

Franz SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

Sonata in A major, Op.120, D 664 24'33

1. Allegro moderato 12'13
2. Andante 5'17
3. Allegro 7'03

4 Impromptus Op. 142, D 935 43'02

1. Impromptu in F minor. Allegro moderato. 14'18
2. Impromptu in A flat major. Allegretto. 8'37
3. Impromptu in B flat major. Andante. 12'31
4. Impromptu in F minor. Allegro scherzando. 7'36

Total time: 67'40

Irakly AVALIANI, piano

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FRANZ SCHUBERT, THE GREAT VIENNESE COMPOSER (1797 – 1828)

In 1797, when Franz Peter Schubert was born in Lichtenthal, a suburb of Vienna, the royal and imperial capital, music was everywhere, both «*on the throne and under the thatch*», to quote a charming phrase from one of his biographers. From the Emperor to the most modest of civil servants, everyone played all kinds of instruments, with fervour and passion, and of course, there was also singing and dancing... «*It is from music,*» observed an anonymous traveller, «*that the Viennese derive all their pride. So it becomes an essential component of education for their children, who start learning music at the age of four or five.*»

«The child is father of the man» (William Wordsworth)

It is not surprising that in such a music-filled atmosphere, Franz Theodor Schubert, a state primary school teacher, wanted his twelfth child to learn the rudiments of piano and violin, with his help or that of his eldest son.

A little later, between 1805 and 1808, Franz Theodor entrusted his son to Michael Holzer, the choirmaster in Lichtenthal's parish church. He was a remarkably knowledgeable teacher and he marvelled at this supremely talented small boy. One day, with a tear in his eye, he described Schubert thus: «*When I wanted to teach him something new, he always knew it already. So, I never really gave him a lesson... I simply conversed with him, filled with silent admiration*».

Under the guidance of this exceptional maestro, Franz worked hard at both the piano and violin, began to play the organ and developed his singing technique. When it came to harmony, young Schubert made such progress that it led the connoisseur Holzer to observe: «*Harmony truly flows through his veins*».

Indeed it would be hard not to agree with the composer Richard Heuberger, who remarked how Schubert, even as a child in the baroque rococo church at Lichtenthal, «*recognised the act of metamorphosis which transforms a score into a living work. It was there that his ear, thirsty for music, soaked up the timbres of instruments and the voices of all kinds of singers, both soloists and various ensembles.* »

Right up to his untimely death, Schubert never ceased to appreciate and admire his teacher, who had opened the doors for him into what would soon become his kingdom.

In 1808, Franz Peter turned 11. His father, ever anxious to give him the best possible education, learned in the *Wiener Zeitung* – Vienna's official newspaper – that the Chapel of the Royal Imperial Court was offering two places for child choristers. Given his pure voice with a wide range and his uncommon musical gifts, Franz should be able to gain a place in the Stadtkonvikt (Imperial Seminary), which, alongside a thorough musical training, offered children from poor families a solid general education. Franz was admitted with flying colours. He particularly impressed one of the members of the jury, a certain Antonio Salieri, Mozart's triumphant rival, who was fortunate in enjoying the Emperor's favour. A handwritten note by Salieri at the time states: «*Fra li soprani i migliori sono Francesco Schubert e Muller.* [As for the sopranos, the best are Francesco Schubert and Muller.]» Salieri was so pleased with the new recruit and so overawed by young Schubert's talent, that one day, he offered to give him private harmony and composition lessons free of charge. Schubert's father was also delighted, but for different reasons: his son's education was to be financed by the State, which would allow him, when the time came, to apply for a post as a specialist primary teacher. He never dreamt nor wished that Franz would have a career as a musician, however great his talents might be...

Schubert, a sensitive and tender child, likened his daunting and cold boarding school to a prison. However not all of his experiences there were futile, far from it. For five years, his burgeoning talent for composition went from strength to strength. Ever more creative, his compositions were inspired by all the forms of music he encountered: he had the opportunity there to conduct ensembles and an orchestra, to play in a quartet and discover the works of Mozart, Beethoven, Haydn and Mehul. Schubert often went to the theatre, where he enthused over works including «Iphigenia in Tauris» by Gluck, «The Magic Flute» or Cherubini's «Medea». It was not only Schubert's musical education, which was wide and rich in opportunities, but this was also true of his literary studies. Could he have set to music so many texts with such brilliance, if he had not been taught to read and interpret poetry in such depth at the Konvikt school?

