



Yefim Bronfman

March 18, 2023

PROGRAM NOTES

Support for the program notes is generously provided by Roberta Viviano.

FRANZ SCHUBERT

(VIENNA, 1797 – VIENNA, 1828)

Piano Sonata in A minor, D. 784 (1823)

Schubert suffered immensely during the last few years of his life as a result of contracting syphilis, likely in 1822. There was not an effective treatment for the disease at the time, and Schubert became increasingly isolated due to embarrassment over his symptoms and appearance. He was frequently unable to engage with the wealthy clientele who had previously supported his *Schubertiades*, domestic concerts in Vienna where Schubert performed his impressive output of songs, numbering over 600 in total. However, Schubert's depression, and realization that his death was encroaching, provided fodder for his creative activity, as he continued to compose at a brisk pace in 1823-24, completing the Piano Sonata in A minor, D. 784 in February 1823. Schubert succinctly summarizes his unfortunate situation in a journal entry from March 1824: "What I produce is due to my understanding of music and to my sorrows."

We hear Schubert's sorrowful demeanor immediately in this sonata's opening statement, which strikes one as funereal. Empty octaves replace what is usually a lyrical melody, and the rhythm is dominated by plodding half notes that morph into sighing gestures when followed by an eighth note. These short, hollow phrases repeat and are subject to terrifying dynamic extremes for just over two minutes until one of Schubert's quintessential singing melodies in

major mode enters to briefly clear the air. This oscillation between trepidation and tranquility characterizes the entirety of the first movement, which ends with a glimmer of hope provided by quiet sonorities in the key of A major. The slow movement presents a similar dichotomy as Schubert composes pleasant phrases that cadence in F major, only to be answered by an ominous muted whisper (marked *sordini*), initially stated in barren octaves, recalling the first movement. This is often described by scholars as a “death motive.” Yet again the optimistic sentiment prevails. This is not the case in the third movement as a panicked theme in the key of A minor, comprised of triplets in triple meter, eventually overtakes a major-mode lullaby. The sonata concludes with a frightening fury, perhaps a musical enactment of death.

ROBERT SCHUMANN

(ZWICKAU, GERMANY, 1810–ENDENICH, GERMANY, 1856)

***Faschingsschwank aus Wien*, Op. 26 (1839–1840)**

In 1839, Robert Schumann visited Vienna with the goal of finding a new publisher for the music journal that he had founded in 1834, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. Schumann was eager to explore the city that had recently bid adieu to two of his favorite composers, Ludwig van Beethoven and Franz Schubert, who died in 1827 and 1828 respectively. Schumann’s bid was unsuccessful and he was dismayed to discover that conservative musical tastes predominated among both Viennese aficionados and mainstream audiences. Schumann’s *Faschingsschwank aus Wien* (Carnival Scenes from Vienna) outwardly depicts the festive carnival period before the arrival of Lent while also containing some marvelous allusions to the music of Beethoven and Schubert.

Although the piece is modeled on a Viennese piano sonata, Schumann composes five movements instead of three or four, already emphasizing an intent to buck traditional conventions, just as his idols did. The piece begins with a jaunty rondo form in triple meter, throwing off listeners who are expecting the usual sonata-allegro form, and includes several allusions and quotations, ranging from Beethoven’s Op. 101 piano sonata to “La Marseillaise,” the French national anthem, which was banned in Austria to discourage revolutionary uprisings aimed at overthrowing the aristocracy. The

Romanze and Scherzino mirror the inner movements of Beethoven's symphonies. The Intermezzo is a nod to Schubert's pianistic figurations, such as in the Impromptu in G-flat major, D. 899, No. 3, which features a singing melody over continuous sweeping arpeggiations. Schumann treats the piano symphonically in the opening of the finale, an homage to Beethoven. The concluding movement is a perfect representation of Florestan, the protagonist in Beethoven's only opera, *Fidelio*, and namesake of one of Schumann's alter egos, whom he referred to when describing the fiery and impulsive qualities of his music and personality.

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

(ŻELAZOWA, NEAR WARSAW, POLAND 1810–PARIS, 1849)

Nocturne in D-flat major, Op. 27, No. 2 (1835)

Piano Sonata No. 3 in B minor, Op. 58 (1844)

Chopin's Opus 27 nocturnes are among his most beloved works. He composed the set in Paris during one of his most prolific periods of creative activity, a time when he was beginning to view himself more as committed to the craft of composition than as a pianist who composed unique works in order to differentiate himself from the many formidable pianists who called Paris home in the early 1830s, including Franz Liszt. The D-flat major nocturne exemplifies Chopin's trademark style: a highly embellished melody soaring over dreamy widespread arpeggiations. Nocturnes are "night songs" and Chopin emulates the florid vocal filigree of bel canto opera singers in the long, melodic lines heard in this piece and many of his nocturnes.

In 1844, Chopin experienced profound sorrow when his father passed away in Poland in May. Unable to secure a visa to return to his native country, which was governed by Russia, he prioritized reconnecting with his family by hosting his sister and her husband in France for the summer. Chopin composed his third piano sonata during the summer and early fall of 1844, noting that "we are mad with happiness." This marked the final blissful period for Chopin, and his partner, George Sand, who were growing apart and would subsequently have a series of bitter disagreements, largely

incited by domestic quarrels over the questionable actions of Sand's adult children from a previous relationship.

In general, Chopin's late style of the 1840s is characterized by very careful detail to contrapuntal textures, as well as a continuation of his exploration of spontaneity and intimate emotional terrain. Passages that resemble waltzes, nocturnes, polonaises, and mazurkas—which Chopin typically confined to short, standalone pieces earlier in his career—are now frequently deposited into his large-scale compositions, such as the nocturne that appears as the second thematic group in the opening movement of Op. 58. Chopin's enthusiasm for J.S. Bach's music was unwavering, and he also studied newly published counterpoint treatises by Luigi Cherubini and Jean-Georges Kastner.

Interestingly, when Chopin employs the framework of a sonata-allegro form in his late works—heard in the first movement of the Op. 58 Sonata—older blueprints of sonata form, as well as imitative polyphony à la Bach, are combined with attention to motivic cohesion, à la Beethoven. In an essay on Chopin's three sonatas, Anatole Leikin asserts that “the first movement of Op. 58 contains more imitative passages than any other of Chopin's works.” The work is highly integrated as intervallic relationships, especially a half step, that are heard in the opening measures generate the melodies in the subsequent movements.

In his final piano sonata Chopin alludes, perhaps unconsciously, to the Op. 35 sonata, the third movement of which is his famous funeral march. The internal movements of Op. 58 mirror those of Op. 35 with a scherzo followed by a slow movement. The plodding duple meter and dotted rhythms of the funeral march reappear in Op. 58, but here they are situated in a major key. Chopin composes the Presto finale, a sonata-rondo form, in his iconic brilliant style. Again, unexpected twists and turns arise as the music zips along: the recurring refrain and episodes both veer off to harmonic regions that are not conventionally heard in this form, including E minor and E-flat major, before arriving on B major for the conclusion.

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