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An Overview of Schubert's 21 Piano Sonatas

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Abstract

The history of piano sonatas between 1750s-1850s is of particularly interest for composers during the time. Composers from Johann Christian Bach to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart wrote several magnificent sonatas which are commonly performed in recitals. Nevertheless, Joseph Haydn became increasingly preoccupied with the piano trio; Mozart with piano concerto; Ludwig van Beethoven with no piano sonatas written during the last seven years of his life. On the other hand, Franz Schubert (1797-1828) wrote vocal and instrumental music that were almost equal, although the pace was more slowly in instrumental writing. Schubert's piano sonatas, written with so much value of experimentation, reveal constant struggles and difficulties with his illness for many years, as he lamented to his long friend Leopold Kupelwieser in 1824 to be the most "unhappy" and "wretched" creature in the world. Many of these numbers are not even complete for various reasons. I value the writing of the 21 piano sonatas to be powerfully and extraordinarily personal that describes his rather short life journeys, yet splendidly. The purpose of this writing is to present an overview of Schubert's complete piano sonatas written during 1815-1828.

Keywords: Overview, Schubert, Piano Sonata, Creative Process

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Sekilas akan 21 Piano Sonata oleh Schubert

Abstrak

Banyak komposer di Eropa tertarik dalam menulis piano sonata antara tahun 1750 sampai dengan 1850, dari Johann Christian Bach sampai ke Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, dimana mereka menulis dengan jumlah sangat banyak. Tetapi, Joseph Haydn semakin tidak tertarik dalam menulis piano sonata dalam 20 tahun terakhir hidupnya, dan mengalihkan perhatiannya ke penulisan piano trio; hal serupa dengan Mozart dalam penulisan piano konserto; begitu juga Beethoven, dimana ia tidak menulis piano sonata pada tujuh tahun terakhir hidupnya. Franz Schubert (1797-1828), yang sering kali kurang mendapatkan penghargaan serupa), menulis jumlah karya vokal dan instrumental yang hampir seimbang, walaupun kecepatan menulisnya lebih lambat pada karya instrumentalnya. 21 piano sonatanya ditulis dengan proses eksperimentasi luar biasa, yang menggambarkan kehidupannya yang penuh perjuangan melawan sipilis dan kesulitan lainnya, seperti yang ia tuliskan ke temannya Leopold Kupelwieser pada tahun 1824, bahwa ia merasa sebagai makhluk yang paling tidak senang dan malang di dunia. Banyak dari karya piano sonata ini bahkan tidak selesai untuk berbgaai macam alasan. Penulis menilai 21 karya ini sebagai komposisi yang sangat luar biasa, yang menggambarkan perjalanan hidup Schubert yang singkat, namun luar biasa. Tujuan dari penulisan ini adalah untuk mempresetasikan gambaran keseluruhan akan piano sonata dari Schubert, yang ditulis antara tahun 1815-1828.

Kata Kunci: Overview, Schubert, Piano Sonata, Creative Process

Introduction

As Vienna became the most important city in the development of music during late eighteenth century, it did not produce the truest genuine musician except Franz Schubert (1770-1827). The so-called "First Viennese School" is mistakenly understood since none of the three (Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven) was born in Vienna. Schubert, however, was not widely known outside Vienna and his music, especially instrumental works, was unfamiliar despite the vast output, although they were written almost equally to his vocal music. It took 40 years for a lawyer named Heinrich Kreissle von Hellborn (1822-1869) to write something about Schubert's life although he never met him in person. The biography was not convincing enough since Schubert was a man with insignificantly few words, living with only several friends, the "Schubert's Circle." Besides that, there were only several original pages known as *Mein Traum* (Life Dream), written between 1816 and 1824, that could be taken as accounts. The most complete and updated

biography of Schubert today was perhaps provided by Otto Erich Deutsch (1883-1967) in the collections of *Documents*, *Memoirs*, and *Schubert: Thematic Catalogue of all his works in chronological order.*

