

EHNES / WEILERSTEIN / BARNATAN TRIO

October 28, 2023

FRANZ SCHUBERT

Piano Sonata in C Minor, D.958

Allegro

Adagio

Menuetto: Allegro

Allegro

Fantasy in C Major for Violin and Piano, D.934

Andante molto; Allegretto; Andantino; Allegro vivace; Presto

INTERMISSION

Piano Trio in E-flat Major, D.929

Allegro

Andante con moto

Scherzo: Allegro moderato

Allegro moderato

LATE SCHUBERT

All three works on this program were composed during the final year of Schubert's life, so inevitably we think of them as "late Schubert." But we should remember Donald Francis Tovey's pointed corrective that Schubert died at 31, so everything he wrote is "early Schubert." A seventy-year lifespan would have taken Schubert to 1867 and let him hear the music of Chopin, Liszt, and Schumann, as well as the operas of Rossini and the early operas of Verdi and Wagner. Who knows how Schubert might have grown as a composer in that rich environment? But over his final year, Schubert's music deepened in unexpected ways, even as his health began to falter and finally failed. The three works on this program give us a tangible flavor of that final year.

Piano Sonata in C Minor, D.958

FRANZ SCHUBERT

Born January 31, 1797, Vienna

Died November 19, 1828, Vienna

The year 1828 was both a miracle and a disaster for Schubert. The miracle lay in the level of his creativity: he completed his "*Great*" *Symphony in C Major* and several works for piano duet during the winter and spring, the *Mass in E-flat Major* over the summer, three piano sonatas in September, and the *Cello Quintet* in October. The disaster, of course, was his health. Never fully well after a year-long illness in the 1822-23, Schubert went into sudden decline in the fall and died suddenly in November at age 31.

The *Piano Sonata in C Minor* was the first of the sonatas composed that summer. Everyone feels the influence of Beethoven here; Schubert's biographer John Reed believes that he was consciously trying to assume the mantle of Beethoven (who had died the previous year), and certainly the choice of key, the dramatic gestures, and the character of the thematic material suggest the older composer.

The beginning of the *Allegro* resounds with echoes of Beethoven, both in the emphatic opening chords and in the muttering, nervous main theme. Yet quickly this theme turns serene and flowing, reminding us to value this sonata as the music of Schubert rather than searching for resemblances to other composers. The chordal second subject is pure Schubert, and the extended development—built around the collision of these quite different kinds of music—brings a great deal

of emotional variety.

The *Adagio*, with its elegant, measured main theme, has also reminded many of that earlier master. Schubert marks the opening *sempre legato*, yet with its fermatas and pauses and pounding triplets this movement too brings a range of expression. The *Menuetto* seems at first more conventional: the initial statement of the main theme is in octaves in the right hand, but soon Schubert is inserting one-measure rests that catch us by surprise as they break the music's flow. The finale begins as what seems a conventional tarantella. Throughout this extended movement, Schubert maintains the expected 6/8 meter of the tarantella, yet he accents that meter with such variety that the pulse sometimes feels completely different. Similarly, he moves with graceful freedom through a range of unexpected keys, including B major and C-sharp minor, so that this movement seems to be constantly evolving, right up to the two thunderous concluding chords.

Fantasy in C Major for Violin and Piano, D.934

Schubert wrote the *Fantasy for Violin and Piano* in December 1827, and it was first performed in public on January 20, 1828, by violinist Joseph Slavik and pianist Karl von Bocklet, one of Schubert's close friends. That premiere was a failure. The audience is reported to have begun to drift out during the performance, reviewers professed mystification, and the *Fantasy* was not published until 1850, twenty-two years after Schubert's death.

Hearing this lovely music today, it is hard to imagine how anyone could have had trouble with it, for the only thing unusual about the *Fantasy* is its structure. About twenty minutes long, it falls into four clear sections that are played without pause. Though it seems to have some of the shape of a violin sonata, the movements do not develop in the expected sonata form, and Schubert was quite correct to call this piece a "fantasy," with that term's implication of freedom from formal restraint.

Appealing as the *Fantasy* may be to hear, it is extremely difficult to perform, and it demands players of the greatest skill. The first section, marked *Andante molto*, opens with shimmering ripples of sound from the piano, and the violin enters almost unnoticed. Soon, though, it rises to soar high above the accompaniment before brief cadenza-like passages for both violin and piano lead abruptly to the *Allegretto*. Here the violin has the dance-like opening idea, the piano immediately picks this up, and quickly the instruments are imitating and answering each

other. The violin writing in this section, full of wide skips and string-crossings, is particularly difficult. The third section, marked *Andantino*, is a set of variations. The piano alone plays the melody, which comes from Schubert's song *Sei mir gegrüsst* ("Greetings to Thee"), written in 1821, and Schubert then offers four variations. At the conclusion of the variations, the shimmering music from the beginning returns briefly before the vigorous final section, marked *Allegro vivace*. Schubert brings the *Fantasy* to a close with a *Presto* coda, both instruments straining forward before the violin suddenly flashes upward to strike the concluding high C.

Piano Trio in E-flat Major, D.929

The premiere of the *Trio in E-flat Major* was one of the few public triumphs in Schubert's brief life. It took place at a concert of his music given in Vienna on March 26, 1828, one year to the day—coincidentally—after Beethoven had died in that city. Schubert was lucky in his performers on that occasion: the violinist was Joseph Böhm, the cellist Joseph Linke, and the pianist Carl Maria von Bocklet—all three had been associated with Beethoven, who admired their playing. The audience, packed with Schubert's friends, was wildly enthusiastic. The concert even turned a profit, and the composer found himself briefly wealthy—he used some of the money to go hear Paganini, who was appearing then in Vienna.

The *Allegro* opens with a powerful unison figure three octaves deep. This theme is only six measures long, but in that brief space Schubert has already modulated from E-flat major to C minor. Almost instantly, a countertheme spins off this main idea, and later in the movement still another theme grows out of this opening idea—it is as if that basic shape is so pregnant and Schubert's melodic gift so fertile that themes are being born in front of us. The long development moves easily over silvery piano triplets before the concluding cadence, which ingeniously combines both main themes.

The *Andante con moto* begins with an accompaniment that is brilliant in its understatement. Rather than offering a steady rhythm, Schubert gives the piano an odd little hop, and that asymmetric hop is the difference between routine and inspired writing. Over it, the cello sings the soaring and noble main melody. This opening appears to have had an unusual inspiration: in November 1827, just as he was beginning work on this trio, Schubert heard a recital by the Swedish tenor Isak Albert Berg, and among the Swedish songs sung on that

occasion was one whose main theme-shape anticipates Schubert's theme here. The movement rises to a huge climax, marked triple *forte*, before concluding quietly on the opening theme.

The third movement is marked *Scherzo: Allegro moderato*, though in a letter to his publisher Schubert referred to it as a "minuet." While it retains some of the shape of the classical minuet, it is much too fiercely argued to be dance music, and its real identity lies somewhere in that area between scherzo and minuet. Schubert builds the outer sections on canons, while the trio is full of energy. The concluding *Allegro moderato* flows along agreeably, and in an unusual example of cyclic writing Schubert twice brings back the big cello tune—the so-called "Swedish" theme—from the slow movement. The reappearance of this theme, now varied rhythmically, is one of the most striking moments in this striking music.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger