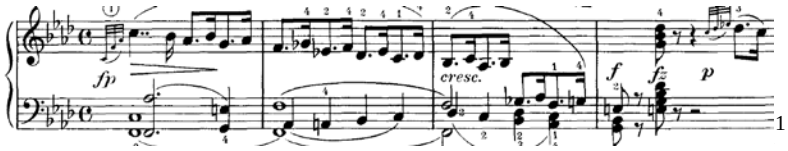
Schubert's Impromptus, Part II: The Four Impromptus Op. 142, D. 935

Notes accompanying a home performance of the eight Impromptus, by G. Bar-Elli

No. 1, in F minor (Allegro Moderato)

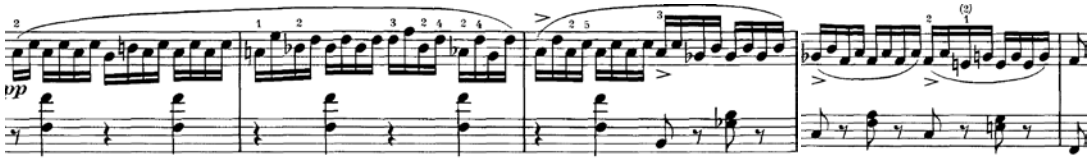
In discussing the four Impromptus op. 90 we remarked that those of op. (posthumous)142 were also composed in 1827, were numbered by Schubert 5-8 in obvious continuation of the previous set, and that there are many similar traits between the two sets: both consist of four pieces of middle-seize length; both begin with a minor key work; the last piece of the second set is in minor (F), and the last piece of the first set, though marked A♭ major, has a minor flavor: it begins in minor, and its middle section is also in minor. The first piece in both sets is of a special, quite uncommon structure and of a grand epic character. This character is manifest here in the opening introduction, which has an improvisatory character, which may call to mind a narrator (with a guitar) beginning a tragic story.



[1]

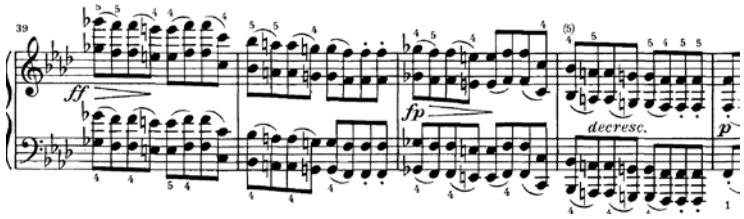
This introductory theme recurs at the very end of the piece, and in the middle (m. 116), dividing the piece into two equal halves. Each of these halves consists of the same two main subjects, and each of these subjects consists itself of two parts – the first in minor and the second in major. So we have here a hierarchical dual structure (describing it as a rondo, as many do, seems unfit).

The first subject (from m. 13) is divided into two parts. Its first part (mm. 13-44) is dominated by semi-quaver minor-second moves terminating in an expanded neapolitan cadence, derived from the opening introductory theme (m. 3). Its beginning is marked by a sort of a whispering hesitating character. But whereas the minor-second moves and the neapolitan cadence in the introduction are forte and emphatic with a tensed tragic character in the tonic of F minor, they are of quite the opposite character here, in a whispering piano, moving quickly to the relative major (A-flat, m. 21). Here from m.13:



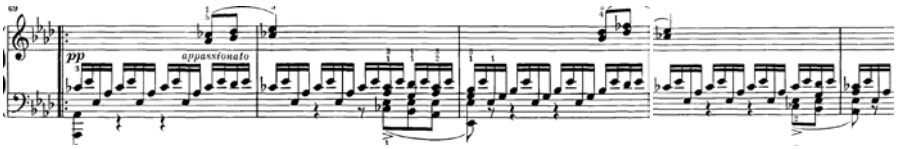
[1] Music examples are taken from W. Gieseking edition (published by Henle) in IMSLP site. Let me repeat that the reader is expected to have the score before him; the examples are not meant to replace it, but just to help in general orientation.

The interplay between F minor and A-flat major runs through the whole subject. The same motive of the hesitating semi-quavers with the minor second moves (mainly on the first and third beats) changes from minor to major as if changing a look of the same face. But whereas the change at the beginning is slight, it develops into a marked change of character where this motive with the minor second moves turns into a threatening unison octaves in forte in the bass (m.30), increasing to a fortissimo double octaves outburst in mm. 39-42, still of the minor second moves, concluding the first part of the subject.



In the second part of the subject (mm.45-68) A-flat major reigns, slightly developing the previous whispering motive, which was of 4 bars, into a more melodious line of 6 bars.

