Franz Schubert (1797 – 1828), Four Impromptus, Opus 90

By Professor of Humanities Dezso Bartha

In the course of Western music, one of the most fascinating transitions in music history is the transition from the Classical to the Romantic era. While Classicism has often been delegated to the eighteenth century and Romanticism to the nineteenth, there is a certain degree of overlap in these periods. Nevertheless, as the years advanced, the increasing fascination of the Romantics with nature, emotion, and drama would challenge the qualities of balance, melodic purity, and simple homophonic structure associated with the Classical era. Thus, the balanced, formal structure of Classicism would gradually give way to the free range of emotions celebrated by the Romantic composers who viewed nature and music as a direct path to the sublime. The formal Classical structure of Mozart and Haydn would be broken and transformed in the freedom of expression embraced in Romanticism.

The compositions of German composers Beethoven and Schubert occupy the fascinating transitional period of this era. While Beethoven has often been lauded as the bridge between Classical and Romantic, Schubert also shares this honor, albeit in a subtler manner. During his brief career, which spanned little more than 15 years, Franz Schubert created more than 1,000 compositions. The extraordinary catalog of Schubert’s works includes some of the most expressive, thoughtful, and beautiful pieces of music ever written.

Unfortunately, Schubert was not appreciated in his lifetime. Indeed, many of his greatest orchestral compositions would remain unplayed until after his death at the age of 31. The final years of his short life were plagued by illness with his hopes for general recognition repeatedly dashed. Schubert died on November 19, 1828. The first performance of his “Great” Symphony No. 9 in C major would take place 11 years later. The little recognition that Schubert did achieve during his lifetime would be largely from his songs for voice and piano, of which Schubert wrote over 600, and his compositions for solo piano.

Many of Schubert’s piano works other than his piano sonatas consist of short pieces grouped into collections. These include his Impromptus and his *Moments Musicau*x. These works were partially influenced by one of Schubert’s contemporaries, the composer Václav Tomášek of Bohemia. Written late in his career, Schubert’s Impromptus are deeply reflective works. They showcase his mastery of melody and technique and are among the most sublime of his compositions.

The Impromptus are a series of eight pieces composed in 1827 for solo piano. They emerge in the same period as Schubert’s masterful song cycle for voice and piano *Winterreise (Winter’s Journey)*, and his Piano Trio in E flat, D. 929, one of the greatest compositions in that genre. These Impromptus were published in two sets, the first in Schubert’s lifetime as op. 90, and the second after his death as op. 142. The sets were cataloged by Austrian musicologist Otto Erich Deutsch, respectively, as D. 899 and D. 935 in the Thematic Catalog of Schubert’s Works. They are considered to be the masterpieces of this genre.

The first of these four pieces, No. 1 in C minor and scored “Allegro molto moderato,” combines a deeply meditative and gentle lyricism that is a variation on two primary themes. Beginning with a march-like melody, very gentle in its first exhibition, Schubert develops an almost narrative atmosphere in a manner that invokes the ceaseless wandering that is so often invoked in his song cycles, particularly his *Winterreise (Winter’s Journey)* and *die Schöne Müllerin (Fair Young Maid of the Mill)*. The work begins with a primary motif in C minor, which is extended to general tension through octaves in G major before Schubert develops a moving conclusion ending ever so gently and delicately in the key of C major. The movement is deeply introspective, melodic, and philosophical, with a delicate lyricism similar to Mozart and Beethoven.

The second Impromptu is an Allegro in E flat major. The work is a brilliant showcase of technical fireworks and is the most dramatic of the set. The piece begins with a lively scales and chromatic triplets almost in the manner of Chopin. Ascending and descending scales and arpeggios dominate the outer sections of the movement, while the inner section features a lively and gentle passage in B minor. With the conclusion of this interlude, Schubert returns to the arpeggiated chromatic statements of the beginning of the work, ending strongly in the key of E flat minor. Of the four Impromptus, the E flat major exhibits the most “romantic” sensibilities of drama and emotion of the set.

The third of the set, in G flat major and listed as Andante by the composer, is the most delicate and lyrical of the four in a manner similar to the slow movement of Beethoven’s “Pathetique” sonata. The work alternates a gentle lyrical theme and an emotional contrast that showcases Schubert’s ability to successfully create long, deep, meditative and reflective serenades. The work possibly anticipates Mendelssohn’s *Songs without Words*. The andante gently concludes in the opening key of G flat major, and is one of the very few compositions created so early in this very unusual key. Of the four pieces, the third Impromptu best exhibits the Romantic subtlety of deep introspection in a manner similar to the period’s fascination with nature.

The final of the four Impromptus, an Allegretto in the key of A flat major, begins with a delightful contrasting spiral in that key. In a manner similar to the second of the series, rapid passagework dominates the outer part of the movement while more delicate melodic content is focused in the work’s inner passages. The trio in the movement’s interior passionately showcases the emotional longing so often central to Romantic compositions as a contrast to the movement’s outer passages. With the completion of his gentle middle section, Schubert returns us to the arpeggiated triplets that began the work and brings the work to a gentle conclusion in its home key of A flat major.

Schubert’s Four Op. 90 Impromptus provide a fascinating study between the balance and structure of the Classical era while also stressing the Romantic longing so typical as the nineteenth century progressed. Ultimately, Schubert’s approach to composition defies classification, and Schubert generally stands in the transitional period of Western music from the Classical to the Romantic.