

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 1 May 2023
7.30pm

Paul Lewis piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata in C D840 'Reliquie' (1825)
I. Moderato • II. Andante

Piano Sonata in A D664 (?1819)
I. Allegro moderato • II. Andante • III. Allegro

Interval

Piano Sonata in A minor D845 (1825)
*I. Moderato • II. Andante poco moto •
III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace • IV. Rondo. Allegro vivace*

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During 1823 and early 1824 **Schubert** was plagued by ill-health after suffering from the first symptoms of syphilis. Yet by early 1825 both his health and his spirits were substantially restored. With his reputation growing within and beyond Vienna, the year was a fruitful one both socially and artistically. Across the spring and summer he composed three piano sonatas: the unfinished 'Reliquie', D840, the A minor, D845, and the D major, D850. Each is conceived on an ample scale, with something of the 'heavenly length' that Robert Schumann admired in the 'Great' C major Symphony completed that same year.

Schubert abandoned as many piano sonatas as he finished. Last and finest of these fragments is the Sonata in C D840 of April 1825, commonly known as 'Reliquie' ('relic'). As with the 'Unfinished' Symphony, we can only speculate why Schubert downed tools after he had completed two substantial movements and begun a minuet and finale.

Opening with a quiet, 'pregnant' theme, initially in bare octaves, the first movement marries expansiveness with an orchestral grandeur of sonority - a reminder that so much of Schubert's keyboard music evokes other sound worlds. His harmonic imagination, too, is at its boldest, not least when the second theme - a more expansive variant of the first - arrives, via a sudden, disorienting twist, in the infinitely remote key of B minor. In the far-flung development Schubert combines fragments of the main theme with an insistent drumming figure in music by turns mysterious and volcanic.

After the tranquil close of the *Moderato* - the only sustained stretch of C major in the whole movement - the *Andante* opens with a plaintive C minor theme. In a rondo-like structure, this haunting melody alternates with a barcarolle-esque episode whose gently rocking motion can be shattered by the explosive outbursts that are so characteristic of Schubert's late slow movements.

Fragmentary evidence suggests that the delectable Sonata in A D664 dates from Schubert's holiday in the mountains of Upper Austria in the summer of 1819. A schoolfriend, Albert Stadler, later recorded that Schubert presented the manuscript of a piano sonata to Josefine Koller, the (in Schubert's words) 'very pretty' ('sehr hübsch') daughter of one of his hosts in the town of Steyr. We can assume that the gift to Josefine was this A major sonata, a more intimate companion to the 'Trout' Quintet, and likewise inspired by the glorious Alpine scenery.

The 'little' A major, as it is often known, is the quietest and most compact of all Schubert's sonatas, and the one that comes closest to the image of the composer as an effortlessly spontaneous lyricist. The serene, songful opening sets the tone. It is typical of Schubert at his most undynamic that the skipping

second theme should start in the home key before casually slipping into the expected key of E major. There is a brief moment of drama in the central development before the recapitulation glides in with Mozartian ease.

The lulling theme of the *Andante* initially tantalises the listener as to whether it is in 3/4 or 6/8 time. Schubert then freely varies the theme in textures that often suggest a string quartet or quintet. The cascading waltz finale is the most obviously pianistic movement of the three, full sly deflections of key and such witty touches as the sudden hold-up in the middle of the second theme. The development brilliantly exploits the opening scale motif, while in the tiny coda the main theme seems to become mesmerised by itself until two *fortissimo* chords brusquely terminate proceedings.

As in the first movement of the 'Reliquie', Schubert often seems to be thinking orchestrally in the monumental opening *Moderato* of the Sonata in A minor D845 from April or May 1825. The whole movement grows from the two themes heard at the outset, one bleakly questioning, the other a pounding military march that later softens into dancing lyricism. After the mysterious central development, dominated by the opening theme, the recapitulation enters *ppp* in the far-distant key of F sharp minor - a magical moment. The crisis comes in a long coda that begins in a spectral *pianissimo* and then drives the march theme in a crescendo of mounting fury that wrenches the tonality from A minor through B minor and B flat minor. When the home key is finally restored, Schubert continues to rage in savage octaves that recall Beethoven's famous exclamation, 'The piano must break!'

The C major *Andante poco moto* (a warning not to drag) is a set of five variations on a simple but hypnotic theme that is initially 'concealed' in the alto register. After two variations of increasing brilliance, variation three turns to C minor for a vehement re-interpretation of the theme. When Schubert played this movement during an impromptu concert in Kremsmünster, his listeners were enchanted. As he reported, they told him that 'the keys became singing voices under my hands, which, if true, greatly pleases me, since I cannot stand the wretched chopping which even distinguished pianists indulge in....'

The *Scherzo*, half-agitated, half-playful, is full of rhythmic teasing. In extreme contrast, the trio is a spiritualised *Ländler* of unearthly calm. The wiry *moto perpetuo* finale, with its luminous A major episode, distantly recalls the finale of Mozart's sonata in the same key, K310 - one of so many Mozartian homages that pepper Schubert's instrumental music and song.

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