The second subject (from m. 69) begins in a most impressive sinking into A-flat minor. It is shaped in the form of a sort of a dialogue of short motives between the high and low registers, at first mainly of rising and falling thirds, and later, of minor seconds. Here from m.69:



Like the first subject, its second half (from m. 97) is in major. This dialogic model is quite typical of Schubert. It may take the form of exchanges of questions and answers, or anxious complaint and calming reassurance as between a child and his father. A famous example of it is Erlkoenig (D. 328), and I would suggest hearing the second subject of our Impromptu as generally of that dialogic model.

In Erlkoenig, to recall, a child riding with his father through a forest at night is permanently in fear, complaining of seeing an elf trying to catch him and to tempt him to come with him. The father, seeing and hearing nothing, tries to calm him, assuring him that he will securely bring him to their home, just to discover when they arrive there that the child is dead. Schubert composed Erlkoenig when he was 17 years old, and our Impromptu – about ten years later. Yet the comparison between them is natural and revealing. It is mainly the dialogue between the stressed and worrying short motives with the emphasized minor seconds in the high register, and their "answers" in the bass, but also the permanent rapid accompaniment of semiquavers (rapid triplets in Erlkoenig),

which makes a comparison between these two masterpieces apt. In Erlkoenig there are four persons (narrator, child, father, elf-king) all sung by the same singer. The dialogic roles are of course manifest by the verbal contents. We don't have all these in the Impromptu, and the music itself is of course very different. And yet the dialogic model, the special expressive nature of the two voices, the rapid constant accompaniment are all so evident in our piece that it seems natural to hear it under the same category of father/son dialogue. I am talking here in particular of the second subject of the Impromptu; its being part of the wider context of the whole work gives it a somewhat different and much more comprehensive meaning than the lied.

Besides the intrinsic merits of Goethe's ballade and the deep grip it had on young Schubert (he set it in four versions), father/son relationships were of special importance in Schubert's life, and may be a psychological background for understanding the hold of this dialogic model in his music, of which our Impromptu is a paramount instance. Let me therefore digress in referring to Schubert's famous reported dream, in which this is a central topic.

Schubert's Dream

In his article on Schubert in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music* R. Winter writes:

> In mid-1822 Schubert scrawled in pencil a document that his brother Ferdinand later labeled *Mein Traum*. In the literary style of Romantics such as Novalis, it recounts the tale of a son who is twice expelled from his parental home and is reconciled with his father only at the graveside of a young maiden. The manuscript, which Ferdinand presented to Robert Schumann in 1839, has generally been interpreted as a ‘literary effusion’, but its very uniqueness and timing suggest that Schubert was grappling with fundamental issues of family, belonging and otherness. We should not demand direct parallels in Schubert's life in order for this document to shed light on his state of mind.

Schubert's relations with his father were dominated by his dependence on him: for many years he not only lived (as an adult) in his father's house, but served as a teacher (also his father's profession) in his father's school. All these were necessities more than choices, and Schubert repeatedly tried to get out of this hold. These, expressed also in the dream, may be related to the strong feelings of otherness and not-belonging, with a sense of painful compliance, so typical of Schubert's music. His father was a devoted catholic and 7 years younger than his mother (Elizabethe Vietz). They had 14 children, 5 of them survived and Franz was the youngest. His mother was over 40 when he was born. His father re-married within a year of his mother's death in 1812. His second wife was 20

years younger than himself, and they had 5 more children. Franz was in good terms with his step-mother. He is reported to have loved only one woman in his youth – young soprano Therese Grob – and some of his friends relate that in general he didn't like the daughters of Evc.[2]

Here is a translation of Schubert's My Dream (from the internet, unsigned)[3]:

July 3rd, 1822
I was one of many brothers and sisters. We had a good father and a good mother.
And I felt a deep love for them all.
One day, my father took us to a feast, and my brothers became very merry.
But I was sad...
My father then came to me and told me to taste the wonderful food.
But I could not...
And at that, my father, in his anger, banished me from his sight.
I turned on my heel and with a heart filled with infinite love for those who scorned it.
I wandered away into a far country...
For years, I was torn between the greatest love and the greatest sorrow.
Then came news of my mother's death.
I hastened back to see her, and my father, softened by his grief, did not prevent my return.
I saw her lying dead and tears fell from my eyes.
We followed her, mourning to the greave, and the coffin slowly sank.
From that time on, I stayed again at home.
But one day my father took me once more into his favourite garden and asked me if it pleased me.
But I disliked it,
and I did not dare to reply.
Then he asked me for a second time, and more impatiently, if I liked the garden.
Trembling,
I told him "***No***".
And at that, my father struck me,
And I ran away...
For a second time I turned away and my heart still filled with love for those who scorned it,
I wandered once more into distant lands.

