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Paul Lewis

Friday 3 & Tuesday 7 February, 7.30pm

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Paul Lewis Piano

Duration

120-minutes (including interval)



CREDIT: KAUPOI KIKKAS

Program

Friday 3 February

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata No.7 in E-flat, D.568

Piano Sonata No.14 in A minor, D.784

Interval

Piano Sonata No.17 in D, D.850

Tuesday 7 February

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata No.15 in C, D.840

Piano Sonata No.13 in A, D.664

Interval

Piano Sonata No.16 in A minor, D.845

About the Artist

Paul Lewis is one of the foremost interpreters of the Central European piano repertoire, his performances and recordings of Beethoven and Schubert receiving universal critical acclaim. He was awarded Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (CBE) for his services to music, and the sincerity and depth of his musical approach have won him fans around the world.

This global popularity is reflected in the world-class orchestras with whom he works, including the Berlin Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony, London Symphony, Philharmonia, Bavarian Radio Symphony, NHK Symphony, New York Philharmonic, LA Philharmonic, Royal Concertgebouw and Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestras. His close relationship with Boston Symphony Orchestra led to his selection as the 2020 Koussevitzky Artist at Tanglewood.

In chamber music, he is a regular at Wigmore Hall, having played there more than 100 times, and was one of the artists selected to play at the hall's Lunchtime Series at the start of the coronavirus crisis. He works closely with tenor Mark Padmore in lied recitals around the world – they have recorded three Schubert song cycles together.

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About the music

Friday 3 February's Program

In 1817 Schubert began and abandoned many piano sonatas. including the Sonata in D flat major, D.567, a straightforward, three-movement work despite a relatively unusual key signature. The work was technically 'finished', unlike the fragments or 'torsos' littering his studio, so it is strange that Schubert returned to it in around 1826 (though it was only published after his death). He transposed it to E flat – a more 'orthodox' key – and revised it, adding a Menuetto and Trio that maintain a seamless stylistic unity with the original material.

The teen-aged Schubert studied with Antonio Salieri, who when he wasn't murdering his rivals, was clearly a gifted and inspiring if conservative teacher who laid the foundation for Schubert's technique in word-setting, phrase structure and basic counterpoint. These, naturally, had flow-one effect in his instrumental works.

As Charles Rosen has noted, Mozart (rather than Haydn) was the model for many Viennese composers in the early 19th century, leading commonly, in his view, to 'a conception of form as essentially melodic; the exposition becomes a succession of themes, separated by connecting developments.' Even in its revised form we can hear this 'loose' aspect of Schubert's design, but need to stress that the 'connective tissue' is very often as beautiful and engaging as the more extended thematic writing.

The first movement has a largely unadorned first theme in even, four-bar phrases, derived from the common chord of E flat and inflected with dotted rhythms that recur throughout the sonata. In 3/4, the movement has moments of unmistakably Viennese rhythm in its second subject. The slow movement features a pensive G minor melody that retains the memory of the Italian 'serious opera' that Salieri championed, contrasted with a more rhythmically urgent central passage.

The *Menuetto* is built out of four-bar strains, and the dotted rhythm motif generates the central trio section. In the 6/8 Finale the upward rising *arpeggio* of the opening movement's theme is again to the fore, releasing more turbulent episodes, and Schubert's characteristic swerves between major and minor modes.

The years 1822 and 1823, as we know, saw a major crisis in Schubert's health, and, while we should always be wary of reading the facts of composers' lives into their work, it is hard not to hear what Stephen Hough refers to as a 'chilling desolation' pervading the opening movement of the A minor Sonata, D.784. For a composer celebrated for his sophisticated harmony, Schubert here writes an inordinate amount of music in bare octaves, as at the start, where they are matched by the starkness of the intervals and a slowly gathering intensity of volume. Moments of incipient rage alternate with hymnal calm, and these disparate elements, along with dotted rhythms from the opening form the basis of the movement's development section.

These sudden juxtapositions indicate that Schubert had made a study of Beethoven (whom, as a teenager, he had written off because of Beethoven's 'eccentricity which confuses and confounds...tragic and comic, sacred and profane, pleasant and unpleasant, heroic strains and mere noise'). Barely harmonised octaves give out the second movement's theme, which is interrupted by quiet chromatic motifs (marked *sordini* – muted – showing that Schubert, like Beethoven, was acutely aware of piano tone-colour. The movement flowers into the Schubert of tinkling bells, and the interrupting motifs, of course, gain great significance.

