

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 29 September 2024
7.30pm

Elisabeth Leonskaja piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata in C minor D958 (1828)

I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Menuetto. Allegro • IV. Allegro

Piano Sonata in A D959 (1828)

*I. Allegro • II. Andantino • III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace •
IV. Rondo. Allegretto*

Interval

Piano Sonata in B flat D960 (1828)

*I. Molto moderato • II. Andante sostenuto • III. Scherzo.
Allegro vivace con delicatezza – Trio • IV. Allegro ma
non troppo*

At the end of this evening's concert, John Gilhooly will award the Wigmore Medal to Elisabeth Leonskaja.



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In the summer of 1828 Schubert was plagued by headaches and attacks of nausea. Yet he continued to work at a feverish rate. In September, he completed four masterpieces that crowned his work as a composer of instrumental music: the C major String Quintet, and three piano sonatas, D958, D959 and D960. While it is tempting to hear these works as a farewell, Schubert had no inkling until his final illness that the autumn of 1828 would be his last. There is pathos, anguish and a sense of evanescence in these sonatas, but also exuberance, humour and a sheer zest for life.

The C minor and A major sonatas seem to confirm the notion that Schubert was determined to establish himself as Beethoven's successor after the master's death in March 1827. The opening of the C minor Sonata, D958, recalls Beethoven's *32 Variations in C minor*; and there are half-echoes of the 'Pathétique' Sonata in the *Adagio*, and of the 'galloping' finales of the 'Kreutzer' Sonata and the Sonata Op. 31 No. 3 in the finale. Yet where Beethoven's variation theme is Classically rounded, Schubert extends its 'hammer blows' in a fevered rising sequence before a precipitate scale hurtles the music into the depths. The sonata's opening has been well-described by Alfred Brendel: 'the leading character in this tragedy is being chased and cornered, and looks in vain for a way to escape'.

The solemn calm of the *Adagio* is ruffled by two widely modulating episodes whose restlessness can grow febrile. Although marked *Menuetto*, the unquiet third movement is closer in spirit to the Romantic intermezzo than the Classical minuet. The trio is a faintly beery *Ländler*, the one echt-Viennese moment in the whole sonata.

As in the 'Death and the Maiden' and G major string quartets, Schubert's vast finale uses the tarantella rhythms beloved of Italian comic opera composers with grim, obsessive force. As in earlier movements, disorienting silence plays a crucial role. After one such silence Schubert transmutes the pounding main theme into a smooth bel canto melody in the far-flung key of B major. Momentary lyrical relief? Or, as Alfred Brendel has suggested, the sinister lure of the Erlking?

The Sonata in A D959 also owes a debt to the master he never dared approach in his lifetime. Its finale is covertly modelled on Beethoven's G major Sonata, Op. 31 No. 1: not so much in its theme (which Schubert adapted from his own early Sonata in A minor D537) but in its structure and textures. Yet where Beethoven's finale is terse, Schubert's is luxuriantly expansive in its lyricism; and whereas Beethoven's deceptions and pauses in the coda are pure comedy, Schubert's are tinged with disquiet. Schubert then rounds off the movement with an allusion to the sonata's 'heroic' opening - the kind of unifying cyclic device later favoured by ensuing Romantic composers.

The quasi-orchestral summons that opens the first movement - especially the *marcato* octave leaps in the bass - generates some trenchant motivic argument à la Beethoven. Yet Schubert's leisurely time-scale and sensuous harmonic shifts are entirely his own. The *marcato*

octaves also feature in the accompaniment of the *Andantino* and in the skittish theme of the *Scherzo*. The pastoral trio then re-interprets the sonata's opening theme, inverting the falling octaves around a warmly sustained melody that evokes far-off horns.

Schubert's late slow movements are often built on extreme contrasts of calm and turbulence. In D959's *Andantino*, though, the disruptive violence is without parallel. It opens as a melancholy barcarolle, harmonised first in F sharp minor then, with magical effect, in A major. Schubert then proceeds to transform the keyboard into a grotesque orchestra for a fantasy that pushes metre and tonality to the brink of incoherence. After the nightmare recedes the barcarolle returns, without quite exorcising the trauma of what has gone before.

In the Sonata in B flat D960, any Beethovenian influence is at best faint. The contemplative ecstasy of the first two movements is, with parts of the String Quintet, the consummation of a quintessential Schubertian experience first glimpsed in his 1815 setting of Goethe's *Wandlers Nachtlied*.

The deep trill, on a dissonant G flat, that questions the serenity of the opening theme immediately illustrates a crucial difference between Beethoven's and Schubert's methods. Where Beethoven would surely have integrated the trill into the music's argument, for Schubert it remains something 'other': a mysterious contrast with everything that surrounds it. Only once, in the transition from exposition to development (heard only if the exposition is repeated) does the trill erupt in *fortissimo* violence.

The mood of otherworldly tranquillity deepens in the *Andante sostenuto*, a nocturnal barcarolle in the distant key of C sharp minor. As so often in Schubert, the keyboard textures evoke other sound worlds: a string quartet or quintet in the opening theme, a quartet of cellos or a male-voice choir in the A major central episode. With its shifts of register and harmonic sideslips, the *Scherzo*, marked *con delicatezza*, forms a mercurial interlude between the timeless contemplation of the *Andante* and the more corporeal world of the finale. The *Trio*, with its lumpen off-beat bass, sounds like a skewed *Ländler*.

The rondo finale is another of Schubert's gloriously leisurely structures. Launched by a held octave G, it begins with a Hungarian-tinged dance tune which feints at C minor before resolving into B flat. Later themes include a gliding *cantabile* over a rippling accompaniment, and a mock-heroic F minor outburst that dissolves into a skittish dance. Only at the end is the main theme's ambiguity resolved, with the octave G slipping down to G flat and then to F (the dominant of B flat) for a brilliant presto sendoff.

Although the 31-year-old composer could hardly have known that this would be his last music for solo piano, Schubert bowed out with mingled robustness, lyrical tenderness and a wry, quizzical grace.

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