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West Cork Chamber Music Festival 2021
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Bantry and Beyond

Classical Prelude

2. Late Schubert

Filmed at the Concertgebouw Kleine Zaal, Amsterdam

Alexei Grynyuk [piano]

Schubert

Piano Sonata in B flat D.960

Four Impromptus Op.90 D.899

Franz Schubert [1797-1828]

Sonata in B flat D. 960 [1828]

1. *Molto moderato*
2. *Andante sostenuto*
3. *Scherzo - Allegro vivace con delicatezza*
4. *Allegro ma non troppo*

With this stupendous sonata, we all know that we have reached endgame in Schubert's battle with the black angel. As one critic has put it, there is no late period Schubert so every lover of Schubert's music is tantalised by the 'what if' question. Scholars have been tormented by his half-sketched Tenth Symphony and have pointed out that if had been blessed with Beethoven's span of life, he would have been seen as a contemporary of Chopin and Liszt, Schumann and Berlioz rather than of Beethoven and Hummel. The B flat sonata has an inevitable aura of valediction about it, but in another context we could have seen in it the broad spaces of the first Razumovsky Quartet or the Archduke Trio. There is no doubt that its completion a bare two months before his death colours our perception of the work, for we know what his magisterial vision has cost him.

This epic first movement opens with a theme that defies time with its unhurried flow and noble solemnity. When it reaches its cadence, the music pauses and a long, menacing trill shudders in the bass before the theme is repeated. The second trill leads directly into a song-like version of the theme before it is unleashed at full power to overwhelming effect. The second subject group has two sections, the second a combination of dancing triplets and short chords that become fragmented as they proceed leading to the strange stuttering nine first-time bars that force the pianist to repeat the exposition. Something is terribly wrong, these bars seem to say, as the sinister bass trill is worked up to a double forte. Now at the repeat our perception of everything is subtly changed by our memory of that chill of fear. The development has moments of high drama before the return of the main theme is heralded by appearances of the bass trill. This mighty movement, nearly twenty minutes long, concludes with a last miraculous song before that trill speaks its menace one final time.

This almost peaceful Andante has much in common with that of the String Quintet, that same air of profound spiritual contemplation in a place where time stands still. The central section resounds to another of Schubert's magisterial themes as if he has risen above the pain and can contemplate it from afar. It is divided into two sub-sections, each varied repeat becoming more active. When the first theme returns it has a new murmuring bass figure linking each bar to the next that has the effect of slowly bringing the contemplative mood to earth. This is emphasized by C sharp minor melting into C major to radiant effect.

The airy, dancing Scherzo enters at the same dynamic level so as not to disturb the mood too drastically while the unusual marking *con delicatezza* underlines the point. The tune swings from treble to bass to middle voice, scurrying from one unlikely key to another. The brief trio still dances but the step is more stately.

The sonata-rondo is Schubert's preferred last movement style for it suits his tunesmith genius. The movement opens with a bell-like chord that announces his joyful rondo theme and reappears each time the theme comes around. No darkness troubles this carefree movement where the interest

never flags for a second and the unfettered outpouring of tunes can only amaze and astonish. A presto coda closes with a conclusive pulse-quickening crescendo.

Francis Humphrys

***Four Impromptus D.899* [1827]**

No.1 in C minor – Allegro molto moderato

No.2 in E flat - Allegro

No.3 in B flat - Andante

No.4 in A flat - Allegretto

We approach the works of Schubert's last two years with awe, *Winterreise* and *Schwanengesang*, the last three sonatas, the monumental string quintet, the two glorious piano trios and, interspersed among these giants of the repertoire, we find the jewelled perfection of the two sets of *Impromptus* and the *Drei Klavierstücke*. The first set, which we hear tonight, was almost unbelievably created between the two parts of *Winterreise*, whose dread presence scarcely darkens these four delicious masterpieces. They were clearly written for immediate publication, taking advantage of a new fashion for impromptu-like pieces begun by Beethoven's *Bagatelles* and carried on by the Bohemian composers, Voříšek and Tomášek.

The C minor Impromptu has the breadth and high seriousness of a Schubert sonata movement despite not being in sonata form. The shuddering opening chord sets the scene, before leading directly into the bleak, unaccompanied march theme that is the foundation of all that follows. This stark rhythm eventually gives way to a new version of the same theme over a smoothly rippling accompaniment, turning winter back to summer in the space of a few bars. The grim opening mood is revisited in one harsh climax and the reminders of the march are never far away; nonetheless the mood is softer by the close.

The much shorter second Impromptu in E flat contrasts its rapidly flowing outer sections with an explosive central section in B minor. The coda juxtaposes the same two tonalities in an attempt at reconciliation, but since it is dominated throughout by the dramatic material from the middle section, Schubert takes the highly unorthodox step of allowing the piece to reach a violent conclusion in the minor. The third Impromptu can then be seen as an attempt to find some sort of resolution to this uneasy ending. It can also be experienced as a Nocturne before its time, an embodiment of the intimate, poetic model of the Romantic piano miniature.

Where the second Impromptu had progressed from airy major to dark and threatening minor, the final piece of the set undergoes the reverse process. It takes a full thirty bars before its rippling minor-mode opening reaches the major and a further sixteen before the music's latent melody at last emerges in the left hand. As for the trio with its pulsating accompaniment, it consists of a single long-spun theme of aching expressiveness. We have here but a few minutes of music but they give us a glimpse of another world.

Francis Humphrys