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[2] Rita Steblin, in a series of articles portrayed a different picture and a richer network of Schubert's relations with women.

[3] An English translation of the Dream can also be found in M. Solomon's "Franz Schubert's 'My Dream' ", *American Imago*, summer 1981 vol. 38/2 137-154. Solomon surveys some psychological interpretations and proposes his own one of homosexuality. In all these father/son relationships play an essential role. His paper was widely discussed, but I shall not go into it.

Through long, long years, I sang my songs.
But when I wished to sing of love, it turned to sorrow.
And when I wanted to sing of sorrow, it turned into love.
And so I was divided into love and sorrow.
But then a pious girl, who had just died, appeared before me,
and a circle formed around her thomb in which young and old men wandered as though in perpetual bliss.
They spoke softly, so as not to wake her.
Heavenly thoughts, like bright sparks seemed to flicker unceasingly from the virgin's thomb.
And they made a soft sound as they fell on the young men.
I longed to walk there too,
But only by a miracle, so people said, could one enter into that circle.
But I went forward, slowly and devoutly,
with my eyes lowered towards the gravestone.
And before I knew it,
I was ***in*** that circle
from which the loveliest melody sounded.
I felt the whole measure of eternal bliss, compressed, as it were, into a moment's space.
I saw my father too, loving and reconciled.
He folded me in his arms and wept.
But I wept still more...

Somewhat like in Erlkoenig,[4] the "father/son dialogue" in the second subject of our Impromptu has an increasing dramatic tension. It begins piano, as a sort of a calm dialogue of questions and answers. But from the second volta (m. 84) the tension gradually intensifies, expressing in the high register worries or complaints of pain rather than questions. The minor second moves are crucial and most expressive here, and Schubert ingeniously combines them with the rising thirds (e.g. mm. 87-95), thus synthesizing the constitutive elements of the two subjects. This tension is relaxed in the second part of the subject, which is in major (from m.98), where the rising thirds, and even more so the descending fourths in bars 104, 108 in the high register do not have the previous complaining and agonizing character, but rather express acceptance and compliance, so typical of Schubert's late works.

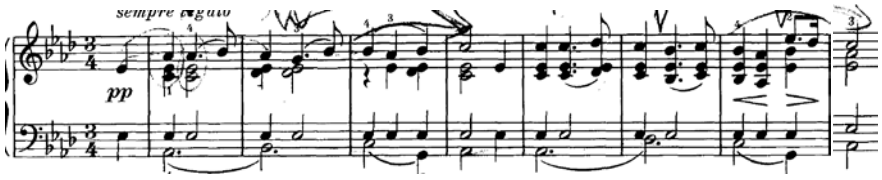
[4] The connection between Erlkoenig and the dream was noticed e.g. in Peter Pesic: "Schubert's Dream", *19th-Century Music*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Autumn, 1999), pp. 136-144, 138. Pesic explores parallels of structure and content with the sonata in B-flat D 960. Among other things he discusses the "Circle of sixths", modulatory shifts and returns, the importance of bVI.

The whole is then repeated in the second part (from m. 116) with no significant changes except for a sudden shift to F major (m.131) in which the first subject proceeds. This recapitulation is prepared by a descending third whose first step is a sharp move of a minor second in the bass to G of V^{46} (m. 113). The second subject enters in the tonic of F minor (m. 182). The piece ends with a repeat of the introductory theme, with two statements of the minor second, as if to remind us of its importance, in the very last bars.

No. 2 in A-flat major (Allegretto)

Whereas impromptu no. 1 has, as we saw, a somewhat unusual structure of a hierarchy of duals, this one has the classical A-B-A form (a minuet with a trio), where each is itself of an a-b-a structure, and B (Trio) is in D-flat whose b section is in the minor. One should mind the Allegretto indication and the lied character, and should not lose its flow by playing it too slowly, as unfortunately is often done.

The A section is a charming melody with a dotted rhythm running throughout, built as a period of 8 bars (4+4), both parts of which ends on the tonic.



