

Franz Schubert

(1797-1828)

- 1 **14 Waltzes** (Suite compiled by V. Primakov) (9:50)
C major, D. 969, No. 1; G major D. 969, No. 4
E minor, D. 145, No. 5; C major, D. 969, No.6
C major, D. 779, No. 30; A major, D. 969, No.8
A major, D. 779, No.13; D major, D. 779, No.14
G minor, D. 146, No.12; G minor, D. 146, No.15
C major, D. 146, No.13; F major, D. 365, No. 35
F major, D. 365, No. 36; C major, D. 969 No. 5
Reprise of C major, D. 969, No. 1
- 2 **Impromptu No. 1 in F minor** (11:22)
Allegro moderato, D. 935; Op. 142, No. 1
- 3 **13 Ländler** (Suite compiled by Vera Gornostaeva) (8:51)
B minor (transposed to a minor), D. 366, No. 10
A major, D. 366, No.1; D major, D. 366, No. 8
B minor, D. 366, No. 9; B minor, D. 790, No. 5
G# minor, D. 790, No. 6; D major, D. 790, No.3
D major, D. 790, No. 4; A major, D. 366, No. 2
A minor, D. 366, No. 3; A minor, D. 366, No. 4
A minor, D. 366, No. 5; B minor
(transposed to a minor) D. 366, No. 13
Reprise of D. 366, No. 10

- 4 **Impromptu No. 1 in C minor** (10:01)
Allegro molto moderato, D. 899; Op. 90, No. 1
- 5 **Impromptu No. 2 in E-flat Major** (4:51)
Allegro, D. 899; Op. 90, No. 2
- 6 **Impromptu No. 3 in G-flat Major** (6:11)
Andante, D. 899; Op. 90, No. 3
- 7 **Impromptu No. 4 in A-flat Major** (7:46)
Allegretto, D. 899; Op. 90, No. 4
- 8 **12 Waltzes** (Suite compiled by Vera Gornostaeva) (9:11)
E major, D. 145, No. 1; B major, D. 145, No. 2
E minor, D. 924, No. 11; B major, D. 365, No. 24
B minor, D. 145, No. 10; B major, D. 365, No. 23
E-flat minor, D. 145, No. 8; F-sharp minor, D. 145, No. 9
B minor, D. 145, No. 6; E-flat major, D. 145, No. 7
B major, D. 145, No. 11; E major, D. 365, No. 26
Reprise of E major, D. 145, No. 1
- 9 **Impromptu No. 2 in A-flat Major** (8:10)
Allegretto, D. 935; Op. 142, No. 2

Vassily Primakov, piano

Schubert: Impromptus & Dances

Schubert, we are told in the reminiscences of his friends, did not dance. But he was always happy to play the piano for dancing in the convivial atmosphere of gatherings of friends, and was considered to have a real gift for it. No doubt much of what he played was free improvisation, but he also wrote down an extraordinary number of short dances and dance-sequences – minuets, ecossaises, ‘deutsche tänze’, ländler, waltzes and so on, many of which were printed during his lifetime or shortly after his death. He wrote over 400 dances in all, ‘of the sort which [he] could rattle off by the dozen’, as one biographer has phrased it.¹ They are virtually all in binary form, with two halves each of which is repeated. Music for dancing – the freer waltz more than the older-fashioned minuet – had become a craze in Vienna in the first decades of the 19th century, and several specialist dance-composers were active as well as composers like Schubert for whom this was only one element in their creative output. (His distinguished contemporary Johann Nepomuk Hummel, for example, was writing an enormous number of pieces for Vienna’s leading dance hall, the Apollosaal.)

Many of Schubert’s dances reflect his melodic genius and his ingenuity in turning some ever-fresh leaf on a wholly conventional dance-rhythm. But he seems to have viewed them in a completely utilitarian way as simply music applied for a particular social purpose. The manuscripts, on the whole, do not present an appearance of great care; he seems to have taken little interest in seeing the published sets through the press, and apparently often left the selection of individual pieces and their ordering up to his publishers. Thus some of the early editions present us with what seems an arbitrary ordering.

The temptation for later editors to make better, more elegant, more poetic orderings out of sets that, in detail, contain so many tiny gems, has proved irresistible over the years. In this, modern editors have no more distinguished predecessor than Johannes Brahms, one of Schubert’s greatest 19th-century champions. In the early 1860s Brahms edited Schubert’s *12 Ländler, D 790* for their first publication. In 1869 he brought out an edition of another *20 Ländler* – this time not a set designed by Schubert but a collection of dances which Brahms himself had assembled from several different Schubert manuscripts and carefully shaped into a sequence unified by key and character.

