

Schubert

PIANO SONATA IN A MAJOR

Op. Posth. (D. 959)

IMPROMPTU IN C MINOR

Op. 90 No. 1 (D. 899)

**LUDWIG
OLSHANSKY** pianist



Ludwig OLSHANSKY Plays SCHUBERT

PIANO SONATA in A Major, (Op. Posth.) D. 959

IMPROMPTU in C Minor, Op. 90 No. 1, D. 899

The first and only public concert consisting entirely of Schubert's works held during his lifetime was given on March 26, 1828, the first anniversary of Beethoven's death. Schubert had just turned thirty-one and, with the encouragement of a small circle of devoted friends, he had organized the event not only to boost his depleted funds but to boost his morale. True, he had some fame, primarily for his songs which the distinguished artist, Michael Vogl, had introduced beginning with *Erlkönig* in 1821; but the reputation he wished to acquire for his instrumental works had entirely eluded him. It was not easy to be a young composer in Vienna walking in the shadow of the great master who himself had not had an easy time of it with publishers or performers. What they had demanded of Beethoven — "easier works, not so difficult to play" — they were now asking of Schubert, and publishers were rejecting his prodigious output of instrumental compositions in favor of his songs. The March 26th concert was meant to let public and publisher alike see the full range of his genius. This was not entirely possible, of course: his symphonies could not be performed, for example, nor selections from his operas. But the first movement of a string quartet (G major) and the E flat piano trio were presented along with the songs which no Schubert concert could do without. The program did, indeed, prove a revelation to Viennese concertgoers. "I shall never forget how glorious that was," Franz von Hartmann wrote in his diary. And, in a letter to her lover, Marie von Pratobevera, after telling of a visit on that same day to Beethoven's grave, concluded: "Enough of graves and death, I must tell you about fresh and blossoming life which prevailed at a concert given by Schubert on 26 March. Only compositions by himself were given and gloriously. Everybody was lost in a frenzy of admiration and rapture."

His funds and spirits restored, Schubert at once launched a campaign to acquaint publishers with the success of his concert and with the quality and quantity of compositions still "in stock", the great majority of which he had never heard performed. Nor was he destined to, for before the year was out, this "fresh and blossoming life" itself was gone. Schubert died of typhus on November 19th and two days later was buried, according to his wish, in a grave close to Beethoven's. The small circle of friends who gathered for the ceremony had the sense not only of great personal loss, but the even profounder loss to the world of the great music that might yet have come from the genius of one so young. The fact is that even they, who had been so intimate a part of his life, who had been participants in the now famous "Schubertiades" at which he had played for them his latest songs or sonatas, had not the slightest idea of the truly enormous volume of his output during his brief creative life. They were to be astonished, in the years that followed, at the posthumous publishing of hundreds of his works that they had known nothing of; and they aided as best they could in the search for scattered and lost manuscripts to no avail.

The search for lost Schubert manuscripts goes on to this very day. Generous to a fault, careless in the handling of his affairs, apparently unguided by sound advice, the young composer had given away both original manuscripts

Side One

SONATA in A Major, (Op. Posth.), D. 959

1. Allegro
 2. Andantino
 3. Scherzo (Allegro vivace)
- (Playing time: 25:03)

Side Two

SONATA (continued)

4. Rondo (Allegretto) (12:08)

IMPROMPTU in C Minor, Op. 90 No. 1 (10:34)

and copies to anyone who asked. As for finances, only at the last did he seriously take himself in hand with publishers and try the haggling game. He had not the knack. With their unkept promises, not only in regard to payment but to publishing dates, these publishers soon brought Schubert down to his earlier mood of despair. One month before his death he is writing a pleading note to Probst "wondering if the trio will ever appear? I am anxiously awaiting its publication. I have composed among other things three sonatas for pianoforte alone ... several songs ... a quintet. Should any of these compositions by any chance commend themselves to you, please let me know." This was the last letter but one he was destined to write, a sad document to read in the light of how little time was left to him.