«I am in this world only in order to compose music.»

In 1811, Schubert confided to his friend Von Spaun, 9 years his senior, who was like a big brother to him and always a caring figure in his life, that he had composed a huge quantity of music, a sonata, a fantasy, a little opera and he was going to write a mass. He was only 14 years old at the time. Spaun recalled: «*He wrote extraordinarily quickly, and spent endless hours tirelessly composing.*» His intense focus on music and literature led to mediocre marks in the other disciplines. His father would not tolerate this and was furious, forbidding him to set foot again in the family home. This cruel ban, rather than making Schubert submit, fuelled his passion for music which now became his sole refuge. «*I am in this world only in order to compose music.*» he said one day, as if to apologise for obeying this inner calling, this «demon» that absorbed his entire being.

One day in May 1812, the year of the doomed Russian campaign, when Franz was shut away in the school, news came that his beloved mother, Elizabeth Vietz, had just died of typhoid. In a text written years later, like a kind of waking dream, Schubert describes this brush with death – «*I saw her mortal remains that day. Tears filled my eyes. I saw her at rest like the beloved past, in which we can also seek the thoughts of the dead. I saw her in repose, as she had been in that past. We followed her body as mourners and the coffin disappeared. From that day on I lived at home again.*»

The deep melancholy, at times tender and radiant, more often than not harsh and sombre, which haunted Schubert's works was surely the painful echo of his early experience of being uprooted, family conflict and separation. Of his 14 siblings, only 5 would reach adulthood; death, so prominent in his imagination had been a constant presence ever since early childhood.

Franz Peter could not bear his prison-like school and left it with a sense of relief whilst continuing to work with Salieri who, although genuinely appreciating his work, regretted how his talented pupil was besotted with Mozart and Beethoven, since he considered that only the Italians and Gluck merited such admiration.

During that period of his life, Schubert wrote his First Symphony, three quartets, a *Salve Regina*, and accepted an offer to present himself at the Sankt Anna Schule, in order to become a primary school teacher like his father and both his brothers. In October 1814, Franz Peter entered his father's school as teacher of the youngest pupils. Speaking later of his experiences with children, he confided: «*Every time I used to compose, those little rascals irritated me so much that I often forgot my ideas. Naturally, I gave them a proper hiding...*»

«Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel» came out on October 19, 1814, marking the birth of German lieder.

With his setting of this poem from Goethe's «Faust» Schubert, who was just 17, had immediately scaled new heights and revealed his true genius. He lends a unique

flavour all of his own to the lament of Gretchen, struck down by the tragedy of her first love. With piano and voice he recreates the poem, giving it profound meaning. In a perceptive essay, Fischer-Dieskau notes that «*sometimes Schubert formulates the poet's thought with even more precision and carries it further.*»

Schubert set all kinds of poems to music, from the most obscure to the most famous: Aeschylus, Anacréon, Dante, Petrarch, Novalis, Schiller, Heine and Goethe – 70 in all. «*Thanks to the poets,*» Fisher-Dieskau remarks, «*he could enter the domain of the Word, and maintain a very deep relationship with it, simply because he was not exclusively bound up in himself.*» Just like Shakespeare, perhaps, who lost himself enough to be none other than Othello, Hamlet, Juliet or Lady Macbeth.

1814-1818, musically at least, were very fruitful years and happy times on the whole. After the ogre Napoleon had left the scene, a new European order took root in Vienna, which would last for 100 years. Schubert composed four comic operas and 250 lieder, including «*Der Erlkönig*» and his Fourth Symphony, known as the Tragic Symphony.

It does, indeed, seem as though Franz Schubert really was put on this earth to create. Constantly absorbed by music destined for his lieder, Schubert also wove into his instrumental works (quintets, quartets, piano pieces) themes and variations used in «*The Trout*», «*Death and the Maiden*» or «*The Wanderer*». Deutsch, who was for Schubert what Köchel was for Mozart, comments on this when stressing his singular qualities: «*A well-chosen melody would find instrumental expression in Schubert's music.*»

Sad loves and precious friendships

Schubert had to abandon his suit of charming Therese Grob, his first love endowed with an enchanting voice. This must have been because of his material situation which left much to be desired. Therese, who had loved him, nevertheless chose to marry a baker instead... «*She was not destined for me*» said Franz, who had a very acute sense of fate and the inevitable... As for his profession as a teacher, he left it with a light heart, just as he left his father's household. Often penniless and not knowing where he would spend the night, Schubert now had to rely on the hospitality and generosity of his friends. He indeed had rare friends, who were all ready to take him in and support him in a thousand different ways: they also did everything they could to make Schubert's work better known. The unfailing devotion of the lawyer Spaun, the poets Schober and Mayrhofer and the musician Hüttenbrenner show how Schubert was a precious individual for his friends, who were very much aware of his rich human qualities and his genius.

