

## **Schubert: Impromptus op. 90, D. 899**

A lecture accompanying a home performance of the eight Impromptus,  
Jerusalem, February 2013  
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In 1827, when he was 30 years old, just a year before his death, Schubert wrote two sets of Impromptus, each consisting of four, middle-size pieces, very different in character. The first two of the first set were published still in his life time and given the opus number 90 (now, D. 899). They were called Impromptus by the publisher, but probably with Schubert's approval. The second set was published after his death in 1839 as op. 142 (now D. 935), and in a letter to a publisher, Schott, Schubert himself refer to them as Impromptus, and numbered them 5-8. The last two of the first set were published about twenty years later. In May 1828 he wrote three other Klavierstücke D.946, which some regard also as Impromptus, but we shall not. Some people claim he was influenced by the Impromptus op. 7 of his friend Jan Vaclav Vorisek and by works of Tomasek, who some regard as the inventor of this genre.

In each set the first piece is in a minor key. This can almost be said also of the last in each set. The last one of the second set is in F minor, and although the last in the first set is marked A-flat major, it begins with its main motif in A-flat minor, which is rather an unusual key. It should be also noticed that the first in each set is of a grand epic character – almost a sort of a ballade – and is the longest in the set. Many of them, but definitely not all, are in a ternary song form of A-B-A'. Though some people (including Schumann) suggested that the second set was a sonata in disguise, this has been recently refuted both by analysis and by the fact that Schubert marked them 5-8, following the numbers of the previous set.

### **Part I: Impromptus op. 90, D. 899 (1-4)**

#### **Number 1, in C minor**

Like all the Impromptus this work is very homogenous and compact in its motivic material, but it is quite distinct in its unusual form and its epic and tragic character. It has two main subjects, which are thematically close to each other, and there is no significant other material except some developments of them. After an unison, wide-spread octave on G, which fades out gradually with a fermata, the first subject (mm.2-17) appears consisting of two classical, well balanced periods, each beginning with a solo tenor, playing a dotted motive in the dominant around D (mm.2-5; 9-12). This sounds much like a tragic hero proclaiming his suffering fate, in a calm, ensured voice with a far-reaching

look. It is echoed in harmonized form in the second stanza in chorus-like affirmation of his statement (mm.6-9; 14-17), carrying it back to the tonic (C).



There is a distinctly Schubertian sadness and tragic character here, but, again typically, with no bitterness or revolt (as one would expect e.g. in Beethoven). This is perhaps the general most typical characterization of Schubert's music: deep sadness with a complying realization and acceptance. These two periods are then repeated with fuller voice and richer harmony, but again in perfect balance and symmetry.

A transitory passage consisting of elements of the previous periods modulates into A-flat major, to the **second subject** (m. 41). This, though starting by using the material of the first motive, soon develops into a much freer, more open and more animated theme, whose kernel is a descending sixth F-Eb-Db-C-Bb-Ab (mm.43-46), accompanied in a constant movement of triplets in the left hand. Here from m. 42:



Unlike the clear periodic structure of 4+4, going from dominant to tonic, of the first subject and its closed and static character, this one consists of four phrases of 5, 5, 4, and 5 bars, all, except the second which goes to the mediant, in A-flat, and it is much more spread out, lively and dynamic. This is then repeated where the two hands change roles.

In terms of its form, what comes next is somewhat baffling. Some people see the whole Impromptu as a theme with variations, so that what we regarded as a second subject is the first variation and what comes later are further variations. I find this unconvincing. I think it is better to regard what comes later as a sort of a long and varied **development** section, which begins at m.74 and runs to the end, dealing once and again with the two subjects in turn. It starts with the descending sixth of the second subject from F (m.75) to Ab (m.79), with a marked change in the texture of the accompaniment. Alternatively mm.74-86 are transitory to the development which begins at m. 87, but we shall proceed by regarding it as part of the development. Here mm. 75-78:



The development then turns to the first subject (m.88) stirring it up to a very dramatic climax, ending with a Neapolitan cadence (mm.114-115). Within it Schubert inserts in the inner voice the descending sixth (Ab-C) of the second subject (mm. 96-98, condensed in m.106). This actualization of the dramatic potential of the first subject highlights, by contrast, the introvert complying character of this subject at the beginning. The development then turns again to the second subject (mm.125-160) agitating it even more than before until it sort of rests on a G major repeat of the beginning of the development (m.152), which was, to recall, on A-flat.

