

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 8 September 2023  
7.30pm

This concert is supported by the María de los Angeles Zambrano de Sada Music Fund

Mitsuko Uchida piano

Jonathan Biss piano

**Franz Schubert** (1797-1828)

Allegro in A minor D947 'Lebensstürme' (1828)

March in E flat minor D819 No. 5 (1824)

Rondo in A D951 (1828)

*Interval*

Divertissement à la hongroise in G minor D818 (1824)

*I. Andante • II. Marcia. Andante con moto • III. Allegretto*



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The longer one lives with **Schubert**, the more moving and, paradoxically, the more unfathomable he becomes. It is his lyricism – sublime, simple, seemingly effortless – that first captures the ear and the heart. Then one might discover *Winterreise* and, with it, the horror that complements and complicates that lyrical impulse. But then you hear the late instrumental music – the C major Symphony, or the E flat major Piano Trio – in which those same qualities are applied to a massive canvas. These pieces are a revelation. Schubert's music is not merely beautiful, and profound, and confronting: it is *grand*. Its scale is epic; its vision is staggering.

And then comes another revelation: that of the nearly 1000 works Schubert wrote in his solitary, impoverished, syphilis-plagued 31-year lifetime, it is not just the relative few that made the hit parade that are a demonstration of his magnificent, inimitable gift. No. Open your ears further, and you will find that one little-known piece after another is a world unto itself, each suffused with such tragedy and such tenderness, each offering a window into a different corner of Schubert's soul.

This is the space that Schubert's music for piano 4 hands occupies. Apart from the *Fantasy in F minor*, a decidedly un-celebratory work trotted out for many celebratory concerts, most of it is unknown to audiences. Apart from a few dedicated piano duos, much of it is unknown to *pianists*. What a shame! It would be difficult to overstate the richness of this music, or the extent to which it rewards an immersion in it. In true Schubert fashion, it can be massive in scope, but it can also evoke feelings of overwhelming intensity through a lone harmonic shift, or turn of phrase, or sleight of counterpoint so unassuming, any attempt to explain the source of its power would be an exercise in futility.

Each of the four works on this programme is riveting for its own set of reasons. The *Allegro in A minor*, written in Schubert's last year, is a cataclysm that owes much of its power to its form. Late in life, Schubert's sonata movements expanded in a quite extraordinary way: their willingness to wander – to make room for Schubert's most sublime daydreams and his most upsetting nightmares – makes them unlike any music written before or since. This *Allegro* is no exception: its tragic nature is laid bare from its first notes and is somehow heightened rather than tempered by the unearthly beauty of its second theme. The arrival of this theme is a stunning event. In the work's opening pages, Schubert uses the extra pair of hands at his disposal in a brilliant, unsettling way, creating constant rhythmic and motivic complication. The second theme, by contrast, has the purity of a hymn, played *pianississimo* in the distant key of A flat major. The central fact of this theme is not its beauty, or even its profundity, but its faraway-ness. And the central fact of the *piece* is the tension between that remote utopia, and a terrible fate that cannot be avoided and grows ever closer.

By contrast, the *Rondo in A*, contemporaneous to the *Allegro* and possibly intended as a companion to it, offers 12 minutes of nearly uninterrupted consolation. It spotlights that most elemental gift of Schubert: the lyricism. The serenity and directness of this music are instantly disarming; it seems to have flowed from him utterly unimpeded. This being Schubert, that extraordinary serenity cannot quite mask the equally extraordinary fragility: *sehnsucht* is everywhere. But this is the rare Schubert work where the horror, ever lurking, never rises to the surface.

The *March in E flat minor* is again something else, a funeral procession that, in true Schubert fashion, grows that much more heartbreaking when it moves from minor to major. But perhaps most remarkable of all is the *Divertissement à la hongroise*, a portal into a bleak, melancholy world. This music is devastating but not depressing; it is too beautiful for that. Its point of origin is Hungarian folk music, which Schubert treats with the opposite of condescension: in his hands, even the most unassuming motive becomes unspeakably profound.

Schubert's music contains the full spectrum of human emotion, to be sure. But loneliness was the central fact of his existence and, accordingly and heartbreakingly, it is at the centre of his music as well. Schubert could convey what it is to be alone like no other artist, and he does so in nearly every one of his works, either fleetingly or unremittingly.

To experience this in the context of his 4-hand music is to experience a deep irony, as there is no other musical genre in which two instrumentalists find themselves so close to one another, physically and otherwise. Often, the *primo* player's left hand will cross below the *secondo* player's right; nearly as often, Schubert will ask the two pianists to do the impossible and play the same note at the same time. (This might be an oversight; I am inclined to think that it is not, but rather a reflection of the human connection for which Schubert was so starved.)

But the closeness goes deeper than that. Many pianists have analogised pedaling to breathing, in that both are done primarily instinctually, as needed. To have another pianist pedal for you, as you must in this music, is thus to allow another person to be your lungs. To trust that someone else will anticipate your choice to linger, or not, over a harmony that strikes you differently today from how it did yesterday is a profound sort of trust – the sort of trust that comes only with deep attunement to another human being.

That is to say: playing Schubert's 4-hand music is an act of extreme intimacy in the service of music that conveys extreme loneliness. To feel Schubert's loneliness so palpably is painful. But living with this music and being able to share in it is a privilege, and a gift.

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