

WIGMORE HALL 125

Sunday 18 January 2026
7.30pm

Imogen Cooper piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) 4 Impromptus D899 (1827)
I. Allegro molto moderato
II. Allegro
III. Andante
IV. Allegretto

Interval

4 Impromptus D935 (1827)
No. 1 in F minor: Allegro moderato
No. 2 in A flat: Allegretto
No. 3 in B flat: Andante
No. 4 in F minor: Allegro scherzando



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Schubert started composing piano music in childhood. By the time of his death aged 31, his solo works for the instrument included around 20 sonatas (some incomplete), hundreds of dances, and a large body of music for piano four hands. The two sets of four Impromptus, D899 and D935, were composed in 1827, the penultimate year of his life. The first two pieces of D899 were published by Tobias Haslinger soon after they were completed, but the remaining six – like the majority of Schubert's instrumental music – were not made public in his lifetime.

An *Impromptu*, which suggests a spur-of-the-moment creation, was a fairly new genre in music publishing. Like the many 'Nocturnes' and 'Romances' that proliferated in the 19th Century, short piano pieces were increasingly attractive for the growing market of amateur music making. Haslinger may have suggested the title to Schubert, as it appears in his hand on the manuscript of the first Impromptu.

Such standalone pieces were commonly structured in ternary form. While Schubert's Impromptus usually adhere to this principle to some extent, they also show a variety of approaches. Some have a genuinely 'impromptu' feel, taking short patterns and manipulating them through interesting modulations. Others present a sequence of contrasting ideas in a more logical way, recalling the sonata.

But throughout these works we find one hallmark of Schubert's mature style: the vacillation between the major and minor mode of the home key, which often becomes a stepping stone to more remote modulations. These tonal fluctuations contribute so much to the poetry of his late works, which, in their lyrical moments, seem to express the fragility of a man who knows that fortune can turn in an instant – by this time in his life, Schubert was living with an incurable illness (likely syphilis), whose symptoms could worsen at any moment.

Of the D899 Impromptus, the first is the most expansive. It opens with a stark C minor funeral march, which develops into a longer melody with a flowing accompaniment, and a consoling theme in the major. These three ideas are exchanged and ultimately reach a peaceful conclusion, but repeated left-hand notes create a nervous tension that is never fully dispelled. The second impromptu, in E flat, has a Jekyll-and-Hyde character. It begins as a *moto perpetuo* of running triplets, all sunshine and gaiety, but soon morphs into something more sinister, leading to a tempestuous new section in B minor. After the reprise of the opening section Hyde has his revenge, plunging us to a dramatic E flat minor close in a coda. Even for Schubert, to end a major-key work in the minor was a highly daring move.

The latter two impromptus of the set had to wait until 1857 before they were published, at which point further indignity was heaped on the third, as its key of

G flat was initially transposed to the less intimidating G. But despite the sight-reading headaches Schubert caused, this is one of his most beautiful creations: an effortlessly lyrical 'song without words' with a bubbling sextuplet accompaniment. Here is Schubert the inspired melodist, most successful as a song composer in his lifetime, and though dark clouds come and go, the overall mood is serene. The fourth Impromptu is a marvellous piece of misdirection. It begins with two light and sprightly ideas: rapid descending arpeggios in the right hand, and a chordal answering phrase. By several twists and turns we eventually alight on the home key of A flat, at which point the right-hand figure reveals itself as an accompaniment to a bouncy new left-hand theme. The brooding central section takes us to a gloomier register, with a tragic tone.

Early in 1828, Schubert had offered his second set of Impromptus (as he now called them) to the firm of Schott, stating that they could be published together or separately. At first Schott accepted, but later reneged on the deal: their Paris branch had deemed them 'too difficult for trifles', and they enquired if he had anything 'equally brilliant' but easier. By this time Schubert's health had deteriorated. A month later, he was dead.

When the D935 impromptus were published in 1839, they were reviewed by Robert Schumann, who argued that they must have been intended as a sonata. Given the key structure and character of the pieces, it's an understandable observation. The first Impromptu certainly begins like a sonata, with a serious F minor introduction. But soon Schubert begins to daydream: fragments of melody are exchanged above and below a set of flowing arpeggios, and this spacious episode comes to dominate the piece. The second impromptu, in A flat, resembles a minuet and trio, complete with sectional repeats. Its main theme – by turns wistful and pompous – is predominantly chordal, and gives way to an arpeggiated trio section whose flow is disturbed by spiky accents.

Uniquely among these works, the third Impromptu is in variation form. Its *Andante* theme in B flat is similar to one that Schubert wrote for his incidental music to the play *Rosamunde* and reused in the A minor String Quartet. From this material he skilfully draws a cast of varied (and increasingly florid) musical characters. In wild contrast to this orderly structure is the final Impromptu, an F minor *Allegro scherzando* showpiece with impish humour and Romani-style flourishes. Its bravura runs up and down the keyboard amply demonstrate Schott's concerns – whatever else you might say, this is certainly no trifle. Instead, perhaps, it offers us glimpses of how Schubert would have approached a different genre, one he didn't write for in his tragically short life: the piano concerto.

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