

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 4 December 2023
7.30pm

Paul Lewis piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata in A minor D537 (1817)

I. Allegro ma non troppo

II. Allegretto quasi andantino

III. Allegro vivace

Piano Sonata in B D575 (1817)

I. Allegro ma non troppo

II. Andante

III. Scherzo. Allegretto – Trio

IV. Allegro giusto

Interval

Fantasy Sonata in G D894 (1826)

I. Molto moderato e cantabile

II. Andante

III. Menuetto. Allegro moderato – Trio

IV. Allegretto



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The year 1817 saw the 20-year-old Schubert making a concerted effort to get to grips with the genre of the piano sonata. He completed no fewer than a half-dozen works of the kind, and left a handful of further attempts in an unfinished state. More than ten years later Schubert reached back to the first work in the group, the **Sonata in A minor D537**, and reused the theme of its middle movement for the rondo finale of his A major Sonata D959. As befits its altered position within the work as a whole, the late work is in a more flowing tempo – a plain *Allegretto*, as opposed to the *Allegretto quasi andantino* of D537. The theme as it appears in the sonata of 1817 differs from its famous cousin in the late work not only in its gentle syncopation, but also its texture which has the melody accompanied by a staccato left-hand part with a hint of a march-rhythm – an aspect that is further stressed not only in the most expansive of the movement's episodes, which is an actual march, but also in the disarmingly simple coda.

The sonata's energetic opening movement is notable for its driving rhythm, and for a main subject whose initial phrase culminates on a yearning dissonance. Although the second subject, in the major, is gentler, it, too, is permeated with aching dissonances. The finale begins with a series of rushing scales culminating in the same held note that had formed the apex of the first movement's main subject. The note is followed by a sighing phrase which appears three times, on each occasion in a different key and to different expressive effect – an early instance of the type of emotional ambiguity to which Schubert and Mozart particularly seem to have held the key.

Also dating from 1817 is the **Sonata D575**, in the unusual key of B major. Schubert's manuscript is lost, and we owe the work's survival to a copy which his childhood friend Albert Stadler made for the young pianist Josephine von Koller. Schubert had become acquainted with her family in the summer of 1819, during a visit to their home town of Steyr, in Upper Austria. It's difficult to know what Josephine would have made of the startling series of events in the opening movement of Schubert's sonata. The piece is dominated by the assertive military-style rhythm of its opening bars, and their progressively widening melodic intervals and constant alternation of single notes and full-blooded chords are elaborated in striking fashion during the central development section. Harmonically, too, Schubert is at his boldest, and the first *fortissima*, after only ten bars, occurs with no advance warning on the very remote chord of C major. As if that were not enough, each of the three subsequent themes appears in a different key.

The slow movement is notable for the violence of its minor-mode middle section, with its 'running' left-hand part in forceful octaves. In characteristically Schubertian fashion, the figuration of this central section continues beneath the return of the movement's opening theme.

Among the charming touches in the *Scherzo* third movement is the manner in which its second half takes the concluding phrase of the first as its springboard, immediately throwing it into a new key. The finale's

unifying feature is the tiny phrase in octaves that heralds its main theme. The same idea gives rise to the exposition's closing bars, and – in inverted form – to the curiously childlike beginning of the central development section.

The **Sonata D894** was composed in October 1826, just a few months after Schubert's only other large-scale instrumental work in the key of G major, the string quartet D887. However, when the piece was issued in the following year the word 'sonata' was conspicuously missing from the title page, which promised instead a 'Fantasie, Andante, Menuetto and Allegretto'. The publisher, Tobias Haslinger, was a canny businessman, and he must have known that his sales figures were likely to be healthier if he presented the work to the public as a collection of individual character-pieces.

Schubert's very first chord, topped by the note B, recalls the famous opening of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto, in the same key of G major, but the scorings of the two beginnings are markedly different: while Beethoven uses eight notes, Schubert has only five, and this translucent texture is typical of his piece as a whole. No less characteristically Schubertian is its tempo marking of *Molto moderato e cantabile*. Its one moment of violence occurs in the development section, which is largely in the minor, and invokes what for the period are some very rare *fff* markings. Significantly, though, the development's intensity is achieved without recourse to any acceleration in rhythmic or harmonic pulse.

Schubert's manuscript shows that the slow movement was initially very different from its familiar form. In place of the forceful episode which follows the quiet opening theme there was to have been a gentle melody in the key of B minor. The discarded passage clearly lacked sufficient contrast, and the dramatic outburst that Schubert substituted for it effectively transforms the character of the entire piece. Only the rejected episode's key of B minor was retained.

The minuet third movement is in B minor, too, and the rhythm of its theme is one that Schubert seems to have remembered when he came to write his great Piano Trio D929, whose opening movement contains a very similar B minor theme. In the sonata the rhythmically incisive minuet itself gives way to a *Trio* in the major – a *Ländler*-like piece of infinite tenderness that unfolds *ppp* virtually throughout.

The minuet's insistent repeated-note rhythm also informs the theme of the rondo finale, which has episodes in the style of *écossaises*. The second of those episodes is expansive enough to form a self-contained dance, complete with a trio whose melancholy C minor melody suffers a radiant sea-change into the major. Like the three preceding movements, this one ends with the music fading away into the distance, as though in a haze of nostalgia. Which other composer, we may well wonder, would allow all four movements of a work on so large a scale to end *pianissimo*?

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