Musicians of the eighteenth century, including "the First Viennese School" and celebrated virtuosi (including Hummel, Kalkbrenner, Cramer, and Czerny) made their names as concert pianists; nevertheless, Schubert was not a composer for the virtuoso and therefore rarely appeared publicly as a soloist. During his short life (1797-1828), Schubert was undervalued and was little known in his lifetime, and it took several years following his death just for his works to be acknowledged. Schubert also had to face unfavorable public recognition and difficulties in financial condition since he was the first composer in Western music to have written music without any patrons. Schubert lived by his art alone, in which he could only find peace, friendship, and love in music (András Schiff, 2016). His music was written with so much value of experimentation that reveals constant struggles and difficulties with his illness for many years, as he lamented to his long friend Leopold Kupelwieser on March 31, 1824,

> "In a word, I feel myself to be the most unhappy and wretched creature in the world. Imagine a man whose health will never be right again . . . . to whom the felicity of love and friendship has nothing to offer but pain . . . . My peace is gone, my heart is sore; I shall find it never and nevermore. I may well sing everyday now, for each night, on retiring to bed, I hope I may not wake again." (Badura-Skoda, 2004, 121).

Schubert's overall piano works include more than 400 piano pieces, ranging from character pieces to sonatas; from the most charming to the darkest soul; from the most beautiful to the most depressed; and from the simplest to the most dramatic. Treated piano as intimate expression, Schubert was highly sensitive with such singing tone production and lyricism. These vast numbers are categorized into four groups: sonatas, fantasies, shorter character pieces, and dances. The piano sonatas are undoubtedly the central, the most important, and the most profound works. The late John Gillespie (a former professor at University of California Santa Barbara), stated that "his piano sonatas are lyrical, personal works, and as such they mirror the composer's sensitive nature." (Gillespie, 1969, 206). The sonatas do not present much scope for concert virtuoso; in fact, "the sonatas can only make their full effect in the hands of a pianist who is able and willing to surrender himself wholly to the spirit of the music without any thought of display." (Radcliffe, 1967, 6).

Schubert's Piano Sonatas

The total number of 20 piano sonatas (21 if differentiating D. 567 and D. 568; see table below) are divided into three groups based on pianistic style: the early period (1-12), which are still in the traditionally classical style; the middle period (13-17), which show a turning point in the development of Schubert's pianistic style (after the composition of the "*Wanderer*" *Fantasy*); and the late period (18-20), which there were public acclaims for the composer's works, but at the same time suffering gradual deterioration of his health. His sonatas were often published after his death as single piano pieces rather than coherent sonatas, and thus create confusion about the actual number of sonatas, which was resolved during 1960s by Maurice Brown (1906-1975; Schubert scholar) and Paul Badura-Skoda (born 1927).

Table 1 Chronological Order of Schubert's Piano Sonatas

Group	No	D number	Key	Date	Number of movements
I	1	157	E	February 1815	4*
	2	279/346/277A	C	September 1815	4*
	3	459 (*fünf klavierstücke*)	E	August 1816	5+
	4	537	a	March 1817	3
	5	557	A-flat	May 1817	3
	6	566/506	e	June 1817	4**
	7	567 → 568	D-flat – E-flat	1817/1818	4
	8	571/604/570	f-sharp	July 1817	3**
	9	575	B	August 1817	4
	10	613/612	C	April 1818	3*
	11	625/505	f	September 1818	4*
	12	664	A	Summer 1819	3
II	13	784	a	February 1823	3
	14	840 "Reliquie"	C	April 1825	4*
	15	845	a	April/May 1825	4
	16	850 "Gastein"	D	August 1825	4
	17	894	G	October 1826	4
III	18	958	c	September 1828	4
	19	959	A	September 1828	4
	20	960	B-flat	September 1828	4

** The "unfinished" sonatas – 5 totals*
+ Only the first two are titled "Sonate"
*** Composed in fragments*

One of Schubert's distinctive writings is his unprepared modulation through remote keys describing his life journey. Schubert often expressed his unhappy feeling toward life, especially the latter months of 1822 that were troubled by a serious breakdown in health. In regard of structure,

Schubert liked to write long flowing melodies and present the themes on continuously shifting harmony, often with new characters as well. The theme may grow and develop gradually out of another (i.e., the first movement of *Sonata in A minor*, D. 537 and the *Sonata in A major*, D. 959) – a writing skill that is often used by nineteenth century composers, especially Johannes Brahms (1833-1897), coined as developing variation by Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951). Schubert's sonatas are mixture between traditional style and spontaneous improvisatory-quality of lyrical melody being worked out in a large spatial design.