Though ending on the tonic, the period keeps suspended on the high C in the melody. It is then repeated in a higher register, ending in a full cadence of VI-V-I, with the higher voice coming to rest on A-flat. We would also note the two compressions of the dotted rhythm in bars 7 and 15, completing a descent of a fifth from E-flat to A-flat. Also important is the emphatic sub-dominant moves in the middle section of A (first to D-flat and then to G-flat). This is projected on to the B section which is also in D-flat. To these I would add a rhythmic remark. As said before the rhythm of A is the same throughout, but there is a subtlety here. Though the point is debatable I believe that the a-section of A has the main emphasis on the first beat, as suggested by the dissonant neighbor tones A-flat (2), B-flat (3), C(6) etc. while in the b-section it is on the second, as marked in some editions (e.g. Koehler & Winkler, published by Litolff). In others it is on the first, which weakens the special meaning of the sforzando on the G-flat in bar 123.

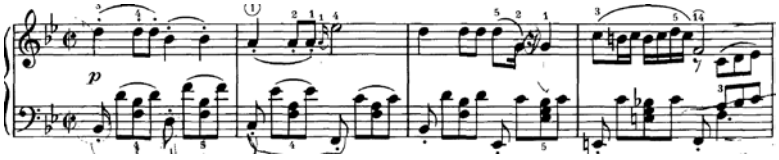
The trio is very different: it is un-melodious with non-stop arpeggio triplets in the right hand and a stable harmonic points in the left with an organ-point on the second beat – first A-flat, then A natural, and back to A-flat. We said above that the sub-dominant D-

flat of the b-section of A is projected onto the Trio. This also applies to the rhythmic subtlety mentioned above having the main emphasis on the second beat of each bar. These two features connect the trio to the main section, which otherwise may seem unrelated to it, and make the contrast in their overall texture more interesting.

No. 3 in B-flat: Tema (Andante) and Variations

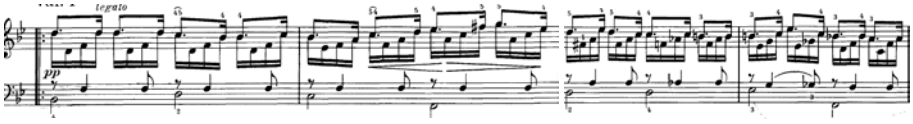
Though some editions mark it in 4/4 I suppose this is a mistake, and most editions mark it alla breve, which I suppose is the correct metre and would render it much faster of course. This is the only Impromptu which is a theme and (five) variations.

The theme, in B-flat, is of two simple periods of 8 bars with two closing bars at the end. As often indicated it is reminiscent of Schubert's music for Rosamunde (op. 26), used also in the 2nd movement of string quartet no. 13 in A minor.



Its charming melody and simple harmony are set in a typical Schubertian rhythm of ta - ta-te- ta.[5] The melody proceeds by relatively wide intervals without losing its directedness and fluency. The variations 1, 2 and 5 generally follow the structure and harmony of the theme. Note the germinal chromatic rise in the bass of m. 3-4 (which will be developed into a full chromatic progression in var. 3). The middle variations, nos. 3 and especially 4 go quite a way from it. No. 3 is in minor and no. 4 in G-flat departing from the theme in many respects – motivically, harmonically and rhythmically – though the phrase and periodic structure of the theme are maintained. In no. 5 we are back to the more conventional form of variation, where the theme's harmony is also maintained.

Var. 1 Inserts rhythmic complexity: the dotted rhythm in the upper voice, the semi-quavers harmonic filling, and the syncopation in the lower middle one – all of which are kept throughout the variation like in the theme.

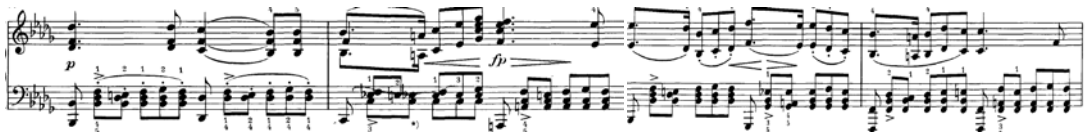


[5] We met it expanded in no. 3 in G-flat of op. 90, and shall meet it again compressed in the next and last one of op. 142; it is the key motive of the Wanderer Fantasy op. 15, Rosamunde, the 9th (great) symphony, Moments Musicaux 3, 5, and numerous other works of Schubert.

This complexity is one of the main contrasts it has with the rhythmic simplicity of the theme. Another is the way the upper voice stretches continuous lines, filling the interval-jumps of the theme with auxiliaries. These two elements – the stretching lines filled with auxiliaries and the syncopated accompaniment – run throughout all the variations. One should also note the chromatic descent in the tenor of bars 3-4, derived from the upper voice of the left hand in mm. 7-8 of the theme, which inverts the bass of mm. 3-4.