Vassily Primakov and Vera Gornostaeva are thus adding to a long and honourable tradition in compiling the three sets of dances on this disc. Primakov’s set of **14 Waltzes** is drawn from Schubert’s collections D. 145 (a huge collection of 38 dances written between 1815 and 1821), D. 146 (a collection of 20 Waltzes published posthumously as op. 127), D. 365 (the 36 *Originaltänze* of the same time-span), D. 779 (the 34 *Valses sentimentales* from about 1823) and D. 969 (the *Valses nobles* probably written in 1869); the two last-named collections inspired a famous set of

waltzes by Ravel. The overall governing tonality of this compilation is C major, in which key the dances begin and end. The **13 Ländler** have been drawn by Gornostaeva from the collections originally published as *17 Deutsche*, D 366 (composed about 1816) and the above-mentioned *12 Ländler*, D 790. The first and last pieces have been transposed from B minor to A minor to emphasize the A-ish relationships between the various dances. Vera Gornostaeva's compilation of **12 Waltzes**, is brought together from D. 145 and D. 365 (the 36 *Originaltänze* of the same time-span, published as op. 9) and D. 924, the so-called *12 Grazer Walzer* probably written in October 1827 and therefore contemporary with the second set of *Impromptus*. The tonal focus of the compilation is E, though the dances are all presented in their original keys, and the set opens and closes with music from the so-called *Atzenbrugger Tänze* of July 1821. Throughout these three collections Schubert's skill at ringing the changes on 3/4 time, his seemingly endless fund of melody, and his gift for sudden half-lights and unexpected harmonic colouring is continuously on display. If these pieces began life with no greater purpose than to keep the feet moving, they still provide a feast for the ears.

Most musical dictionaries will tell you that the term 'impromptu' signifies a short piece that resembles an improvisation, as if prompted by the spirit of the moment. It is ironic that the eight pieces by Franz Schubert which we call his *Impromptus* – and which, despite the later essays of Chopin, Fauré and others, remain probably the most famous piano *Impromptus* ever written – have little in common with that definition, being comparatively large, impressive in their architecture, and quite clearly composed with care, craftsmanship and deep feeling. Yet we have no firm evidence to determine whether Schubert intended to call them by that name. The

four pieces that we know as the **Impromptus, op. 90 (D. 899)** were written out, probably in the summer of 1827, on a single manuscript that bore no title, and submitted for publication as a definite group. Karl Haslinger published only the first two pieces in 1827, and the title 'Impromptu' was added to Schubert's manuscript of No. 1 in Haslinger's hand. It may have been Schubert's wish (he was still alive, after all), or Haslinger's idea. Thirty years later Haslinger's son Tobias issued a new edition, in which the third and fourth pieces were published for the first time along with the first two. The third piece, however, was printed in G major, not the G flat major of Schubert's manuscript – which, even by the mid-century, seemed an eccentric choice of key.

Whether Schubert or Haslinger settled on the term *Impromptu*, it was probably meant to suggest an analogy with the *Impromptus* of the Moravian composer Jan Václav Voříšek (whom Schubert knew), who had published a set of six pieces with that title in 1822. Voříšek is known to have been much influenced by his elder fellow-countryman Václav Tomášek, who wrote almost exclusively for piano and had written short lyrical pieces called *Eclogues* and *Dithyrambs*. But Tomášek's and Voříšek's efforts are much slighter productions than Schubert's op. 90. So is the title 'Impromptu', a complete misnomer in his case? The most that can be said in its favour is that each piece of op. 90, in the approved *impromptu* manner, takes a theme and plays with it: but in so doing it evolves a structure so large, so sophisticated, so clearly architectural in its implications, that any thought of 'artless improvisation' seems very wide of the mark.

In fact there has since been endless debate as to whether Schubert, on the

contrary, conceived the op. 90 pieces as a complete cycle – whether they manifest an inner unity and consistency that is only satisfactorily explored and resolved in a complete performance of all four pieces. Certainly for all their inner contrasts, and contrasts between pieces, they suggest a close kinship of expression. They do not add up to a ‘disguised sonata’, insofar as they are all, broadly, ternary-form pieces with a contrasting middle section – none of them is in sonata form with an obvious development. And yet Schubert seems often to play with aspects of sonata form – creating the impression of a ‘second subject’, for instance, by a different tonal setting of a theme we have already heard; or through the subtle but wide-ranging exploration of tonalities both within each piece and in the overall trajectory of the four main tonalities C minor – E-flat – G-flat and A-flat. Then again there is an almost ceaseless and very subtle play between the major and minor modes of each tonality. This gives the movements a highly individual, bittersweet quality, reminding us that 1827, the year in which they were composed, was also the year of *Winterreise* and the two great Piano Trios.