This shift from A-flat, at the beginning of the development, to G at its end, is emphatically condensed into the fortissimo chords (mm.112-113) preceding the above neapolitanic cadence. This whole climatic passage displays the descending sixth (Ab to C) of the second theme in the bass, hidden also in the upper inner voice.



The development ends by a shift to the major of the first theme, and the whole piece ends with a **coda**, using the first motive and restoring the calm, sad and complying character of the beginning. The coda also alternates between the major and minor, so typical of Schubert in general and of this piece in particular. It ends in the major, but calmly, evenly, and with characteristic compliance.

### Opus 90 number 2 in E-flat major

This Impromptu, a much more conventional piece than the first, is in a ternary form of two main contrasting subjects, i.e. A-B-A', where both the A and the B sections are composed of three parts of the form a-b-a', though the difference between the [a] and the [b] sub-sections is rather slight. It ends with a **coda** which is a variant of B. The B section is prepared to be in C-flat, but it is of course enharmonically transformed to B.<sup>1</sup> Besides its obvious structure one should notice the move of B (m.83) - C# (m.86) – D (m.90) of the opening theme of B, compressed to the same rising third in m.85. Here from m. 83:

<sup>1</sup> A similar twist occurs in the Impromptu no 4 in A-flat minor, and in Moment Musical 5, m.35. Schubert's music is replete with enharmonic changes and modulations, and there are many examples also in the Impromptus.



This third is very operative in the sequel of B as well (e.g. mm.113, 117, 119, 121, 125). It may be derived from the opening bass of A. One should also note the rhythmic pulse of the triplets on the weak second beat, which recalls the rhythmic pattern in the left hand of the main motive in the A section (with a change of the pulse). Thus with all their difference in character, A and B are connected by thematic and rhythmic links.

### Opus 90 number 3, in G-flat major

This Impromptu is renowned as one of the most lyric pieces in the piano repertoire. It is in the somewhat unusual key of G-flat major, and though marked *andante* its meter is marked *double alla breve* (four halves), which minimizes the bar-lines and clearly indicates a not too slow tempo with continuous flow. It is in a conventional ternary song form of A-B-A', where the B section (from m.25) is in the relative minor (E-flat minor). Its main subject is a classical period of 4+4, which is followed by another, slightly more activated classical period of 4+4, which is repeated twice with slight variations. So, all in all we have in the A section 4 classical periods of 4+4. The beautiful melody in the soprano is accompanied by a not less beautiful harmony played by sustained chords in the bass and continuous sixlets (six notes per half) in the middle voice.

Though perfect fluency is maintained also in the more excited section B in the relative minor (E-flat), with its wonderful modulations to C-flat (mm.31-35) and back to E-flat (mm.47-51). It is much more agitated and excited than A, beginning with a 3-bars phrase (25-27, the only one in the piece). The return of the main subject (A') at (m.57) is quite usual except for a slight abridgement at m.72 and the closing section (from m.76) with its emphatic "German sixth" chord at m.78 and at m.82 with the only fortissimo in the work, sort of prepared by cadence to the a Neapolitan (lowered II) G (82).

The general character of the B section is again a distinctive Schubertian mixture of deep sadness with heroic awareness of it and compliance with its being objectively there as part of human condition. There are no complaints, no desperate cries and no revolts in Schubert (unlike in Beethoven for example), but rather a realistic acceptance of the pain and agony of human condition. It is a similar kind of feeling to that expressed by

the altogether different opening of the C minor Impromptu discussed above (or the middle sections of nos. 2 and 4, and many other works).