In late Beethoven the dramatic weight of a work frequently rests on the last movement, and so it is here (this is the last of Schubert's piano sonatas cast in three, not four, movements.) Tarantella-like triplets, crisply repeated chords, and bare octaves contend at the start, before Schubert unleashes one of his extended and sinuous melodies. These disparate elements create thrilling contrast, borne along by inexorable energy.

Appearing as Op.85 in 1826, the D major sonata, D.850 is one of the three published during Schubert's life. It is cast in four substantive movements (none actually slow) beginning with an *Allegro vivace* that has something of the optimism of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto, before introducing trumpet calls that take the music into more unstable emotional territory. (The piece's nickname 'Gasteiner' refers to Schubert's composing it as the spa town of Bad Gastein in 1825.) The second movement is marked *con moto* (with movement), and alternates songlike material with a more insistent syncopated passage; each is developed as the piece goes on – occasionally interrupted by improvisatory flourishes – and combined at the end. The *scherzo* is genuinely humorous, with its self-consciously pompous dotted rhythms, heavy voicing and metrical overemphasis. The central trio seems artlessly simple until, being Schubert, it isn't...The finale is a *Rondo*, its main material – elaborated on each restatement – drawn from the vernacular Viennese music that Mozart might have drawn on for a character like Papageno, with contrasting episodes of often extreme rhetorical contrast.

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Tuesday 7 February's Program

Rachmaninoff might seem an unlikely way into tonight's program, but he tells us something about the journey Schubert's solo keyboard sonatas have over the last hundred years, from relative obscurity to a secure place in the recital hall and on record. In 1928, the year the world of music marked the centenary of Schubert's death, Rachmaninoff, one of the greatest pianists on the planet, admitted that he had no idea that Schubert had written any works of this kind.

Despite subsequent pioneering work by such pianists as Artur Schnabel and Wilhelm Kempff, the situation only improved slowly. In the late 1960s, one of Schubert's most passionate advocates, Paul Badura-Skoda, could refer to the 'unknown' Schubert, and when Andras Schiff began recording the sonatas in 1992 he described most of them as 'relatively unknown and underrated.' The pace of Schubert scholarship may have been a factor; while major biographies and thematic catalogues of Beethoven, Mozart and Haydn had appeared by the late 19th century, it was not until 1951, with the appearance of Otto Deutsch's thematic catalogue of

Schubert's work, that we acquired the D. numbers by which the music can be reliably organised. Much of Schubert's music was not even published during his lifetime.

It is also the case that you cannot describe Schubert's sonatas as a cycle, in the way we think of the imposing legacy of Beethoven's 32 sonatas. And while the Eighth Symphony may be Schubert's most famous 'Unfinished' work, the performer attempting to see the totality of Schubert's piano sonatas is faced with many incomplete works. In 1817 alone Schubert began, or sketched movements for, eight solo sonatas, of which four come down to us in a fragmentary state. This is an issue not confined only to his first years as a composer, for the opening work in tonight's program is in some ways as significant an unfinished work as the symphony with that nickname.

The critic Neville Cardus once observed that Schubert was 'surprised, or rather enchanted, into composition;' the flip side of this gift for the seemingly spontaneous idea, or quicksilver change of mood, is that Schubert could also become disenchanted with his creations. Amid the fragments, isolated movements and false starts scattered through his worklist (he would sometimes begin writing a work on a blank page of an earlier piece) the Sonata in C, D.840 is a special case. Like so much of his work, it was published after his death and when it first appeared, in 1861, it was given the title *Reliquie* (Relic), and was claimed to be his last sonata. He had actually composed it in 1825, around the time of the sonata D.845, which Paul Lewis will also perform tonight.

What makes D.840 unique? Its projected scale, for one, as the two surviving complete moments – and the fragments that remain of the succeeding *Minuet* and *Finale* – suggest a Sonata of considerable ambition; and the beauty of its ideas, for another. Although performers, and other composers (including Australian pianist Ian Munro) have created 'completed' versions of the work, Andras Schiff is not alone in thinking that after the *Andante* of this Sonata, 'there is nothing more to be said.'

