

# FRANZ SCHUBERT

(1797-1828)

## Sonata in A major, D. 959

- |          |                             |         |
|----------|-----------------------------|---------|
| <b>1</b> | I Allegro                   | (43:11) |
| <b>2</b> | II Andantino                | (16:40) |
| <b>3</b> | III Scherzo: Allegro vivace | (8:04)  |
| <b>4</b> | IV Allegretto               | (5:11)  |
|          |                             | (13:08) |

## Sonata in A minor, D. 784

- |          |                    |         |
|----------|--------------------|---------|
| <b>5</b> | I Allegro giusto   | (22:41) |
| <b>6</b> | II Andante         | (13:12) |
| <b>7</b> | III Allegro vivace | (2:49)  |
|          |                    | (5:33)  |

**Todd Crow, piano**

**Total Time: 65:58**

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## Notes by Leon Botstein

Listening to these two sonatas, it is hard to reconcile the musical impression they make with the fact that they were both written in Vienna in the 1820s. When we think of Vienna in the 1820s in terms of the history of music, we think initially of Beethoven in his later years. Schubert may have died within eighteen months of Beethoven's death, but in Schubert's music an expressive language and intent, at once unmistakably original and linked to the later nineteenth century, is audible. The paradox of Schubert is that he was a contemporary of Beethoven's (and one whom Beethoven deeply influenced) and at the same time an innovator in musical romanticism whose aesthetic had a profound impact on Schubert's successors, initially Schumann and later Brahms and Bruckner.

This seeming paradox is not without its particular historical roots. Much of Schubert's greatest music only came to light long after his death. These two sonatas, one written in 1823 and the second in 1828, were published only in 1839 and 1838, respectively. When Robert Schumann reviewed the last three sonatas in 1838 (including the A major D. 959), he failed to pay much attention to them. He merely noted that they were not in the first rank of Schubert's work, one of the few misjudgments Schumann would make as a critic. Even the Schubert scholar John Reed, writing in 1972, concluded that the last sonatas did not equal those of the mid 1820s. These judgments only highlight the fact that wide recognition and acceptance of much of Schubert's more innovative instrumental and dramatic music occurred long after his death. Given the continuing process of re-evaluation, Schubert's music has been a fresh element in music history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One might compare the fate of much of Schubert's music to the career of Georg Buechner's dramas. They became widely popular and influential in an age far distant from the years in which Buechner lived. In fact, the piano sonatas of Schubert published posthumously, including the two recorded here, have attained their greatest popularity only in the mid-twentieth century.

Furthermore, we too easily forget that the 1820s in Vienna were years of dramatic social, cultural, and political change. Beethoven was at best an isolated, if not anachronistic, figure. Schubert was, in contrast, at the center of a young circle of artists and writers who together dominated the culture of Biedermeier Vienna. When the Styrian Musical Society honored the 26-year-old Schubert in 1823, the year in which he wrote the A minor sonata, it praised Schubert's merit as "tone poet." The previous year it honored the 52-year-old Beethoven as the "greatest composer of this century." The contrast in terminology only hints at the striking differences between the contexts in which Beethoven and Schubert sought to pursue their art. Although they lived and worked in the same city, their expectations, audience, and aspirations were radically different.

Schubert's ambitions diverged from those of Beethoven. First, Schubert was intent on succeeding as a dramatic composer. The opera *Fierabras*, for example, was written in the same year as the A minor sonata. Second, Schubert was considered preeminently in his own day as a song writer and master of musical narration. Third, he was well known as a composer of choral and instrumental music designed for amateur performance. Unlike Beethoven, Schubert was a native Viennese. His reputation and career were quite local and contemporary. Beethoven, in contrast, was a world figure whose political and aesthetic interests harked back to the world before the Congress of Vienna. His relationship with local Viennese culture was remote. He thought about Goethe, Schiller, Mozart, and Haydn. He had little use for the comic and sardonic world characterized by the new and great satiric and theatrical geniuses of Biedermeier Vienna, Johann Nestroy and Ferdinand Raimund. The waltz craze and the new popular culture of the city with its novel mores were of little interest to the eccentric, deaf, and forbidding personality of Beethoven.

