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Recital 1: Piano Sonatas 1: Program

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Schubertiade I

Piano Sonatas 1

Jiayan Sun, piano

September 12, 2019

8:00 PM

Sweeney Concert Hall, Sage Hall



SMITH COLLEGE

PROGRAM

Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

Sonata No. 15 in C major, D. 840 (*“Reliquie”*) (1825)

Moderato

Andante

Sonata No. 18 in G Major, op. 78, D. 894 (*“Fantasie”*) (1826)

Molto moderato e cantabile

Andante

Menuetto. Allegro moderato – Trio

Allegretto

intermission

Sonata No. 19 in C Minor, D. 958 (1828)

Allegro

Adagio

Menuetto. Allegro – Trio

Allegro

Josten Performing Arts Library has created a LibGuide to facilitate access to literature and resources on Schubert’s life and works.

<http://libguides.smith.edu/schubertiade>

Please silence all cell phones and other electronic devices before the performance.

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Last year, in a series of eight recitals, and in what was a magnificent gift to the Smith College community, Jiayan Sun performed all of the piano sonatas of Ludwig van Beethoven. This year, he turns to the younger generation—namely, to Franz Schubert, who was born in Vienna on January 31, 1797, when Beethoven was twenty-seven, and who died on November 19, 1828, when Beethoven was twenty months into the grave (Schubert attended the funeral). During Schubert’s all too brief lifetime (he died ten weeks before his thirty-second birthday), Beethoven was the world’s most celebrated composer. That Schubert lived in his shadow has been obvious, to all who have cared to look, from Schubert’s day until our own. That the younger man created a body of work that at once pays homage to the older master while fashioning for himself a musical persona of incomparable originality is one of the small miracles in the history of western music.

The homage of which I speak may be seen in the finicking details of the individual works, and more obviously in the very categories he chose to explore: the piano sonata, the string quartet, chamber music with piano, and the symphony. Beethoven “owned” those categories; Schubert rejuvenated them. In the category of the Lied, to which Beethoven made important contributions, Schubert surpassed his mentor and sang his way to the top. “Who can still do something after Beethoven?,” the boy is purported to have exclaimed when he was about eighteen years old. “I can,” it is pleasant to imagine Schubert saying to himself, near the end, despite the feelings of insecurity that led him to take up the study of counterpoint, if you can believe it, in the final months of his life.

Schubert rejuvenated the forms that Beethoven inherited from Haydn and Mozart by infusing them with novel melodies of unsurpassed lyricism, and with novel harmonies that, by dint of repeated use, broadened the tonal language widely spoken by his predecessors and contemporaries. For melodies, we have no conventional vocabulary that accurately describes the various types. We say *wow*, *bella*, *magnifique*, *erstaunlich*, and leave it at that. For harmonies, however, we do have a lexicon. Let me say two words, here, about how Schubert enriched the discourse, relying only upon easily perceived difference between *major* and *minor*. A piece in *major* normally employs chords and keys that are

related to that home (*major*) key. (Think of “Bush 41” and his sons “W” and Jeb.) A piece in *minor* does the same thing—employing chords and keys related to that home (*minor*) key. (Think of the Donald, and his sons Eric and Don, Jr.). Now imagine a person who treats A Major and A Minor *as one*: the relations of the major become the relations of the minor, the relations of the minor become the relations of the major; “W” becomes related to Eric; Jeb, to Don, Jr. That person—not Dr. Jekyll, not Mr. Hyde—is Schubert: he treated *major* and *minor* as the two equal faces of home; though he had no children of his own, he circulated among the tonal *relatives* as both *pater* and *mater familias*.

This evening’s program opens with a “relic”—that is to say, a piano sonata of whose intended four movements Schubert completed only the first two. (The second two have been completed by others, but Mr. Sun prefers the originals.) The misleading title of the first (posthumous) publication, brought out in 1861, is “Reliquie. Letzte Sonate (unvollendet)” —“Relic. Last Sonata (unfinished).” Apparently more than a few people thought that this work, because it is incomplete, was the “last.” In fact, as indicated in *The Schubert Thematic Catalogue* by Otto Eric Deutsch (the man who gave the D-numbers to Schubert, just as Ludwig von Köchel gave the K-numbers to Mozart), the work was composed in April 1825, more than three years before the composer’s death. (The “Unfinished” Symphony was composed in 1822, *six* years before the composer’s demise.)