Ever since Schubert's death, controversy as to the exact dates of his compositions has gone on among scholars. Opus numbers have been altered, and even classifications are in dispute. The Four Impromptus which were among those compositions Schubert was offering to publishers during the last months of 1828 (published posthumously ten years later as Op. 142) have, in line with Robert Schumann's first analysis of them, since been listed by some musicologists as a sonata. As for the Four Impromptus, Op. 90, no such controversial issue has been raised. Impromptu No. 1 (which is being performed on this recording) is an example of Schubert's ability to extend a single idea through variations into a tightly constructed movement. In it he is at the height of his creative imagination, moving melodic line through shifts of mood from major to minor, one of those techniques typical of Schubert which gives such haunting, dramatic character to most of his works. For him the piano was, above all, an intimate, singing instrument. In his day it symbolized the warmth, joy and intimacy of the home, as well as the privacy for meditative reflection. Schubert wrote no compositions for virtuoso display in concerto form. The impromptus, as well as his dances and songs, with their intermixture of gaiety and sorrow, are each gems of Schubert's genius to penetrate through musical ideas the human spirit. He has been called the classicist of the Romantics and the romantic of the Classicists. He did indeed stand at the threshold of the Romantic Movement and it is little wonder that his brother-in-spirit, Robert Schumann, could so closely identify with these poetic works. Despite the speed with which Schubert composed, there is nothing easy in these shorter pieces. What begins

with deceptive calm and simple singing line, inevitably develops, as it does in Op. 90, No. 1, into strong emotional climax, building from tight form into innovative, free range before settling into the quiet of a subsiding, and yet still resistant, conformity.

In his sonatas Schubert introduces novelty as if he were the master of a new art form, and he remained stubborn against those who wished him to conform to tradition. In all of his sonatas poetry predominates, form becomes secondary. Schumann, in his essay on the last three sonatas (of which the Sonata in A Major, D. 959 is one), finds them "impressive in a different way from his others by virtue of a much greater simplicity of invention, a voluntary resignation to brilliant novelty ... and by the spinning out of certain general musical ideas instead of linking episode to episode with new threads as he does elsewhere." The first movement of the Sonata in A is at once both introspective and majestic, filled with a profundity of ideas that require close attention. In his own novel way Schubert develops his theme utilizing his characteristic quick shifts from major to minor and back again. The Andantino in F sharp minor, marking the second movement, is a most beautiful and haunting melody that has an almost arioso quality as if in idea, at least, it is echoing the arioso of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 110. The same melancholy persists until suddenly and sharply interrupted by a surge of life-power introducing a mixture of turmoil and hope, but returns at the close to the lilt of its quiet, elegiac gloom. The scherzo that follows, along with its contrasting and charming trio, at once becomes gayer, more light-hearted, though it, too, is once again wrenched from major to minor and to the plaintiveness of the Andantino, only to be wrenched back again to the more exuberant mood of the opening theme. In the finale some scholars see a very close resemblance to the rondo of Beethoven's Sonata in G, Op. 31, No. 1. Its flowing lyricism and grandiose strength tie the movements together, giving them a unity that distinguishes this sonata as one of Schubert's finest.

Notes by Arthur White

Olshansky on Monitor Records

BEETHOVEN Piano Sonatas: No. 30 in E Major, Op. 109/No. 31 in A Flat Major, Op. 110 **MCS 2161**

Also on cassette: 55013

SCHUMANN Kreisleriana, Op. 16/BRAHMS 3 Intermezzos, Op. 119 **MCS 2160**

CHOPIN 4 Ballades; Mazurka in A Minor, Op. 17 No. 4; Nocturne in C Sharp Minor, Op. 27 No. 1 **MCS 2157**

Also on cassette: 55003

BRAHMS Piano Music: Fantasias, Op. 116 (Complete); Intermezzos, Op. 117 (Complete); Rhapsody in B Minor, Op. 79 No. 1 **MCS 2152**

SCHUMANN Fantasia in C Major, Op. 17/BRAHMS Sonata in F Sharp Minor, Op. 2. **MCS 2127**

NOTE: The Schumann Fantasia, Op. 17 and the Kreisleriana, Op. 16, are available on a cassette: 55011.

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