



CLEVELAND
CHAMBER
MUSIC
SOCIETY

PROGRAM NOTES

Till Fellner

November 12, 2019 – 7:30 p.m.

Mixon Hall

Piano Sonata in A major, D. 959

Franz Schubert

Born: Vienna-Himmelpfortgrund, 1797

Died: Vienna, 1828

Composed: 1828

Unlike Mozart and Beethoven, Schubert never performed in public as a pianist. He was proficient enough on the instrument to accompany his songs during friendly gatherings, and he was also fond of playing and improvising dance music. In one of his letters to his father, he was even able to report: “I was assured by many that the keys began to sing under my fingers, which, if true, gives me great joy, for I can’t stand that damned banging that even excellent pianists are guilty of — this delights neither the ear nor the soul.” Yet he was no virtuoso, and since in those days composers were typically their own performers, this meant that Schubert’s piano sonatas did not become widely known until long after the composer’s death.

Schubert’s piano sonatas were written during three distinct periods in his life: in 1817-18, in 1825, and in 1828, the last year of his life. The two sonatas we shall hear

today belong to the last period—in fact, they are the last ones Schubert ever wrote.

The A-major sonata opens with a set of chords over a pedal point that will return, in different shapes, in all four movements, most emphatically (and audibly) in the closing measures of the finale. In the first movement, these chords, which generate the first theme, contrast with a lyrical second theme that touches on many keys as it unfolds, not shying away from some harsh, dissonant progressions along the way. At the repeat, Schubert adds one slight ornament to the theme that goes by so fast as to be almost unnoticeable; yet these four sixteenth-notes, arranged in irregular five-bar phrases, become the starting point of the entire development section. The recapitulation ends with a recall of the initial series of chords, played softly in a high register.

The quiet opening theme of the Andantino has an even rhythmic flow that musicologist Alfred Einstein, in his 1951 book on Schubert, compared to the song *Pilgerweise* (“Pilgrim’s Song”) on a text by Schubert’s friend Franz von Schober. “I am a pilgrim on this earth and go quietly from house to house”—says the text of this song, and the sonata melody also goes quietly along its way, repeated over and over again, seemingly wandering without a precise aim or destination.

And then an extraordinary thing happens. As in the first movement, Schubert starts a seemingly harmless sixteenth-note motion. In this case, the sixteenth-notes speed up to triplets and thirty-seconds, over unsettling dissonances and daring key changes. The notes seem to get out of the composer’s control and follow their own path as in a dream. In reality, of course, the section is carefully planned along a single continuous crescendo. It ends with one of Schubert’s most shattering climaxes and stops abruptly after a single strongly-accented chord. Only after a number of weaker “aftershocks” does the music finally calm down sufficiently to resume the wandering melody of the beginning.

Three pieces for Piano, Op. 11 **Arnold Schoenberg**

Born: Vienna, 1874

Died: Los Angeles, 1951

Composed: 1909

“I can feel the air from another planet”—a poem by German symbolist poet Stefan George (1868-1933) that begins with these words takes the pace of the fourth movement in Schoenberg's String Quartet No. 2 (1908). Most unusually, the third and fourth movements of this quartet include a soprano solo, and “the air of another planet” can be felt in all of Schoenberg's music written around that time. The harmonic

The third movement is a light-hearted Scherzo. Its playful alternation of registers may have been influenced by Beethoven’s Sonata Op. 2, No. 2 (also in A major). Yet the tone of *Ländler* (the Austrian folk dance) belongs unmistakably to Schubert, whom we may also recognize by the abrupt key changes and the simple, laid-back Trio section.

The graceful theme of the final sonata-rondo is one that Schubert had previously used in another of his sonatas, the A-minor work of 1817 (D. 537), where it appears in the second movement. In this new incarnation, the theme alternates with three elaborate episodes. The first and third of these are identical, mimicking the function of a secondary theme in sonata form (which is why this movement is called a “sonata-rondo”). In the central episode, the tonality changes to minor and the music becomes quite stormy. The return of the rondo theme brings back the serene atmosphere. The way Schubert fragments this theme just before the end, with sudden fits and starts, is certainly indebted to Beethoven (as in the last movement of Op. 31, No. 1); yet the ending, with a recall of the motto from the first movement is entirely without precedent.

language of late Romanticism, which Schoenberg had been expanding since *Transfigured Night* (1899), increasingly approached “outer space.” Overcoming the “gravity” of the traditional major-minor system, it began to glide freely in the uncharted domain of atonality.

This bold move was not a gratuitous act, nor was it inimical to musical expression. It was a logical continuation of

a process that started in the 19th century. In Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, all-pervasive chromaticism was a means to give voice to the composer's Romantic vision of love and death. In Schoenberg's case, atonality served to express feelings of detachment from the everyday world—feelings for which the rules of classical harmony were too narrow.