We can see from the table above that there are several "unfinished" writings, in which they were either lost or not written, or originally composed separately. Although his unfinished piano sonatas contain all the movements he planned to compose, Schubert lacked the motivation to finish them due to several reasons: first, no publisher at that time was interested in publishing them for various reasons, most probably because of lack of popularity; second, no opportunity for their performances since Schubert himself was rarely seen in public; and the third reason is that each sonata was written with too much wealth of ideas. There was a tendency that in each sonata, "Schubert stopped composing only after he had already written down the essential thematic components of the piece, that is, the exposition and the development sections." (Bart Berman, 1996). However, it is not difficult to "finish" the sonatas, as Badura-Skoda states,

> "It is our advantage that Schubert was very systematic in writing down nearly all his unfinished sonata movements up to the point of recapitulation. As the complete composition show, most of Schubert's recapitulations are literal or nearly literal transpositions of the exposition. Thus, completing an unfinished movement remained for him a somewhat mechanical task, which he laid aside for later moments." (Badura-Skoda, 2004, 103).

The Early Period (1815-1819)

The sonatas written during 1815-16 have been neglected at least due to two reasons: the incompleteness and the lack of distinction between themes. There had been no editions available on the market and only few knew their existence; it is only in recent times did these sonatas become available to public. Schubert wrote three piano sonatas: number one in E major, D. 157; number two in C major, D. 279/346/277A; and number three in E major, D. 459. The first two sonatas were written similarly with characteristics of Viennese dance music, especially with the texture of *Mannheim rocket*. The first movements did not present distinguished ideas although they had characteristic of second themes; both the fourth movements were missing – either lost or unwritten. The third sonata was originally published as *fünf klavierstücke* (five character pieces), but

the later discovery showed that the overall design was sonata due to its arc design: Allegro moderato (sonata-allegro form) – Scherzo (sonata-allegro form) – Adagio – Scherzo – Allegro patetico; The presence of two scherzi might have been the reason that Schubert felt uncertain of choosing, thus it was not originally published as a sonata.

Schubert's involvement with the piano sonata was intensified in 1817-1818, in which he composed eight numbers in two years. He wrote new approach of piano technique, as described by Eva Badura-Skoda, "While it is true that Schubert inherited the sonata form from Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and a few others, it is equally true that he brought to it – and to piano technique – a new, fresh approach." (Badura-Skoda, 2004, 104). The first approach is a frequent use of melodies in octaves (often in unison playing). The second approach is the evidence of little influence of Mozart or Beethoven, meaning that Schubert started to free himself from the classical tradition. The third approach is the harmonic progression that had been changed and systematically enlarged to III, VI, flat III, flat VI, or vii. Schubert, therefore, invented a new kind of sonata form and elevated it to a much higher level of development.

Sonata number four in A minor, D. 537 has three movements; the first movement features irregular phrases groups; the exposition has a "development" character (harmonically). The development is built almost entirely on a two-note motive introduced in the final measures of the exposition. Sonata number five in E minor, D. 557 is conceived it in the style of a *sonata facile*. The rondo finale of Sonata number six in E minor, D. 566/506 was published posthumously; however, a manuscript on the library in Vienna bears the title *Sonate von Franz Schubert* with Rondo underneath. Kathleen Dale (1895-1984) – English musicologist and pianist, combined this Rondo with the sonata in E minor in a publication.

Sonata number seven in E-flat major, D. 568 was originally written in D-flat major before being transposed to E-flat major, perhaps due to the publisher's request who considered a key of five flat sign was too difficult for amateur sight readers. Nevertheless, it is not a mere transposition because it has changes in the developments section in the first and fourth movements. The sonata is considered as the finest of Schubert's early sonatas since it represents Schubert in his most Viennese style and character. This work is also the first large, four-movement work encountered in the keyboard sonatas.

Sonata number eight in F-sharp minor, D. 571/604/570 is Schubert's only sonata that sounds the most like an opening of a lied. Sonata number nine in B major, D. 575 has unusual tonal scheme written in march-like opening and lied-like second theme. The second movement of Sonata number 10 in C major, D. 613/612 was written first as an adagio, which was published separately after Schubert's death; meanwhile, the other two movements remained unfinished. The work is the most experimental one with unusual chromatic runs and unprepared modulations. Sonata number 11 in F minor, D. 625/505 has the same scheme with Sonata D. 613, which the second movement was written first as an adagio. Sonata number 12 in A major, D. 664 features another singing lied-like opening theme. A collection of sonatas number seven to twelve show Schubert's expression in writing song and dance music.