The first movement of the work, **D. 840**, in C Major, is typical of Schubert’s handling of the sonata form, with some surprising modulations that, for the early listeners, could indeed have suggested “lateness.” The second movement is in a characteristic rondo form, ABAB’A, with the three A sections in C Minor, and the B sections in, respectively, A-flat Major and C Major. Both movements end quietly. They suggest that Schubert was not in a hurry to move on.

This sense of relaxation is heightened, and beautified, in the G-Major Sonata, **D. 894**, which was completed eighteen months later, in October 1826. The gentle flow of this sonata-form first movement is achieved by an extraordinary attention to the disposition of the notes between the two hands (the opening G-Major chord is in itself a thing of beauty), and a setting in the tenderly lilting meter of 12/8. In the exposition, the opening

G-Major melody is played twice, with a brief detour to the keys of B Minor, a close relative of G, and B Major, no relation at all—precisely what I was talking about a moment ago; it causes a bright change of color and requires a harmonic sleight of hand to return home to G. The rest of the exposition is “normal,” proceeding to the dominant (D Major), as expected, and to several episodes in that key, all charming, all graceful. In the development section, Schubert creates a not-overly-blustery version of a Beethovenian storm. In the recapitulation, he follows classical procedures, and adjusts the tonal furniture just enough to remain in the home key.

The second movement is structured in five parts, like the second movement of the C-Major Sonata we heard first, in this case with three sections in D Major, and two intervening sections in B Minor and D Minor. The third movement is a traditional minuet (in B Minor) and trio (in B Major). The finale is a delightful rondo: a sunny refrain interspersed with episodes that dance around the main tunes and the main keys and maintain the serenity that characterizes the work as a whole. (I mention all of these keys not because you are supposed to hear and identify them, but because Schubert heard and identified them. For him, “G Major” had meaningful resonance, as “Harvard,” or “The Yankees,” or “Tofu” might have for you. I think that “G Major” also had special resonance for Sviatoslav Richter: the great Russian pianist plays this piece more slowly than all the other greats. Kempf: 30 minutes; Brendel: 35 minutes; Sokolov: 40 minutes; Richter: 45 minutes. Zounds!)

G Major meant a lot to Beethoven, too, but C Minor meant even more: we often speak of Beethoven’s “C-Minor mood,” thinking in particular of the “Pathétique” Sonata, the Third Piano Concerto, and the Fifth Symphony, although there are dozens of pieces in C Minor, from the beginning of his career to the end. The *character* of that key gave shape to the *form* that he created for it. He might not have put it that way, but Schubert knew this better than anyone. In his own C-Minor Sonata, **D. 958**, the first of the great last three from the final year of his life, he seems to pay tribute, in the construction of the first theme of the first movement, to Beethoven’s “Thirty-two Variations in C Minor” of 1806—although perhaps what we have here is rather a *critique*, or even an *inosculation* of that work. Schubert’s first movement is “regular” for a sonata form in C Minor:

we move, in the exposition, from C Minor to E-flat Major, we hear several thematic events in that relative-major key, we return to the beginning (for a repeat of the exposition), we move to the development—which is more Beethovenian, more motivically oriented, than others of Schubert’s development sections, which turn on repeated melodies—and, finally, in the recapitulation, we hear in C Major the music we earlier heard in E-flat. A short coda closes the movement, quietly, in the minor key with which we began.

Like the two previous second movements we have heard, this one, too (in A-flat Major), is a five-part structure (three “refrains,” two “episodes”). There is much wandering here from one key to the next—only a pedant would want to see them all spelled out—but on the last page of the movement, as he steps from four sharps to four flats over no modulatory threshold, Schubert does seem to be saying: “this, *mein Freund*, is how you use harmony to express emotion.” That emotion has been noble, wise, and, like those expressed by the slow movements of the other two sonatas of the final trilogy, deeply introspective.