This cult of friendship so valued by the German Romantics would find happy expression in the famous «*Schubertiades*», during which the friends would come together with Schubert – the hero and life-and-soul of the party, to sing, dance, listen to music, read poetry and converse, while enjoying Grinzing wine...

It was one of these devoted friends, Schober, who brought along the celebrated baritone, Johann Michael Vogl, whom Schubert would come so greatly to admire and to whom he introduced to some of his lieder. Vogl responded enthusiastically. He was an extremely cultivated man and he called the lieder «*divine compositions*»: he sang them at every opportunity, thus helping to make them really well-known at last. Often Schubert would accompany Vogl himself and those who heard them would be able to sense the true osmosis between singer and composer, who came to understand each other to an exceptional degree. This collaboration would be one of the rare unmitigated joys in Schubert's artistic career, when he was able to sense true recognition and know he had achieved it at last.

The dark years (1824-1828)

In 1824, Schubert discovered that he had contracted syphilis, a disease that shows no mercy. Overwhelmed by anxiety and gruelling symptoms he continued to compose, as if nothing was the matter. Schubert composed twenty further admirable works, which we cannot list in their entirety here. It was during this time of dark suffering that Schubert was nevertheless able to write his «Beautiful Miller's Daughter», «Death and the Maiden», «Quintet for two cellos», «Moments Musicaux», the «Impromptus» and finally his «Winter Journey».

Schubert died on November 19, 1828, at the age of 31. On his deathbed, he whispered these poignant last words to his beloved brother, « Did I not deserve a place on this earth?»

Franz Schubert was buried in the Vienna cemetery, where Beethoven already lay – a composer whom Schubert had never ceased to admire and revere.

His place next to that genius is well-earned.

* * * *

Irakly Avaliani interprets here the Posthumous Sonata in A Major, Opus 120, in three movements - *Allegro moderato*; *Andante*; *Allegro in the form of a rondo*. Schubert wrote this piece with bucolic and tender accents in homage to a young 18-year-old girl Josephine von Koller. This work is imbued throughout with the grace, purity and simplicity so characteristic of Schubert's art.

The *Four Impromptus*, Opus 142, also appeared long after Schubert's death. The first, *Allegro moderato*, is striking for its mystery and lyricism; the second, *Allegretto*, is like a beguiling minuet; the third, *Andante*, contains echoes of the graceful themes in Schubert's incidental music for the play «Rosamunde»; the fourth and final impromptu, *Allegro scherzando*, is full of stark contrasts and its fugue brings to mind Goya's illustrations for Spanish dances.

With reference to Schubert's works for the piano, Schumann, who held them in great esteem, was to write: «*Everything rings out in them, from the very heart of the piano...*» Thanks to the power and delicacy which sets apart Avaliani's playing, he is able to bring to these works, which number among what we might call the «happy» creations of Schubert, a vision that is both sparkling and profound. Throughout this recording we can encounter once more what makes Irakly Avaliani's interpretations so memorable, regardless of the repertoire presented to his audience. Each piece is thought through and structured with striking mastery. This pianist's highly individual touch, so clear and vibrant, and his emotional sensitivity create in our minds a vision and climate of feeling completely appropriate for the works played for us here. Listening to his interpretations, we are reminded of Saint Bernard's words: « *If you wish to see, listen.* »

Vassili Karist
Translation: Eve Judelson

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Irakly Avaliani was born in Tbilissi, Georgia. He began his musical studies at the Tbilissi High School of Music, then went on to Moscow Tchaikowsky conservatory. After winning the highest awards there, he continued his studies with Ethery Djakeli who introduced him to the work of Marie Jaëll and, over a period of five years, completely reconstructed his piano technique. Today he is one of the few pianists to have explored this path, as did also Albert Schweitzer, Dinu Lipatti and Eduardo Del Pueyo. Irakly Avaliani has lived in Paris since 1989. Irakly Avaliani's recording career, consistently lauded by the music press, has been patroned by Mecenat Group BALAS since 2000.