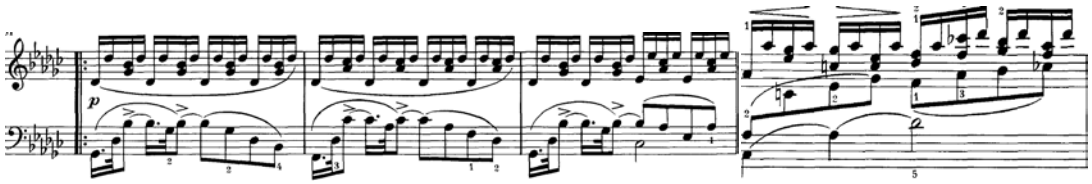
Var. 2 The rhythmic syncopation of the first variation inspires this one as well, though this time with full chords. But melodically it departs further from the simple theme. It also much expands the tone range (diaphason) and the textural variety, though keeping strictly the phrase structure and the harmony of the theme.

Var. 3 The theme and all the other variations are rather in an easy bright mood, but not this one. It is in the minor key, passionate and with thick harmony in triplets throughout. The passionate character is enhanced by repeated emphasis on neighbor tones, as in the second minim of m. 1, or both minims of m.3 etc.



Note the obstinate (ostinato) turns to the upper and lower neighbors mainly in the upper voice of the accompaniment, and the chromatic insertions e.g. in the beginning of the second part (mm.17-18) both in the bass and the upper voice of the left hand, which derive from the germinal chromatic rise in the second part of the theme (mm. 13-15).

Var. 4 In this variation in G-flat – the only one not in the home key of B-flat – we mostly depart from the theme. It begins with a merry dotted jump in the left hand, emphasizing the second (weak) quaver with a syncopated effect.



The hands switch roles in m. 5. Except for the I-V-I-II-V harmonic pattern there is hardly a noticeable trace of the theme. This in general is true of the entire variation.

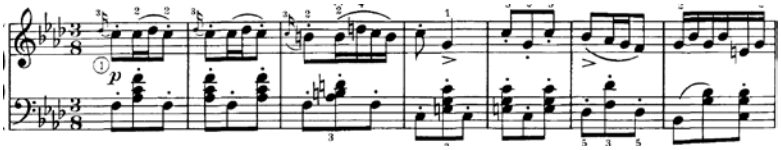
Var. 5 With this variation we come back on B-flat in a more conventional mode of variation. It keeps the phrase structure and the harmony of the theme, and returns, in the left hand, to the syncopated chords of the second variation, with the right hand running in

bright and sparkling triplets. Again like in the second variation the hands switch roles in the second part, returning to the original mode in the last four bars.

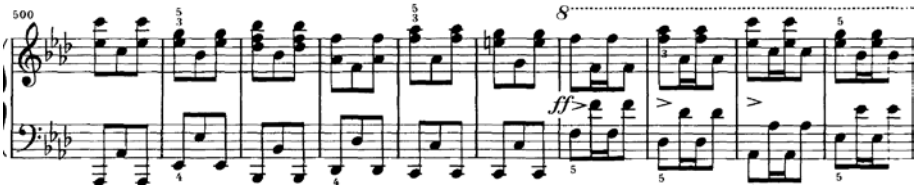
The piece ends with a Piu lento epilogue of nine bars returning to the opening motive of the theme and its typical rhythm with slight harmonic changes, thus rounding up the entire set into one coherent piece. Though repeating the theme at the end of a set of variations is not uncommon (a notable example being Bach's Goldberg variations), here it is not strictly repeated, as this would not fit such a short set. And indeed Schubert repeats only the germane basic motive as a sort of a concluding calm reminder.

No. 4 in F minor (Allegro Scherzando)

This piece is of a more virtuosic and extrovert nature than the other Impromptus. It is again in A-B-A form with a long coda, terminating in a virtuosic Piu Presto passage in octaves. The A section is varied in texture and has three subsections (a: 1-16; b: 17-44; c: 45-86). Its main opening theme displays once again the typical Schubertian rhythm (ta - ta-te - ta) we encountered many times before (this time in a compressed form).



Note also the typical neapolitan turn in m. 31. Sub-section c combines elements of both previous sub sections. The B section is particularly long, running in A-flat (major and minor) up to m. 323, where A returns. The coda builds mainly on the rhythmic pattern of bar 5, developed already in bars 17-18, and later. It ends in a bravura piu presto in octaves, which combines this rhythmic pattern with that of the opening motive. Here e.g. bars 500-509 from its middle:



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