The gently questing theme which opens the *Moderato* gives way to dramatic, bare octaves. Many commentators have remarked on the seemingly orchestral thinking in Schubert's keyboard writing at this time (1825 was also the year of his 'Great' C major symphony), and the dramatic contrast between these opening ideas and the meditative second subject does suggest something incipiently orchestral. In the development section, the restrained melancholy so characteristic of the composer undergoes a tortured battle with a palpable sense of tension and dread. In such moments Schubert seems to be asking as much of the piano of his day as it could give. Yet, as if every work of his proves that he is an essentially intimate composer, this movement resolves itself, suddenly and unexpectedly, in music of a haunting, gentle uncertainty. The *Andante* presents its ideas daringly unadorned at times, and at others – in the middle section, specifically – with a gentle flow that suggests a barcarolle. As with the previous movement, we seem here to be headed for a bold coda, only for the mood to change at the last moment. Unusually, this *Andante* is also largely in the home tonality of C (although minor rather than major), suggesting that these two movements might be self-sufficient after all.

Depending on how you count the incomplete or incompletely preserved works, it can be said that there are 22 piano sonatas by Schubert; only three were published before his death, and D.664 of 1819, now one of his most widely played, was not one of them. It first saw the light of day a decade after it was

written, and the manuscript has been lost. It shares with the Trout quintet, written around the same time, the key of A Major and a similar air of relaxed warmth, which it breathes from its opening bars. It was written on holiday in upper Austria, and scholarship suggests that the work expresses his delight in the countryside (which he considered to be "unimaginably lovely") and his fondness for the young pianist Josefa von Koller, whose company he was then enjoying, and for whom he composed the work. He wrote that she was 'very pretty, plays the piano well and is going to sing several of my songs.'

The heart-easing lyricism of the opening movement gives way to a more ambiguous emotional landscape in the central *Andante*, while the final, dancing *Allegro* provides the work's greatest opportunities for virtuosity, while retaining the sonata's over-arching air of lightness and geniality; Josefa von Koller must have been a fine pianist. This is the shortest of Schubert's complete sonatas and proof – if proof were needed – that he could create an instrumental work of piercing beauty on a smaller canvas.

Between 1819 and 1825 – the year of the sonatas D.840 and D.845 – the biggest change in the composer's life was the onset of the symptoms of syphilis, which first became manifest in 1823. There was, at the time, no practical cure for the disease and from that moment, as critic Anthony Tommasini writes, 'Schubert lived and worked under the assumption that he would soon die.' It is too neat to draw parallels between the circumstances of Schubert's life and the music of this time – 'genius is not the slave of circumstance', as the composer's biographer John Reed put it – yet in his more private music his natural lyricism can now take on an air of longing and valediction, as in D.840.

The opening pages of the A minor sonata are a case in point also, as the music – alternating an arpeggio-based idea with a chordal one – moves from hesitancy to a sometimes ominous insistence. While on holiday in in the summer of 1825 Schubert played the second movement of this sonata to friends, after which he wrote to his father and stepmother: 'Particularly appreciated were the variations from my new sonata...several people assured me that under my hands the keys become singing voices.' The variations suggest other instrumental colours at times, particularly the hunting horns which seems to colour the final minutes before moving gently into the distance. The ebullient *Scherzo* is followed by a short, propulsive Rondo which opens with Mozartian verve and is brought to a sudden stop by two forceful chords.

This was his first completed four-movement sonata since 1817, and he is in no hurry. His gift for epic, long-breathed songfulness is particularly mesmerising in the opening *Moderato*. It was also the rare sonata Schubert got to see published, in early 1826, as 'Première grande Sonate', and was reviewed in Leipzig's *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*. The anonymous reviewer wrote, as we might today, of the work's 'suppressed but sometimes violently erupting sombre passion, alternating with melancholy seriousness.'

Schubert was known to his admirers in Vienna largely for his songs, and it is not idle speculation to imagine that, had there been a greater likelihood of publication for his piano sonatas, he may have been compelled to finish more of them. We can be thankful that, in recent decades, the wonders of these works – complete or not – have been revealed to us with increasing frequency.

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