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## PROGRAM

- Sonata in A major, D. 959 Franz Schubert  
(1797-1828)
1. Allegro
  2. Andantino
  3. Scherzo: Allegro vivace – Trio
  4. Rondo: Allegretto – Presto
- Preludes from Op. 28 Frédéric Chopin  
(1810-1849)
- No. 4 in E minor
- No. 17 in A flat major

## NOTES

As a frequent user of the admirable WMCT publication *History of Concerts and Performers*, I know how well it reinforces the website message that “we’ve been here before ... and we’ve survived.” Trying to replicate as much of our normal experience as possible under drastically altered circumstances would seem to be a sensible approach. Nevertheless it felt wrong to provide my usual notes without some consideration of the conditions in which we’re living and working. So I began by reflecting on the kind of music that adapts best to the virtual audience, and went from there to fantasizing which of the classical composers would take this in their stride. Bach, with his faith that God was listening, would need no other audience; but how about Liszt, at least in his virtuoso pianist days? He surely would find the lack of a live audience a real letdown. I’m sure you can think of other examples to slot into this make-believe scenario. How do the composers on today’s concert fare in these new circumstances? I would suggest rather well. Most of the famous musical parties at which Schubert used to perform for his friends – the Schubertiads - could easily be accommodated on a Zoom conference call. And Chopin was a somewhat reserved character who preferred the intimate gatherings of the salon to the extravagances of the Lisztian concert platform. Performing just for George Sand and a few cameras in the comfort of his own room would probably have suited him very well. But that’s enough fantasy.

Schubert’s A major sonata is the middle work of a group of three that he wrote in the summer of 1828, the year following Beethoven’s death; he himself died in November a couple of months after their completion. From that moment on the three sonatas were surrounded by controversy and conflicting views of their artistic stature. They can still occasionally provoke partisan arguments among musicians. It all began with their

publication, which didn't happen until eleven years after Schubert died. The publisher Tobias Haslinger had tried to capitalise on the composer's death by gathering together a number of songs written around the same time as the sonatas and issuing them as a cycle with the title *Schwanengesang* – Swan Song. In other words, the final notes of the dying composer. He intended to continue in this same advertising vein by publishing these sonatas, but somehow the works were sold to the publisher/composer Anton Diabelli who only got around to printing them in 1839 with a dedication to Schumann – this too was a piece of advertising hype like the blurbs on the back of modern books. The composer had originally wanted Hummel to receive the dedication, but he had since died and Diabelli substituted Schumann's name. The choice was made because he was an influential critic and Diabelli perhaps didn't know about, or overlooked, Schumann's published opinion of the works which had obviously disappointed him: they demonstrated, he said, "Schubert's voluntary renunciation of shining novelty, where he usually sets himself such high standards ... these pieces ripple along from page to page as if without end, never in doubt as to how to continue, always musical and singable, interrupted here and there by stirrings of some vehemence which, however, are rapidly stilled." Alfred Brendel, a forceful advocate for Schubert's piano music, erupts violently against this rather damning faint praise: "Not even from [Schumann] will I accept that Schubert's sonatas 'ripple along.' The occasional 'stirrings of some vehemence' amount not infrequently, to the grandest of dramatic developments ... As for 'voluntary renunciation of novelty' ... [the] eruption of the irrational ... in the middle section of the A major Sonata's second movement ... must rank among the most daring and terrifying pages in all music."

Many writers have drawn attention to the echoes of Beethoven that are to be found in all three sonatas; the last movement of today's sonata, for example, is modelled on the finale of Beethoven's Op. 31 No. 1. These facts, together with the frequent reference to the works as Schubert's late sonatas, can lead us to think that he is attempting to copy Beethoven. That in turn suggests that he has only managed an inferior imitation. Brendel, once again, provides a cogent reply. "In his larger forms," he says, "Schubert is a wanderer. He likes to move at the edge of the precipice and does so with the assurance of a sleepwalker. To wander is the Romantic condition ..." Another writer I have often quoted, Scott Burnham, tackles this same misunderstanding about the relationship of the two composers. "Schubert is not Beethoven on sabbatical, with a license to linger ... Schubert explores effects and worlds unknown to a Beethoven—his music puts into play a different physics." And joining Brendel in disagreeing with Schumann's assessment he adds: "Schubert's

pieces are not just longer, they work differently. They constitute a different order of musical being." He then sums up the effect that this can have on us as listeners: "[Schubert] gives us time to take in his themes, as if they were works of visual art we could inspect at our leisure, or landscapes through which we could wander."

The two Chopin preludes on today's program are part of a set of twenty four such pieces that the composer wrote in 1838 when he was living with George Sand and her son Maurice on the island of Mallorca. They had moved there in November for the sake of Chopin's health and the visit began well in a climate that Sand thought as warm as a Paris June. "Oh, my dear fellow," the composer wrote to Julian Fontana in Paris, "I am really beginning to live. I am close to all that is most beautiful. I am a better man." But this mood was short-lived, they changed lodgings twice in Parma in response to various domestic trials and tribulations, and Chopin became sick again. He was particularly hampered by the lack of a decent piano – one that was being shipped from Paris had become stuck in port somewhere and the instrument he had obtained from a local builder gave him "more vexation than consolation;" according to Sand. In December they all moved yet again, this time to an apartment in a deserted monastery in Valldemossa 20 km north of Palma. "I shall write in the cell of some old monk," Chopin wrote to Fontana, "I expect to send you my Preludes shortly" - Fontana also acted as Chopin's copyist. In another letter he described the strange surroundings in which he was writing. "The cell is shaped like a tall coffin, the window small ... and on a square grubby box [are placed] ... Bach, my scrawls and someone else's old papers." But soon both the weather and Chopin's health deteriorated, forcing them back to a long convalescence in Marseilles. The Preludes, which were completed in 1839 and published the same year, puzzled Chopin's contemporaries and have attracted a great deal of attention from modern scholars. It is significant that one of the few volumes of music Chopin had with him on Mallorca was a copy of Bach's Preludes and Fugues, and following Bach's example he arranged the Preludes in his own systematic way to cover all the major and minor keys. For Schumann they were "strange pieces," almost like "sketches ..." But he also understood the composer - "[Chopin] is and remains," he said, "the boldest and proudest poetic mind of the time." And a 20th century poetic mind, T. S. Eliot, reinforces my picture of Chopin as the ideal virtual pianist.

So intimate, this Chopin, that I think his soul  
Should be resurrected only among friends

*-John Mayo*

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