The Second String Quartet bears the opus number 10 in Schoenberg's catalogue. His next work, Op. 11, written in 1909, is a set of three piano pieces—Schoenberg's first works for piano solo—in which the atonal style is fully established. Yet atonality does not mean that all ties to the past are severed. The first piece begins with an allusion to the rhythm of a slow, melancholy waltz, recognizable even without its underlying accompaniment. This waltz, detached from its roots, is varied, developed, and ornamented. “Thematic” episodes, in which variants of the opening theme can be heard, alternate with what one commentator has called “outburst areas”—free and virtuosic passages that represent the opposite end of the expressive spectrum.

In the case of the second piece, the traditional element is an *ostinato*—an almost constant accompaniment in eighth-notes that

emphasizes the minor third D-F. Over this *ostinato*, we hear a gentle theme with a symmetrical structure. It could be likened to a nocturne, were it not for the dramatic *fortissimo* passage with its powerful, high-lying trills in the central section. As in the first piece, there is an almost literal recapitulation at the end.

The third piece is the shortest, fastest, and stormiest of the set. The texture is dominated by thundering chords and fast runs, requiring a high degree of virtuosity. Interspersed with these dramatic materials are fleeting lyrical moments in a slower tempo, in one instance recalling the theme of the first movement. Gone are the recapitulations of the first two pieces; instead, the energy is suddenly spent at the end in an entirely novel way.

The third piece was written several months after the first two. By that time, Schoenberg had moved even further into the exploration of the new musical “planet,” having begun work on his revolutionary song cycle on text by Stefan George, *The Book of the Hanging Gardens* (Op. 15), as well as the expressionist opera *Erwartung* (“Expectation”), which seems particularly close to the mood of the third piano piece.

Sonata in B-flat major, D. 960

Franz Schubert

Born: Vienna-Himmelfortgrund, 1797

Died: Vienna, 1828

Composed: 1828

Schubert's last sonata covers an enormous emotional ground from the contemplative opening to the exuberant close, and is without a doubt one of the peaks of the entire piano literature.

The first movement, significantly, is not marked *Allegro* but rather *Molto moderato*. The difference is important. Nothing must be rushed, so that one has

sufficient time to savor the two things that make Schubert's mature works so special: his unique melodic writing, and the ingenuity with which he transforms his melodies and builds bridges between them. Schubert had learned from Beethoven the idea of a “three-key” exposition where the music does not proceed from the home key directly to its goal, the dominant, but instead

takes a detour, with the secondary theme appearing in a remote third key (as in Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata for example). But Schubert's route—B-flat major to F-sharp minor to F major—is more adventurous than Beethoven's. The words "route" and "adventurous" are used with good reason here: the initial melody is one of Schubert's great "wandering" themes, and it is indeed as if we were embarking on a journey that takes us to many wonderful landscapes before returning home for a rest. (In this, our journey differs from the one in *Winterreise*, where there is no home and no return.) At the crucial points of the journey—at the beginning, before the recapitulation, and at the end—an ominous trill on the low G-flat provides an atmosphere of suspense.

The key of the second-movement *Andante sostenuto*, C-sharp minor, is extremely remote from the sonata's main key of B-flat major. Its wistful melody, played in sweet parallel thirds, is surrounded by an accompaniment figure in the left hand that keeps crossing over above the right hand. A second melody, in A major, serves as middle section. It gradually grows in intensity and reaches *forte* dynamics after a series of striking modulations. The first theme then returns: the movement is crowned by one of those magical Schubertian minor-major shifts where the sudden tonal change carries a particularly strong emotional charge.

The third-movement Scherzo (*Allegro vivace con delicatezza*) has a simple melody but a very intricate harmonic

scheme. Aside from a few strongly accented notes, the volume never rises above *mezzoforte*, and the scherzo retains its somewhat hushed quality throughout. The soft and understated Trio section (in B-flat minor) has the same *delicatezza* as the scherzo itself.

The Finale combines sonata form with certain features of the rondo. Its main theme is reminiscent of that of Beethoven's last composition, the finale replacing the *Great Fugue* in the String Quartet Op. 130 (in the same key of B-flat major). Both movements start with the same harmony, outside the key of B-flat, and both reach the home key gradually by the end of the first phrase. Schubert follows this theme with a lyrical secondary melody, suddenly interrupted by a rest and swept away by a sudden dramatic *fortissimo* that soon gives way in its turn to a lively tarantella dance. In the middle section, the playful first theme itself is subjected to some dramatic development; a literal recapitulation and a brief *Presto* coda concludes this great sonata.

Schubert had intended to dedicate his three sonatas from the year 1828 to the composer and piano virtuoso Johann Nepomuk Hummel, but the works were not published until 1838, ten years after Schubert's death. At that point, the publisher Diabelli dedicated them to Robert Schumann, whose enthusiastic review opened the door to the posthumous recognition of Schubert's music outside Vienna.

-Peter Laki

Mr. Laki is a musicologist and Visiting Associate Professor of Music at Bard College. He has been the annotator for the Society's program booklet since 2012, having previously served as annotator for the Cleveland Orchestra from 1990 to 2007. He is a native of Budapest and holds a Ph.D. in music from the University of Pennsylvania.