

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 9 May 2025  
7.30pm

Francesco Piemontesi piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Fantasy in C D605a 'Grazer Fantasie' (?1818)

*I. Moderato*

*II. Alla polacca*

*III. Moderato con espressione*

Four Impromptus D935 (1827)

*No. 1 in F minor: Allegro moderato*

*No. 2 in A flat: Allegretto*

*No. 3 in B flat: Andante*

*No. 4 in F minor: Allegro scherzando*

Interval

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Piano Sonata in B minor S178 (1852-3)

*I. Lento assai*

*II. Andante sostenuto*

*III. Allegro energico*

*IV. Andante sostenuto*



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The discovery, in 1969 in southern Austria of an unknown and substantial *Fantasie* for solo piano by **Schubert** must have been a musicologist's dream come true. The manuscript was among many other papers bundled into a chest that had found its way into the attic of a house in Knittenfeld in Styria. The house had been shut up since the end of the Second World War and was part of the estate originally formed by the Hüttenbrenner family. Two centuries earlier, two Hüttenbrenner brothers, Anselm and Rudolf, had been close friends of Schubert – Schubert composed a set of piano variations on a theme from a quartet by Anselm – and Rudolf had made copies of many works by Schubert, including this *Fantasie*. Anselm had other claims to fame – he was one of only two people to have been present at the death of Beethoven, and he withheld the score of Schubert's 'Unfinished' Symphony for years after Schubert's death, its première delayed until 1865.

The 'Grazer' Fantasy was probably written in 1818, when Schubert was 20, and was authenticated by Schubert scholars and published the year it was discovered. The first performance was in the city of Graz, hence the title. It opens with a serene and broad melody over a gentle arpeggio bass that eventually yields to an elaborate modulation for the lively central *Alla polacca* (In the style of a polonaise) in the remote key of F sharp major. There follow more sections and many new keys before a brief return to the opening and a quiet close.

Schubert's last full year 1827 was amazingly productive – the two Piano Trios, the *Fantasie* for violin and piano, two sets of Impromptus and *Winterreise*; and these would be followed in 1828 by the String Quintet and the last three piano sonatas. Schubert hoped for a quick return on his Impromptus, a form created by the Bohemian composer Jan Voříšek for accessible, amateur-friendly, expressively spontaneous piano pieces. Schubert's publisher used the term as a selling initiative, and the composer presented them as 'four impromptus which can appear singly or all four together'. In the case of the D935 set, they did not catch on, possibly because they were too difficult, and they remained unpublished until 1839, when Anton Diabelli gave them their first printing. Schumann described the four pieces as a sonata in disguise, with the first and last of them both in the same key (F minor), a Minuet and Trio second movement, and a set of variations 'slow movement' based on a melody from Schubert's incidental music for the play *Rosamunde*. This idea has been generally dismissed, and the fact that Schubert had numbered the D935 Impromptus as 5, 6, 7 and 8, suggests that he thought of them as a continuation of the slightly earlier D899 set of four. Both sets are now core piano repertoire.

The first Impromptu sets out like a sonata movement, then opens into an extended minor-key episode that works back to the opening. The Trio section of the Minuet develops through several keys before returning to the Minuet. The five variations of the third Impromptu become freer from the minor-key third variation onwards, and the last Impromptu is a virtuosic *Allegro scherzando*, full of rhythmic bite, with an elaborate central section that climaxes in an explosion of furious scales.

Schubert composed some marvellous Fantasies, including the F minor for piano duet, the one for violin and piano, and the mighty 'Wanderer', which **Franz Liszt** played often in recital admiring its seamless and subtle connection to sonata form, something he set out to explore in his Sonata in B minor. In 1847 aged 36, Liszt turned his back on life as a virtuoso pianist and the pressures of 'Lisztomania', with a terrifyingly arduous touring schedule, to develop as a composer. He finished his Sonata in 1853, during his time as honorary Kapellmeister in Weimar, at the start of his 40-year relationship with Princess Carolyne zu Sayn-Wittgenstein.

Beethoven and Schubert played a central role in reinventing the sonata formula so that it did not sound formulaic, in the process hugely expanding the form's emotional and psychological reach. In the 'Wanderer' Fantasy, Schubert had made whole sections function both as movements of a sonata and of the formal sonata process. Liszt's approach is much the same, although, not surprisingly, Liszt piles on the drama, especially in developing his themes. Each one has its own character, but they relate strongly to each other. They also provide a coherent sense of drama that can be at once visionary, noble and intensely dramatic. The music is so instantly characterised that it sounds like an unfolding story – the quiet opening, with octave Gs followed by a sinister descending motif, leading to a volcanic eruption of energy, presents three main elements that return in various guises showing off Liszt's genius for manipulating his material to maximum expressive effect. Liszt's love of Goethe's version of the Faust legend has been cited as the programme of the Sonata, referring to Faust, Gretchen and Mephistopheles, although the composer apparently did not allude to this. The four sections, with a slow movement and a fugato Scherzo, are rounded off by a transcendent, redemptive epilogue.

Liszt dedicated it to Robert Schumann, who in 1839 had dedicated his *Fantasie* Op. 17 to Liszt. It is unlikely that Schumann, now in a sanatorium, ever heard it. His wife Clara did hear it and hated the piece, as did Brahms. Wagner, on the other hand, loved it.

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