The melody of the main theme has a typical Schubertian rhythm of ta - ta-te - ta, (Wanderer fantasy; opening of the 9<sup>th</sup> symphony in C; music to Rosamunde, Impromptu of 142 no 3 and numerous other works). Although the accompaniment runs smoothly in sixlets one should note sometimes a subtle rhythmic ambivalence between a half (minim) and a quarter (crotchet) – e.g. in mm. 10, 18 etc. (to hear it count on the 4<sup>th</sup> in each sixlet). This becomes especially significant in the B section with the triplets in the bass. Schubert was very fond of such ambivalences which sometimes have the effect of almost a hemiola (see for instance Moment Musicaux no. 1 in C major mm.6-8, 15-17, 27-29 which though written in 3/4 are naturally heard in 2/4). The same occurs, to an even greater effect, in its third section, mm.38-44.

### **Opus 90 number 4 in A-flat major**

We have already remarked that though the official key mark here is A-flat major, it begins in A-flat minor. It is once again in the ternary song form of A-B-A'. Though, like its E-flat predecessor, fluent and leggiero, it is marked Allegretto in 3/4, which may suggest a not too fast tempo. The main subject is distinct in its non-symmetric structure, straightened up in the sequel into a more symmetric pattern. It is three times 4+2, and then 4+8, with unusual changes of harmony, going to the mediant and to the enharmonic mediant minor. The tonic appears fully only at m.31. The 2-bars phrases (and the 8-bars phrase) contrast melody with rhythm by beginning with a melodic upbeat which is rhythmically on a strong beat – the first beat of the bar – thus causing the melodic main tone to fall on the second, weakest, beat of the bar.



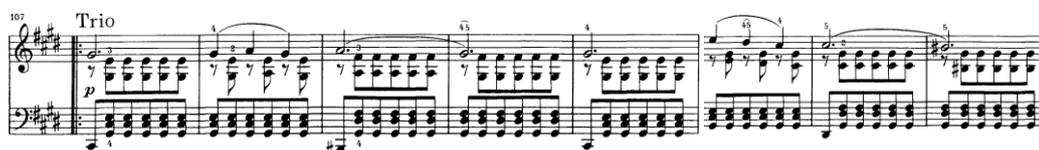
There is a hint to this strange conflicting pattern in the left hand of the beginning of the subject (and all its recurrences), where the main, long chord of A-flat is on the weak second beat and lasts for two halves. One could easily imagine a more natural rhythmic phrasing here by taking the first quarter (now on the first beat of the bar) to be an upbeat to the second on which the bar should begin (move the bar line one quarter). In fact, many pianists play it like that. But Schubert wanted it otherwise, and besides being his wish (which is conclusive reason on its own) it is also wise, for it inserts a special delicate tension into this sweeping subject.

Things, as said, are straightened up from m.39 where harmonic and phrase tempi are gently and gradually intensified and accelerated, and additional tension seems superfluous. This goes together with majoring the harmony, and it reaches its peak in m.64. Here is a sample, from bar 37:



A new phrase in a different triplets texture (mm.72-79) bridges this to a repeat which brings to section B (m.107).

Section B is in C# minor, which is the enharmonic equivalent of D-flat minor, which is the key the previous passage really prepares. We encountered such enharmonic replacement also in the E-flat Impromptu (no. 2) where the B section was in B minor instead of the prepared C-flat minor. This section, marked **Trio**, is of a totally different texture and character than the first. It consists of a highly emotional melody built on up and down minor seconds, with a permanent quaver chords accompaniment. These minor seconds are actually suggested by condensing the C<sub>b</sub>-B<sub>b</sub> move of the first phrase (mm.1-4), the D-C# move of mm.19-20, etc. of the main theme. Likewise, the descending third of (m.112) may be derived from the descending third of mm.5-6.



Thus, once again we see a contrasting B section, very different in character from the main theme, and yet connected to it thematically. Section A is then repeated with no significant changes. And once again, as we elaborated with regard to all previous Impromptus, this highly emotional B section combines expression of deep sadness with courageous dignity of realizing and complying with this sadness and pain as constitutive features of human condition. This general characterization of a distinctive trait of much of Schubert's late music is connected with various "technical" features, such as the rapid interchanges of major and minor (often of the same motive or theme) to the point of their integration to one expressive device,<sup>2</sup> various rhythmic and harmonic ambivalences, and more. Some were pointed out above, and some will be pointed out in discussing Impromptus op. 142.

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<sup>2</sup> There are numerous examples of this. See e.g. Moment Musicaux no. 1, mm.51-8, no. 2, mm.1-15.