

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 30 November 2022
7.30pm

Paul Lewis piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata in E flat D568 (1817)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Andante molto •
III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Allegro moderato*

Piano Sonata in A minor D784 (1823)

I. Allegro giusto • II. Andante • III. Allegro vivace

Interval

Piano Sonata in D D850 (1825)

*I. Allegro • II. Andante con moto •
III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace •
IV. Rondo. Allegro moderato*

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Schubert had begun but failed to finish two piano sonatas in 1815, aged 18. Two years later, after moving into the family home of his friend Franz von Schober, he returned to the medium with renewed enthusiasm, doubtless inspired by the presence of a six-octave piano in the Schober apartment. A relatively modest pianist (a friend observed that 'the expression of the emotional world within him far outweighed his technique'), Schubert could not follow Mozart and Beethoven as a composer-virtuoso. But he could emulate them by publishing sonatas for the flourishing amateur market. And it was surely with the hope - vain, as it turned out - of immediate publication that he completed three sonatas, including one in the rare key of D flat, D567, and began at least three more during 1817. While publishers were soon eager to acquire Schubert's songs and piano miniatures, they balked at issuing sonatas by a still relatively unknown 20-year-old.

We can only guess why Schubert revised the D flat Sonata D567 as the Sonata in E flat D568. Perhaps he calculated that the new key would make it more attractive to the amateur market, though ironically the sonata was only published posthumously. The first movement - expanded from its D flat original - reveals the composer at his most amiably Viennese, with a whiff of sublimated café music in the serenading second theme. In the movement's minuet-like opening we are reminded of Schubert's beloved Mozart, though, typically, he explores a bolder range of keys than Mozart would have dared so early in the movement.

The plaintive *Andante molto* hints at the loneliness and confessional pathos of Schubert's late slow movements. Mozart also lies behind the gracious minuet (newly composed when Schubert revised the sonata) and lolling *Ländler* trio, while the playful finale combines a catchy waltz lilt with Schubert's most harmonically adventurous development to date.

Five years later, in 1822, the omens looked good for the 25-year-old Schubert. Championed by a devoted circle of friends, he was rapidly gaining a reputation in Vienna as a young composer to watch. Then, in the early weeks of 1823, Schubert became seriously ill with the symptoms of syphilis. Though there were extended periods of remission, for the remaining six years of his life his health was permanently undermined. It is, of course, dangerous to draw too close a parallel between an artist's life and work, between, in TS Eliot's phrase, 'the man who suffers and the mind that creates'. Yet it is hard to deny that much of the music from Schubert's last years - *Winterreise*, the late string quartets and piano sonatas, the C major String Quintet - is shot through with a sense of fatalism and evanescence.

None of his instrumental works is more depressive than the Sonata in A minor D784, composed in February 1823 while Schubert was convalescing at his father's home. It evidently alarmed the publisher

Diabelli, who rejected it as being too uncompromisingly dark. Typically of Schubert's later keyboard music, the vast first movement often evokes other sound worlds: soft timpani in the deep, ominous tremolos, a full orchestra when the mysteriously bare main theme erupts *fortissimo*. Relief of sorts comes with the assuaging second theme, somewhere between a chant and a lullaby, whose sonority suggests a hushed brass chorale.

The solemn theme of the *Andante* is punctuated by an oscillating figure in octaves marked to be played *ppp* with the soft, mute pedal - an otherworldly effect. If this movement can again evoke an orchestra, the finale is wholly pianistic. Grimly reasserting A minor, its agitated opening theme refracts Bachian two-part counterpoint through a Schubertian prism, while the tender second theme, like a transfigured waltz, oscillates hauntingly between major and minor. But the opening idea, now in a rampaging *fortissimo*, has the last word: an aptly stark conclusion to the most tragic keyboard work that Schubert ever wrote.

By the early months of 1825, Schubert's health and spirits were substantially restored. With his reputation continuing to grow, the year was a fruitful one both socially and artistically. During the spring and summer he composed three piano sonatas: the unfinished 'Reliquie' (literally 'relic'), D840, the A minor, D845 and the D major, D850. Each is conceived on a generous scale, with something of the 'heavenly length' that Schumann admired in the 'Great' C major Symphony.

'Life...bubbles forth from the sonata in D - one thing after another, exciting and irresistible' was Schumann's summary of the Sonata in D major D850, composed in the mountain resort of Bad Gastein during Schubert's summer holiday of a lifetime. It is surely not over-fanciful to hear the exhilaration of that glorious *Sommerreise* in both this sonata and the 'Great' C major symphony, born at the same time. With its boundless rhythmic energy and apparently casual shifts to distant keys, the first movement breathes an *alfresco* holiday spirit. For Schumann, the luxuriant, leisurely *Andante* was 'so bursting with rapture that it seems unable to sing itself out'.

The ebullient *Scherzo* draws its piquancy and swagger from a constant tug between triple and duple time. 'Anyone who tried to take [the finale] seriously would only look ridiculous' was Schumann's verdict on the finale: understandable in the face of the jaunty main theme and its ticking accompaniment (was Schubert parodying Haydn's 'Clock' Symphony here?) But Schumann seems to have underestimated the second of the two episodes, which begins with a ravishing *cantabile* melody before developing a hitherto unsuspected sinew.

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