Nonetheless, Schubert worshipped Beethoven and, as his letters reveal, felt wholly inadequate in comparison to him as a composer. Not surprisingly, Schubert felt compelled to fashion a new world in which to make a mark with music. He found it in the playful and romantic enthusiasms evident in the social

gatherings of his friends, free-wheeling aesthetes. They lived within a world dominated by a confident middle-class population (eagerly engaged in music making as a pastime), in a growing city caught in a repressive but lighthearted era, the 1820s, of self-conscious respectability and political censorship.

Schubert was part of a close-knit world. Beethoven was a recluse, supported to his death by Vienna's highest aristocrats and by income from his music earned all over Europe. Schubert did well enough, but his successes depended not on aristocratic largesse, but on local popularity and support from civil servants, professionals, people of commerce, and fellow artists and writers within the Austro-German cultural world dominated by the imperial city, Vienna.

During Schubert's lifetime, Carl Maria von Weber's romanticism had taken Vienna by storm, along with Rossini and Italian opera. For the younger generation of Vienna, of which Schubert was a central figure, illustrative and narrative music, poetry, and the arts of fantasy and romantic imagination were means of intimate communication. They were unique avenues of freedom in a world in which grandiose humanitarian and political ideas of the sort with which Beethoven concerned himself were deemed irrelevant. Censorship and the return of reactionary monarchical authority that accompanied the defeat of Napoleon encouraged a younger generation to turn away from the concerns of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, the two decisive non-musical influences on Beethoven. It is into this intimate circle of friends, their personal and artistic concerns, their sense of solidarity and the immediate landscape of Vienna that the listener enters when encountering these two piano sonatas.

The contrast between the worlds and personalities of Beethoven and Schubert should not, however, obscure the decisive influence Beethoven's music exerted on Schubert. These two sonatas are, in fact, ideal vehicles by which to grasp Schubert's greatness and originality, as well as his debt to the past. Schubert's originality stemmed in part from his need to fashion a musical discourse to fit the new audience and the particular circumstances of musical communication in which he lived. Heroic and self-conscious classicism possessed

real limits for a composer in search of recognition in Vienna in the 1820s. The dense and abstract character of late Beethoven (which was deemed difficult to comprehend) inspired in Schubert a discursive, ruminating, but yet comprehensible, if not improvisatory, quality. Schubert's music has an open-ended feeling. It is driven by a desire to spin a narrative experience for the listener. The devices of sonata form are employed to achieve not a closed sense of pattern and logic, but the impression of an almost painterly experience of succeeding images.

Schubert, one must recall, was never old. The intensely self-referential musical experiments of Beethoven in the 1820s were the work of a grand old master engaged in a retrospective, inner-directed reassessment of his art. Since Schubert wrote with a particular group of listeners in mind, he anticipated their habits of hearing. He was intent on securing their attention and reaching their feelings. In both these sonatas, therefore, the elements of harmonic structure, rhythmic elaboration, melody, and the transformation of musical materials are all subordinated, in all their originality, to canons of clarity, comprehensibility, and a linear sense of continuity and direction. Remembering this music is, therefore, relatively easy. Schubert's lyrical instincts, his unique sense of music as analogous to poetry—in its capacity to work simultaneously at levels of description and allusion, with the finite and infinite at one and the same time—are audible at all times in these two works.

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The A minor sonata was written in February 1823 and has three movements. The first, *Allegro giusto*, is in A minor; the second, *Andante*, is in F major; the third, *Allegro vivace*, is in A minor.

The work begins with the theme presented in octaves, the first eight bars setting the stage. The listener is provided with a dramatic statement followed by a contrasting response made up of elements related to the opening theme. The sonorities are almost orchestral, filled with broken octave tremolos, rumbling sound effects, and explosive octave doublings. Fragments of the theme are placed within silent pauses.

The second thematic group (beginning with measure 61) provides harmonic contrast without changing the almost ponderous dignity of the movement. The development of the material utilizes, almost obsessively, the dotted eighth-note—sixteenth-note element from the main theme. The use of pauses and silence and the repeated patterns of stressed half-note resolutions throughout on the first beat of the bar (as in measure 10) give the movement a sense of transparent and uncomplicated unity.

