INON BARNATAN: SCHUBERT RECITAL

A note about recording Schubert

When faced with the choice of repertoire to record, I found it a very easy decision to make. Both pieces on this CD have been pivotal in my life in the past few years and have inspired me greatly. It is my belief that a recording should be treated as an extension of performance.

However, what makes these pieces great also made them some of the most recorded pieces in the piano repertoire. Why yet another recording, when there are such great performances by Lupu, Schnabel, Fleisher and others?

It was not my intention to compete with any existing recording. I found those legendary recordings an inspiration in my own work. This recording doc- uments what I have discovered about this music up to this point- the fruits of work and care for these pieces which I love dearly. For me, one of the pleas- ures of attending a performance of, say, Hamlet, is seeing an actor bring Hamlet to life, highlighting different facets of this familiar role. In a good performance, Hamlet is still Shakespeare's Hamlet, yet different aspects of his personality, his motivations, and his emotional world are revealed. It is in that spirit that I present this recording to you.

-Inon Barnatan

Schubert: Impromptus D. 935 and Sonata in B-flat, D. 960

Sublime Resignation

During his life, and for many years following, Schubert's name was associated with the art of song. The 'most poetic of all composers' (as Liszt once described him), it was his songs that brought him the majority of the little recog- nition he received while still alive. Yet the genius he had for poetry and melody was by no means confined to the art of song, and his gift for evoking a compli- cated and rich world of profound simplicity can be clearly seen in his impromp- tus.

Schubert made reference to the second set of impromptus in a letter to his publisher, indicating that they were to be performed separately or as a whole. However, Schumann had a reason for suspecting that they were originally meant as a piano sonata. The emotional and dramatic scope of the work, the har- mony and tempo relationships between the movements and the structure of the set seem to support such a conclusion. Whether that was the original intention or not, these pieces display the genius of Schubert at it's most potent, both as a lyricist and as an architect.

The first impromptu starts with a strong introductory statement, which sets up the relationship between the dramatic and the lyrical in the piece. This leads to a gentle and plaintive melodic figure that, after working itself up to a climax, turns into a beautiful second subject in A-flat Major, which is still made up of the same material. This magical transformation demonstrates an extraor- dinary quality almost unique to Schubert- his melodies in major are in a sense as poignant, or even more so, than his minor key melodies. (Schubert once wrote to a friend in a letter "When I wished to sing of love, it turned to sorrow.

The love duet that follows seems to demonstrate this point even further, before a return to the opening statement brings about a kind of recapitulation, this time mostly in the major and minor versions of the home key, ending with a touch- ing epilogue.

The second impromptu, an Allegretto in A-flat major, is a gentle and reflective song (almost a lullaby), its tender reminiscence shadowed at times by more emotional exclamation. The middle section continues the main section's rhythmic emphasis of the second beat, yet counters it with flowing arpeggios. It then leads back to a repeat of the tender song, a further example of how even the simplest major melody can, in Schubert, seem tinged with regret.

The more care-free and innocent third Impromptu, a theme and varia- tions in B-flat major, re-uses a theme that Schubert used twice before in differ- ent guises- once in the incidental music to the play *Rosamunde,* D. 797, and the second time in the *String Quartet in A minor,* D. 804. This beautiful theme is given five variations- at times rippling, playful, sparkling, poetic and even trag- ic, each one a prime examples of Schubert's genius as a miniaturist.

The last Impromptu is a virtuosic Allegro scherzando in F minor. Its humorous quality derives from its offbeat syncopations and rhythmic playful- ness, which plays three beats against two beats to the bar. Schubert is really enjoying himself here, perhaps showing that he can be as light-hearted with his minor themes as he is melancholy with his major ones.

The runs of the main section are slowed down and modified to become the material for the middle section, taking us through an array of keys before returning back to the scherzando section. The concluding clock-like section and bravura coda bring the set to an end with a virtuosic scale across the entire 7 octaves of Schubert's keyboard.

Schumann, one of Schubert's great fans, wrote "Schubert has tones for the most delicate shades of feeling,

thoughts, even accidents and occurrences of life. Manifold though the passions and acts of men may be, manifold is Schubert's music. That which his eye sees, his hand touches, becomes trans- formed to music."
Whether it was the death of Beethoven, which affected him greatly, or the premonition of his own impending death a little over a year later, the output of Schubert's last year increasingly confronts the conflict between life and death. This idea is rarely more evident than in the Sonata in B-flat, D. 960.
The sonata starts with a hymn-like melody, one of Schubert's more heavenly lyrical themes, when an ominous trill in the lower register of the piano interrupts its progress, creating a sense of foreboding and doom. This trill and its philosophical implications fulfils a musical purpose, and an ingenious one at that. The trill is centered on an alien note, G-flat, a note that will become a con- tinuing leitmotif in the course of the sonata, and becomes a point of gravitation for the home key of B-flat. If in the beginning, this G-flat signifies the trans- formation from light to dark, at the end of the opening theme it does the exact opposite. The dark trill, now centered on B-flat, flows into G-flat, now a lumi- nous key in its own right. This idea of movement from darkness into light becomes a symbol for the movement, and for the piece as a whole. Using these musical and emotion- al building blocks, the first movement slowly unfolds and develops, its 'heav- enly length' (as Schumann once wrote of the 'Great' C Major Symphony) demonstrating not only Schubert's gift for the poetic, but also his large-scale architectural genius.
After such an extensive slow first movement, one would expect per haps a scherzo, or an Allegretto movement. Instead we get one of Schubert's most profoundly moving slow movements, a song as human and tragic as a lament, made even more poignant by the unyielding chime of the left hand. Another hymn-like section allows light into the darkness, only to be plunged back into darkness when the song returns. However, in some of the most heart- stopping harmonic changes in all of Schubert, the light returns and with it, as in the first movement, sublime resignation.
The scherzo, Allegro vivace con delicatezza, takes its thematic nucle- us from the first movement, as well as its fascination with the note of G-flat. However, the mood is worlds apart, and its dance-like jollity and carefree mood is almost Mendelssohnian. The trio section once again brings a cloud over mat- ters, reminding us again of the sonata's narrative.
The finale, reminiscent of the finale of the popular 'Trout' quintet, as well as the finale of Beethoven's Op.130 string quartet, starts off in the wrong key. This sets the mood for another light-hearted and playful movement with brief dramatic moments, reminding us of the unrest underlying the sonata. But the tinges of darkness do little to unsettle the overall positive statement of the movement, perhaps signifying that light has finally won out over darkness.
When Beethoven died in 1827, Schubert famously exclaimed "who can do anything after Beethoven?". I believe that even if the music Schubert wrote between that exclamation and his own death was his only surviving music, his question would have been answered.
–*Notes by Inon Barnatan*