They also seem to give us an impression of his own pianism. Schubert was a capable pianist but he was no transcendental virtuoso, and the Impromptus – although the E-flat one is certainly a tricky exercise in smooth execution – call for no extraordinary technique. What they do require is a player of utmost sensitivity, alive to every emotional and tonal nuance of their complex world of feeling.

The stern octave G that forms the introduction to Impromptu No. 1 in C minor leaves the tonality ambiguous until the statement (at first without accompaniment) of the principal tune, whose dotted rhythm and three repeated notes give it a marching, or at least

walking, gait. The mood is melancholic and a little oppressed, as if the tune is being sung to keep one’s spirits up. C minor is only gradually established against the pull of several different tonalities, and the music moves to A-flat major for what sounds like a second subject, but which is in fact a transparent variant of the first tune against a delicate left-hand triplet accompaniment. The triplets become pulsing chords, and a kind of five-note turn-figure with a grace-note, itself derived from the A-flat variant, provides a pathetic endpiece, a little like a codetta. The main theme then returns, but combined with the triplet accompaniment, and is tried out in several new contexts, including with a rippling semiquaver accompaniment. It all feels very like the development section of a sonata-form movement, though formally it is not. The variant form of the theme, and the passage built on the turn-motif, recur – or are recapitulated – in G. The main theme returns again and is finally resolved into C major, though there is something infinitely pathetic about this quiet resolution, as if we are witnessing a philosophical acceptance of cruel fate, with an attempt at a smile.

The second piece is in E-flat, the relative major of C minor. It starts out as a kind of virtuoso keyboard study, with a lively, fluttering stream of triplet figuration in the right hand, over chords in the left, that gets quite giddy at times as it side-slips into chromatic areas. A darker contrasting idea based on alternating chords intervenes in the minor, and a sombre-hued transition leads back to the irrepressibly voluble triplet idea. This reappearance is curtailed, however and the chordal idea returns and has the grim last word. (Johannes Brahms seems to have particularly admired this piece. In his early twenties, he made an arrangement of it for the left hand – unpublished until 1927 – in which the parts

are exchanged, the accompanying chords becoming the main motif, and the fluttering triplets a surging wave of bass figuration.)

The third piece, whose G-flat major – a key hardly used by anyone before – seemed so incomprehensible to Tobias Haslinger, is not at all *outré* in expression, but on the contrary the most direct in feeling of the four. It could easily be characterized as a serenade or a nocturne, and in fact it shows some kinship with the *Notturmo* for piano trio that Schubert wrote later in 1827 as a possible slow movement for his B-flat Trio. Schubert spins an extended, song-like melody over a quiet, ceaseless murmur of an accompaniment; the mood is expansive and heartfelt, but there are occasional growls from threatening bass figures to suggest that wild beasts may stalk this apparently serene night, and the tune takes us wandering through a wealth of modulations, continually opening up new tonal vistas before the peaceful close.

The fourth piece, in A-flat, actually begins in the minor despite the major-key signature, and presents a two-part idea: purling cascades of silvery arpeggios falling down the keyboard, and a graver chordal response. The arpeggios go into waltz-time, and then become the accompaniment to a generous-hearted waltz-tune. The music modulates widely before arriving at a central section in the apparently distant key of C sharp minor (though this is an enharmonic re-spelling of D-flat, the dominant of A-flat). This music is more emotionally afflicted and melancholy – it turns towards the major for a moment, but declines once more into the major. The opening section is reprised, and this fourth Impromptu ends with a sense of at least qualified optimism.

The second set of **Impromptus, op. 142 (D. 935)** was completed in manuscript

before the end of 1827. (The existence of a composition sketch for the first of them suggests they may have been begun some months earlier.) This time Schubert himself wrote the title, and numbered the pieces 5 to 8, a clear indication that they were meant as a continuation of the op. 90 group.² He offered them in the spring of 1828 to the Mainz publisher Schott, suggesting they 'could be published separately or all four together'; Schott at first accepted them and then in October sent them back saying they were 'too difficult for trifles'. Schubert was by then in the throes of his last illness: he died on 19 November, and the pieces only appeared posthumously. In a sense the key-scheme of the op. 142 set is more like that of a conventional sonata, for the first and last pieces are in the same key, F minor, and the second piece in A flat, F minor's relative major. Robert Schumann, for one, interpreted the first of these Impromptus as a true sonata-form movement. But like the first piece of op. 90 its form is more elusive than that. The fact that Schubert was indifferent to whether they were published together or separately certainly justifies playing individual items of the set, and on the present CD Vassily Primakov has elected to play only the first two.