Schubert’s minuets and trios are usually regular in phrase structures of two, four, eight, and sixteen bars. By its irregular phrases, at the opening of this minuet, Schubert seems to sow a Beethovenian wild oat. The finale’s galloping energy in 6/8 meter is almost more important than the key contrasts and structural repetitions that cause us to call this a movement in rondo-sonata form.

The main features of the C-Minor Sonata have much in common with those of the A-Major and B-flat Major Sonatas that form the final “trilogy” I have announced. You will hear these works on Jiayan Sun’s third and eighth recitals (October 24, 2019; April 16, 2020). Stay tuned.

—Peter Bloom
Grace Jarcho Ross 1933 Professor of Humanities, Emeritus

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Praised by the New York Times for his “revelatory” performances, and by the Toronto Star for his “technically flawless, poetically inspired and immensely assured playing,” pianist Jiayan Sun has performed with The Cleveland Orchestra, The Hallé Orchestra, the Chinese and RTÉ (Ireland) National Symphony Orchestras, the Fort Worth and Toledo Symphony Orchestras, the Toronto and Aspen Concert Orchestras, the Suwon Philharmonic Orchestra, and he has conducted from the keyboard the Meiningen Court Orchestra. His performances have been broadcast by the BBC, the RTÉ, China Central Television, and classical music radio stations in North America. He has performed at and participated in the Verbier Festival, the Gstaad Menuhin Festival, the Klavier-Festival Ruhr, the Aspen Music Festival, the Sarasota Music Festival, and PianoTexas. Under the mentorship of Sir András Schiff, he was invited to give a number of solo recitals in Europe as part of Schiff’s “Building Bridges” project for the 2017–2018 season.

Jiayan Sun has been awarded prizes at many of the major international piano competitions, including third prize at the Leeds International Piano Competition, second prize at the Dublin International Piano Competition, fourth prize and the audience prize at the Cleveland International Piano Competition, the first prize at the inaugural CCC Toronto International Piano Competition, and others. Playing early keyboard instruments and studying historical performance practice have played a significant role in his musical activities, with critically acclaimed appearances with the American Classical Orchestra in Alice Tully Hall.

Hailing from Yantai, China, he received Bachelor's, Master's and the Doctor of Musical Arts degrees from The Juilliard School under the tutelage of Yoheved Kaplinsky and Stephen Hough. His other mentors include pianists Malcolm Bilson, Richard Goode, Robert Levin, and harpsichordist Lionel Party. His devotion to the art of composition led him to study with the composer Philip Lasser. As the Iva Dee Hiatt Visiting Artist in Piano at Smith College, he presented Beethoven’s complete piano sonatas in chronological order in the 2018–2019 season.

For more information, please visit <http://www.jiayansunpianist.com>.

Schubertiade

Jiayan Sun, piano

Eight Recitals at 8 PM on Thursdays

Sweeney Concert Hall, Sage Hall

Free and open to the public

I. September 12, 2019

Piano Sonatas 1: C Major, D. 840;
G Major, D. 894; C Minor, D. 958

II. September 26, 2019

Four Impromptus for Piano, D. 899;
Piano Trio in E-flat Major, D. 929

with **Joel Pitchon**, violin &
Marie-Volcy Pelletier, cello

III. October 24, 2019

Piano Sonatas 2: E Minor, D. 566;
A Minor, D. 845; A Major, D. 959

IV. December 5, 2019

Music for Piano Four-Hands

with **Judith Gordon** and
Smith student pianists

V. February 6, 2020

The *Schwanengesang* Poets:
Rellstab, Heine, and Seidl

with **William Hite**, tenor

VI. February 27, 2020

Four Impromptus for Piano,
D. 935; Piano Trio in B-flat
Major, D. 898

with **Joel Pitchon**, violin &
Marie-Volcy Pelletier, cello

VII. April 2, 2020

Piano Music for Two-Hands and
Four-Hands

with **Monica Jakuc Leverett**,
Graf Fortepiano

VIII. April 16, 2020

Piano Sonatas 3: F-sharp Minor,
D. 571; D Major, D. 850; B-flat
Major, D. 960

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