

On Schubert's Moments Musicaux op. 94 (D.780)

A lecture accompanying a performance of the six pieces

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Schubert, the master of musical Lied, was fond of short, poetic and moody instrumental pieces. This is one respect in which he was a romantic – one of the prophets of romanticism in music. For, short, momentary, highly expressive and atmospheric pieces became a typical genre of romantic composers like Mendelssohn, Schuman, Chopin, etc. In 1828, few months before his death, Schubert published six short pieces entitled "Moment Musical" (sic), now usually referred to under the French title in the plural. They were composed between 1823 and 1828. Some of them – particularly the third – became among his most popular works. The third piece, in F minor, was composed in 1823, and the sixth, in A-flat major, appeared as an independent piece already in 1824 and was probably the first to be composed. The rest were probably composed in 1827-28.

Number 1 in C major

It is generally in a ternary A-B-A form. The seeming simplicity – almost banality – of this piece is highly misleading. Besides the usual Schubertian rapid interchanges of major and minor, Schubert establishes in the A section two anti-poles to the basic tonality of C major. Both are in equal distances from C, and both are in minor, their basic chords consisting of two elements of the C chord – being the only keys having this property. The first is in A minor (8-9), being a third lower than C and having C and E in its basic chord in common with C. It is immediately modulated back into C (b.12), and Schubert uses 3 of the dominant (G) in this modulation to carry it to E minor.



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This is the second pole – a third higher than C and having E and G in common with the C chord. This symmetric structure of tonalities gives a special sense of balance to the A-part.

The B section, which is itself in a mini-ternary form of a-b-a', is in the dominant G. Its main part – a – is built on the triplets of the A section, but its main charm is in the second part – b (38-50) – which has a subtle hemiolic rhythm. This is already hinted at b.39, whose first beat sounds as an upbeat to the second (weakest) beat. This becomes even more conspicuous in bb.42-44, which sounds as 4 bars of 2/4 (instead of 3 bars of 3/4). Here bb.42-44:



Number 2 in A-flat major

The andante siciliano rhythm is highly misleading, for this is a deeply sad, almost depressing piece. It has a form of a degenerate rondo: A-B-A'-B'-A'', degenerate because the last three sections are slight variations on their originals. This circular form with its repeated themes fits the depressed emotional character of the piece, as if symbolizing that there is no escape from its spell. The sad and tragic sense of the A-theme is manifested in the turn to the minor in the second half of the first phrase (bb.4-8). But this is almost a passing shadow ending in the major. Here bb.5-8:



It then modulates to D-flat major.

The touching B section, in F# minor (enharmonically "replacing" Gb), with its wide broken chords accompaniment, sounds very different from the A-theme, but it even intensifies the deep sadness of the A-part, and thematically it takes its motives from that of the A theme: the minor second ascent of bb.18-19 from that of b.1, and the E-D#-C# descending third, from that of Eb-Db-C of bb.3-4. Here bb. 18-21:



As usual with Schubert this deep sadness is sort of accepted with resignation, without any revolt or bitterness. A notable exception here is the fortissimo outburst of the B'-theme in

bb.55-61, which sounds like a cry of revolt (note how wisely Schubert keeps the minor seconds ascent at bb.56-60, and sharpens the dotted rhythm). Here bb.59-61:



But this outburst is soon restrained and calmed down at b.62, as if to bring to the fore its pointlessness, and this is ingeniously emphasized in the turn to the major in b.67. This majoring of the depressed theme is the ultimate expression of resignation and of giving up any sense of revolt one could have felt before.

Number 3 in F minor

This piece, the most famous of them all, is one of the earliest and was composed, as remarked above, in 1823. It is in A-B-A' form with a coda. The B section is in the relative major of A-flat. It is quite conventional and symmetric in its phrasing. The permanent accompaniment of eighths runs through the entire piece, and is even emphasized by Schubert in the first two introductory bars. Some delicate chromaticizations of the harmony are worth noticing, e.g. in b.39, 59 and at the very ending phrase.

Number 4 in C# minor

This is the longest and most elaborate piece in the collection. It is in A-B-A form with a short coda. The A-section is in a dual form, where its main subject is repeated with slight variation ending with a neapolitanic cadence. It is a moderate "perpetuum mobile" of a sort, which must have influenced Mendelssohn and Schumann.



The B-section is in the major enharmonic equivalent of C#, namely, D-flat major. It has a "Russian"-like simple harmony of I and V with emphasized appoggiaturas in the right hand melody. The rhythm of this section is quite sophisticated in emphasizing the second (i.e. the weakest) of the four eighths, as if the first eighth was an upbeat.

Here bb.62-64:



in the **harmonic rhythm** (long G-flat in b.34, followed by two shorter F# and B in b.35, etc.). **Here bb.32-39:**



These two patterns – the simple rhythm and the harmonic rhythm – are then combined in the following phrase of bb.58-67, marked forte to fortissimo. **Here bb.58-65:**



The work ends with a bar of general pause. This occurs also in the first movement of the B-flat sonata D.960. I have expanded on this strange Beethovenian feature in my "Pause and Silence – The General-Pause End-bar in Beethoven (www.Bar-Elli.co.il) where I suggested that it has to do with the symmetry of the ending phrase. Here, however, it has another function, for it breaks the symmetry, making the last phrase to be 4+4+5.

Number 6 in A-flat major

This, as remarked above, is probably the earliest piece in the collection, published separately already in 1824, entitled "Plaints d'un troubadour". It is in the form of a minuet with a Trio (in D-flat major), i.e. A – B – A'. Both the A-part and the Trio are themselves of a ternary a-b-a' form.

It is beautifully harmonized, in a generally fixed and restrained rhythm. One should note again the enharmonic changes at the end of the second period (b.29), where Schubert gets into a beautiful E (=Fb) major phrase, which as a lowered VI suggests the minor. The general texture of the A-part is changed. This soon gives way to a transition to the return of [a] in A-flat. The same enharmonic shift is then repeated in the fortissimo entrance into E major in the transition to the Trio, and, in the return, to the ending of the piece in A-flat minor. Another notable feature is the way Schubert breaks the periodic symmetry at b.31, and even more elaborately towards the end of the b-part of the Trio.

The Trio, in D-flat major (with a typical hint to the minor in b.84), is also thickly harmonized in an almost fixed rhythm, slightly more elaborated than in the A-part. Like the A-part, its [a]-subsection consists of two perfectly symmetrical periods. And again like in the A-part, in its [b]-subsection the symmetry is broken (from b.101; this time even more elaborately than in the A-part). The [a]-subsection, with which the Trio ends, is a ternary period of three balanced phrases.

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