Pace Schumann, in fact, it would be truer to say that the F minor Impromptu is a rondo that imitates some aspects of sonata form. There are two thematic groups: the first subject-group always returns in the tonic F minor, while the contrasting second group appears first in the relative major, A flat, but on its second and last appearance in the tonic – therefore behaving a bit like a sonata second subject. The first subject is dramatic, with

emphatic descending dotted rhythms and a more pathetic continuation, developing into a fretful toccata-style motion and then a grim idea of repeated notes. Repeated chords also feature in the opening of the assuaging second group, which then descends into more desolate realms with an unusual passage in which melodic fragments of intense pathos answer each other from low and high registers, played in the left hand, while the right hand keeps up an even flow of arpeggios in the middle register. The first subject now returns in slightly varied form – not really varied enough to constitute a ‘development section’, but rather as a reminder of the bleakness of the F minor tonality. The fact that the second subject recurs in that key only emphasizes its bleakness and quality of melancholy appeal. The final return of the first group is in fact just a short coda, unmistakably tragic in accent.

The second piece of op. 142 makes a sharp contrast to that brooding F minor masterpiece, for it is cast in the (by 1827) virtually archaic form of a minuet with trio. The gentle, famous opening tune might seem the perfect incarnation of Biedermeier sentimentality, but its assertive chordal balancing phrase imparts a certain majesty to the proceedings. For the trio the music moves to D flat, with a texture of lively triplet arpeggios, the bottom not of each triplet forming the melody. Unexpectedly the music moves into the minor, and then reaches a passionate climax in A major. After this has subsided, the minuet begins again, Schubert having revealed the deep emotions that dwell below its seemingly conventional surface. Placed last in a programme – as Vassily Primakov has chosen to do on this CD – the piece forms a perfect epilogue to any Schubert recital.

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Vassily Primakov

Since the release of his recording of the Chopin Piano Concertos in 2008 (BRIDGE 9278), Vassily Primakov has been hailed as a pianist of world class importance. *Gramophone* wrote that “Primakov’s empathy with Chopin’s spirit could hardly be more complete,” and the *American Record Guide* stated: “In every piece his touch is perfect. Since Gilels, how many pianists have the right touch? In Chopin, no one currently playing and recording sounds as good as this! This is a great Chopin pianist.” *Music Web-International* called Primakov’s Chopin Concertos CD “one of the great Chopin recordings of recent times. These are performances of extraordinary power and beauty.” In 1999, as a teen-aged prizewinner of the Cleveland International Piano Competition, Primakov was praised by Donald Rosenberg of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*: “Every poignant phrase took ethereal wing. Elsewhere the music soared with all of the turbulence and poetic vibrancy it possesses. We will be hearing much

from this remarkable musician.”

Vassily Primakov was born in Moscow in 1979. His first piano studies were with his mother, Marina Primakova. He entered Moscow's Central Special Music School at the age of eleven as a pupil of Vera Gornostaeva. At seventeen, after a summer at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, he came to New York to pursue studies at the Juilliard School with the noted pianist, Jerome Lowenthal. At Juilliard Mr. Primakov won the William Petschek Piano Recital Award, which presented his debut recital at Alice Tully Hall. While a student at Juilliard, aided by a Susan W. Rose Career Grant, he won both the Silver Medal and the Audience Prize in the 2002 Gina Bachauer International Artists Piano Competition. Later that year Primakov won First Prize in the 2002 Young Concert Artists (YCA) International Auditions, an award which presented him in solo and concerto performances throughout the USA. In 2007 he was named the Classical Recording Foundation's "Young Artist of the Year." In 2009 his Chopin Mazurka disc (BRIDGE 9289) was named "Best of the Year" by *National Public Radio*.

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This recording is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother
Nina Morozova
(1924-2004)

-VP

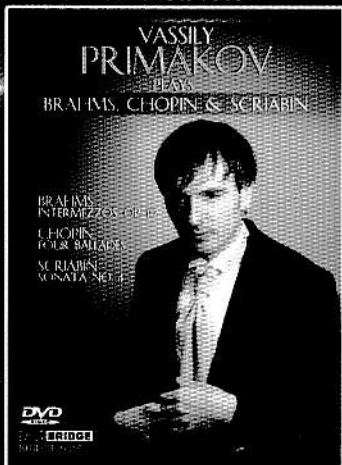
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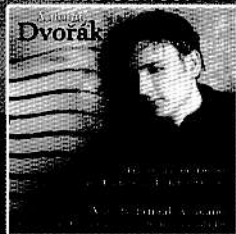


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