schubert's piano writing at this stage, there is no shortage of drama in these works. Most notable is a remarkable individuality in the harmonic freedom of his designs, formal harmonic conventions wilfully ignored in the frequency and suddenness of key changes as if wishing to distance himself from the models of

his Classical predecessors. These two youthful sonatas share a freedom of expression and a striking handling of material where the proliferation of ideas seems to change at an alarming rate, bringing no small measure of dislocation. But within six years Schubert experienced the collapse of his operatic ambitions and received news of his irreversible syphilis (then endemic in Vienna), prompting an expressive sea-change; a tragic weariness and sense of resignation, with occasional fist-shaking eruptions when he seems to 'rage against the dying of the light'.

Piano Sonata No 4 in A minor, D537

1 Allegro, ma non troppo

2 Allegretto quasi andantino

3 Allegro vivace

Some of the creative energy and confidence characterising the Sonata in A minor (March 1817) possibly derives from the new-found freedom when Schubert had temporarily relinquished the drudgery of school teaching, moved into the home of his friend, the poet and librettist Franz von Schober and began life as a freelance musician. Cast in three movements, the first begins with a peremptory motif notable for its forward momentum, briefly halted by a yearning dissonance and answered by a series of cascading arpeggios. The motif's assertive character soon yields to a more relaxed idea, unconventionally in F major, and its aching dissonances now appear in a middle voice. A persistent sighing figure, heard towards the end of the exposition, gains traction in a harmonically roving and capricious central panel, while a much-subdued new idea leads to the return of the opening gesture in the unorthodox key of D minor, finally arriving home in the correct key with one last emphatic appearance. The march-like 'Allegretto' is a flowing movement furnished with rondo and variation features. Its convivial main theme is recalled twice, first with an ornamental accompaniment, then in octaves at a higher register, each new arrival prefaced by contrasting episodes, one of rapid semiquaver figuration, the other recalling the marches so common to Schubert's piano works. A series of rising scales answered by an expressive sigh launch the rondo Finale, a dramatic conclusion underpinned, like the first movement, by a powerful rhythmic impetus and coloured by abrupt tonal changes and unsettling silences.

Piano Sonata No 9 in B major, D575

1 Allegro ma non troppo

2 Andante

3 Scherzo: Allegretto

4 Allegro giusto

By the time this Sonata in B major was completed in August 1817, the disconcerting silences from the earlier work may have all but disappeared, but the harmonic unrest is even more conspicuous. Schubert's choice of key is most unusual (not one of Beethoven's piano sonatas is in B major), and so too are the startling harmonic excursions within the first movement. The exposition alone traverses the major keys of B, G, E and F sharp; each theme, linked by a dotted rhythm, allocated a separate tonality and mood. The first combines an assertive rhythm with striding intervals, the second brings a degree of containment in its repeated one-bar rhythm and leisurely circling motions. A skipping idea follows which in turn yields seamlessly to one further idea, no less buoyant in its nimble bass line. Having progressively subdued the opening statement, the mood darkens for the central development now dominated by the movement's initial rhythm, clothed in explosive chords and more abrupt key shifts. Earlier themes are revisited in the closing section, which curiously tails off with no grandstand finish, but a gentle resolution far removed from the imperious opening gesture.

Abrupt changes already familiar to this sonata now colour the song without words that is the 'Andante', a ternary form movement beginning with a chorale-like melody in E major. Its tranquillity is interrupted by a brief violent paragraph in E minor where tramping left-hand octaves are soon becalmed, its semi-quaver figuration returning as an inner voice for the reprise of the opening section. There follows an elegant and dance-like 'Scherzo', built on an insistent rhythm and deliberately marked *Allegretto*, presumably to avoid a headlong gallop. A meandering upper line supported by bagpipe drones adds a rustic quality for the 'Trio'. The unbuttoned aspect of the 'Scherzo' seems to seep into the Finale, its dance-like character framed in a sonata form structure launched by a tiny phrase in octaves. This figure generates two main themes; one jaunty, the other lyrical, both imbued with a childlike innocence, the muted closing bars dismissed with a forthright final gesture.

Piano Sonata No 18 in G major, D894

Molto moderato e cantabile

Andante

Menuetto

Allegretto

A gentle spirit finds sustained expression in the Sonata in G major. Completed in Vienna in October 1826, it was dedicated to his friend Josef von Spaun who had established the convivial Schubertiad evenings when many of the composer's songs and chamber works were premiered. The Sonata was published (one of only three during his lifetime) the following year by Tobias Haslinger, but the word 'sonata' was conspicuously absent from the title page, replaced by the more commercially advantageous 'Fantasie, Andante, Menuetto and Allegretto', and offered as a set of character pieces. Perhaps the sonata's mysterious serenity and intimacy, not least the fact that each movement closes *pianissimo*, might have prompted indifference from a public more interested in extrovert dances.

While it can be misleading to associate personal circumstances with creative endeavour, the Sonata's mood is surely influenced by the impact of his incurable illness, and the sudden awareness from 1824 of his own mortality. A letter to a friend made clear his misery: 'Think of a man whose health will never be right again, and who in sheer despair over this always makes things worse instead of better'. His music matured almost overnight: in works including his Octet, the string quartet 'Death and the Maiden' and this autumnal Sonata with its distinctive restraint and sense of sweet sorrow. The expansive opening

movement begins solemnly with a chordal theme of limited intervallic range, its leisurely discourse soon making way for a more animated secondary idea underpinned by waltz-like support. Tensions rise in the G minor development marked by a muscular intensity and a rare appearance of the dynamic *fff*. Calm is eventually restored with the return of the heart-easing main theme.

Its gentle mood continues in the 'Andante', its homespun manner offset by stormy minor key passages in B minor and D minor, each identified by impetuous outbursts and giving a foretaste of the explosions in the 'Andantino' of D959 written in the composer's last months. Each return of the initial opening phrase brings us further towards a celestial composure, again a preview of things to come. The rhythmically incisive B major 'Menuetto' occupies a certain swagger and gives way to a 'Trio' of melting tenderness. Echoes of the repeated note rhythm from the 'Menuetto' recur in the rustic charm of the Rondo finale, its folk-like character apparent in the blithe melody heard at the outset over a bass drone. To this '*al fresco* landscape' Schubert adds two further ideas; one playful, the other an extensive and mercurial episode which frames the principal theme. This makes one final appearance four bars from the end, where repeated chords have the last word. Like the three earlier movements, this one retreats into the unknown evoking either a haze of nostalgia or a premonition of his own demise. Either way it concludes a work described by Robert Schumann, in relation to all of Schubert's sonatas, as the 'most perfect in form and substance'.

David Truslove, 2023



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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 in 2016 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 Boston Symphony Orchestra, Camerata Salzburg, Melbourne Symphony,

Orquestra Simfonica Camera Musicae, 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.

Between 2022 and 2024, Paul Lewis embarks on a four programme Schubert piano sonata series presented at Turner Sims and over 25 other venues and festivals around the world.

Beside many award-winning Beethoven and Schubert recordings for Harmonia Mundi, his discography also demonstrates his characteristic depth of approach in other Classical and Romantic repertoire such as Haydn, 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.

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.

Awards: Royal Philharmonic Society Instrumentalist of the Year; two Edison awards; three Gramophone awards; Diapason d'Or de l'Annee; South Bank Show Classical Music Award; honorary degrees from Liverpool, Edge Hill and Southampton universities; appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in the 2016 Queen's Birthday Honours.

info@turnersims.co.uk

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