The second movement sustains the character of the first. It is discursive and built on repetition made interesting by harmonic transformation. Dramatic coherence and intrigue are developed for the listener through Schubert's use of two contrasting motivic cells: the opening theme, and the two dotted eighth and thirty-second refrains which constitute the fourth and last bar of the opening statement.

The entire last movement, in 3/4 time, is framed by the continuous triplet figuration of the opening. There are again two main thematic groups; the second is more lyrical, but both operate in two bar units as opposed to the four-bar units of the first two movements. In the transition passages Schubert uses spaced pauses and an echo of the first movement's rhythmic elements. The movement is consistent with the first two in its clarity of structure and use of almost direct repetition marked by harmonic alteration. The movement closes with a fiercely difficult flourish of octave triplets and a Beethovenian punctuation of minor chords.

Taken as a whole, what is striking about the A minor sonata is its nearly Brucknerian character. It is well known that as a young man Bruckner spent hours playing and studying Schubert's piano music. From the vantage point of the listener in the late twentieth century, this sonata, perhaps more than any other work, reveals the influence of Schubert on Bruckner. It is particularly un-pianistic and one can hear the implication of orchestral sonorities which could easily assume a Brucknerian character.

In the view of the Austrian nationalists, Bruckner was the true heir of Schubert, the only other native genius whose music genuinely evoked the

special spirit of Austria. However, it should be remembered that Brahms, the supposed opposite of Bruckner, was the editor of the first critical edition of Schubert's symphonies, and it is evident in the A major sonata that the range of Schubert's style permitted him to influence Brahms and to serve as a model for the whole range of nineteenth century composers, from Liszt to Schoenberg.

The four movement A major sonata was written in the last year of Schubert's life and published ten years later. The first movement, *Allegro*, is in A major; the second, *Andantino*, in F# minor; the third, *Scherzo: Allegro vivace*, in A major, as is the last movement, a Rondo marked *Allegretto*.

The leading element of the sonata, at the opening of the first movement, is a repeated motivic gesture elaborated in the first five bars and moving imperceptibly into an intense transformative episode which leads to the second thematic group fifty bars later. The movement is thoroughly worked out, with dense rhythmic variation and transformation. Schubert merges exposition with development, uses transitional episodes as developmental material, and connects and interrelates all elements in the movement. The demand is made on the listener as musical connoisseur, able to follow multiple levels of musical narrative. As Charles Rosen has so ably pointed out, in this sonata Schubert displays his imaginative use of sequences as well as his habit of alternating between two tonalities within short sections to achieve a sense of stability and contrast almost simultaneously.

The second movement opens with an example of Schubert's unmistakable song writing style, with the refrains characteristic of song forms. The center of the movement is improvisatory, shaped by Schubert's ability to extend classical form in the direction of free fantasy. The movement closes with a return, albeit with elegiac variation, of the opening theme.

The third movement is a characteristic mix of ballad-like material with nearly Beethovenian fragments, and is strikingly pianistic. The trio provides a simple, lyrical, beautifully voiced contrast to the opening; yet it, too, reflects Schubert's desire to achieve structural unity by its reference to the movement's opening.

The last movement is a long Rondo that closes with a retrograde of the opening of the first movement, making evident that Schubert wished the entire sonata to achieve an organic unity for the listener. The movement opens with a characteristically Schubertian melody built on inner rhythmic and harmonic subtleties and asymmetries. The magic of this material is the tension between easy comprehensibility and real complexity, and this forms the basis for the development. Also, the concern for contrapuntal elaboration is also evident in the episodes of this movement. The Rondo is a fitting close to a sonata marked by a concentration on formal techniques of variation and transformation at all levels. Although the work points towards Brahms, its material and design are unmistakably Schubertian.

Perhaps it is a mark of genius that without guile Schubert achieved a mode of musical expression that merges the dramatic with the narrative in a style that is unique and inimitable. As these sonatas show, he found a way to write music that reached the intimate in human life, opening up the boundless character of emotion without sacrificing, but rather exploiting, the necessary restraints of formal musical requirements. It is for this reason that Schubert's music always sounds fresh even after repeated hearings. Also, like Mozart, he displays a nearly flawless ear for the beautiful in music.

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