

Four Impromptus, D899, Franz Schubert

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) is one of the most well-known and loved composers of Western Classical music. His music is often considered to represent a kind of “introduction” to *Romanticism*. Growing up in and around Vienna (at one point taking lessons from Salieri), much of his music was overshadowed by his friend and contemporary Beethoven, which meant that the majority of his remarkable output remained unpublished and unperformed in his lifetime. Many of these creations are now held in the highest imaginable regard—as pinnacles of the repertoire (the String Quintet, the late piano sonatas, countless Lieder). His life was, like many others of his time, tragically short. Some have written of the impact this may have had on his music—facing drastic physical deterioration from syphilis, he composed steadily until his death.

A year from death, Schubert wrote the *Impromptu*, Op. 90. This is perhaps the most well-known set of pieces he wrote for piano, and the quality of the set and of its individual parts is undeniable. Intimate “Schubertian” character can be felt fully in each.

Impromptu in C minor

The first *Impromptu* in C minor must be among the most poetic pieces written; Schubert’s love of Lieder finds here its pianistic apotheosis. The Fortissimo octaves of the beginning seem a “curtain-opening” gesture on the stage of the world, and a story of the most direct, emotionally pure character. A lonely, luminous melody in the soprano is answered by distant march-like chords—each interjection seems a little nearer, until the two parts are joyfully united. This poetic opening music is simply the introduction to a tightly-constructed Sonata movement, but at no moment does one detect the scaffolding of form beneath this song without words. The movement’s principle theme proves to be closely related to the lonely theme of the opening—the writing is *cantabile*, with the left hand serving as a vocal accompanist. Many listeners may recognize the unforgettable second theme, which itself seems to speak of the past—the expressively vocal melody is one of innocent, child-like beauty—but tinged with the poignant remembrance of age. The vestiges of malevolent forces (as depicted in *Erlkönig*’s repeated octaves) can be glimpsed in the development. Schubert’s musical narrative proves, finally, to be one of transformation; the harmonic closure is not reached in the expected home key of C *minor*, but in the symbolically pure key of C major.

Impromptu in E-flat

The *Impromptu* in E-flat is a playful *étude* whose virtuosity never imposes on its imaginative spirit. The right hand’s *moto perpetuo* figuration glides down and whirls up with unflagging energy—it is, in fact, a melody in its own right (albeit one with limitless breath). The middle section seems the stormier, more martial manifestation of the left hand’s auxiliary two-step rhythm seen at the beginning. Those searching for Schubert’s love (and mastery) of harmonic exploration will have much to enjoy here—Schubert passes through some very distant keys to arrive back at the *étude* A section.

Impromptu in G-flat

The *Impromptu* in G-flat has come to be one of the best-loved piano pieces ever written. It is perhaps in this 6-minute confession that we can glimpse the human spirit at its most intimately introspective. Some have noted relation of this music to other art created by the final necessity and realization of life coming to an end—and the true fragility (and pointlessness?) of the human condition. Facing death (in youth or old age) thus makes it necessary to express, in music, some last meaningful, authenticating, and *lasting* inward impulse. Perhaps it is also here that we see the impossible beauty of music—a language whose meanings are as immutably resonant as they are incapable of finding lingual articulation. This beating heart of music (and life)—the impossibility and yet hope of *knowing* someone’s deepest thoughts and feelings—is expressed most beautifully in the text of Herman Hesse’s poem *Beim Schlafengehen (Going to Sleep)*—a text Richard Strauss would later set as his own “self-elegy”: *Now that the day has made me so tired/My deepest longings shall/Be accepted kindly by the starry night/Like a weary child*. It may be that, in the end, the starry night is the only confessor who will ever truly *know*. But, for many, the celestial and luminous *Impromptu* in G-flat seems to deny this, with its miraculously lucid communications of the heart.

Impromptu in A-flat

The *Impromptu* in A-flat major is often mistakenly referred to as the *Impromptu* in A-flat minor—not surprising, as the home key is not reached until 30 measures in (!), and it spends more of its time in other keys than in A-flat major. Schubert’s patience is also remarkable—the principle melody is not stated until 47 measures in (previously only hinted at in fragments). The texture throughout the A section is characterized by downward-moving right hand scintillations whose almost autumnal shimmer is highly evocative. A highly dramatic middle section acts as a foil to the playful, roundabout A section—throbbing repeated chords pulse beneath a vocal, *espressivo* melody whose range is unexpectedly large. Some absolutely breathtaking harmonic choices are made by Schubert here (including a memorable twist into the Neapolitan key).