The Middle Period (1823-1826)

After a four-year gap, the Middle Sonatas (1823-1826) were written in an extreme emotional expression, either being somber or happy. Starting from Sonata number 13 in A minor, D. 784, they were written during which Schubert style in instrumental composition has increased greatly in scope. The opening theme of Sonata number 13 in A minor, D. 784 is nothing like the earlier sonatas as the theme is somber, darkness, and pessimistic, far removed from the charm and gaiety sense of dance as Schubert pushed all conventions aside in this sonata. In 1825 Schubert wrote three piano sonatas; the unfinished sonata number 14 in C major, D. 840 "*Reliquie*" was first published by Whistling (Leipzig) in 1861 with the mistaken title "Schubert's last sonata." The first two large-scaled movements are complete, although Schubert had nearly finished the third movement, the Menuetto. The title *Reliquie* is a poetic reference to its incompleteness. Sonata number 15 in A minor, D. 845 was published during Schubert's lifetime as the first grand sonata, dedicated to Archduke Rudolph. The review by *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* on March 1, 1826,

> "In the matter of expression and technique, although it preserves a praiseworthy unity, it moves so freely and originally within its confines, and sometimes so boldly and curiously, that it might not unjustly have been called a fantasy." (Badura-Skoda, 2004, 124).

Suggesting program music, Sonata number 16 in D major, D. 850 "Gastein," published as Schubert's second grand sonata was composed in Gastein, Austria (hence its name), which is a spa town, reflecting the town's history as a health resort.

The Sonata number 17 in G major, D. 894 is one of the most intimate of all his works (not just piano sonatas), especially the first movement. In Schubert's later works the first movement usually go at a moderate pace. It was the last sonata to be published during Schubert's lifetime, and it originally appeared not as a sonata, but rather as four separate pieces: *Fantasie*, *Andante*, *Menuetto*, and *Allegretto*. Stewart Gordon, a professor of keyboard studies at University of Southern California, states that "The performer must be completely dedicated to the gentle beauty of the work and must draw the audience into a world that is predominantly serene." (Gordon, 1996, 225).

The Late Period (1828)

The last three sonatas (1828) were written only a few weeks before Schubert's death in a remarkably short time, yet at the same time represented the peak in the composer's pianistic output. The sonatas were originally dedicated to Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778-1837), whom Schubert greatly admired; however, they were not published until 1838 due to lack of interests from publishers during the time; not until Anton Diabelli (1781-1858) published them in dedication to Schumann. Having been written in quick succession, the last three sonatas can be interpreted in one group with possibility to trace a sequence of emotional pattern among them: D. 958 is stormy and somber; D. 959 is nostalgic mood; and D. 960 is profoundly and prayerfully contemplative.

The first movements of these sonatas contain three-key exposition; theme groups; harmonically closely-related or remote progression; themes generally do not form symmetrical periods; irregular phrase lengths being prominent; abrupt development section with a new tonal area; many new themes based on a melodic fragment undergoing successive transformations. The second movements are typically written in ternary or rondo-like structure with various harmonic progressions. The third movements are in scherzo and trio; while the fourth movements are hybrid between sonata-allegro and rondo form, written in relentless flowing rhythms, various harmonic progressions, and two contrasting codas.

One of Schubert's darkest works, The Sonata number 18 in C minor, D. 958 has been compared by musicologists with Beethoven's Thirty-two Variations due to its passacaglia theme. It begins with an energetic and powerful opening, just to end in such disappearance. The last movement is written in perpetual tarantella rhythm (compared to Beethoven sonata Op. 31/3). Sonata number 19 in A major, D. 959 is sometimes being overshadowed in popularity by the other

two sonatas. The most striking part of this sonata is the second movement, which Badura-Skoda states, "If ever sadness was expressed in music, it was expressed in this movement where a sorrowful melody is sung. The middle section, a chromatic fantasy, is one of Schubert's boldest pages, perhaps a stark vision of all the horrors of war and destruction, of the Day of Judgment" (Badura-Skoda, 2004, 134). Sonata number 20 in B-flat major, D. 960 is majestic, calm, solemn, which is the final moment of his life. The beginning of the first movement is probably taken from his own lied *Am Meer* (the sea was shining in the last glow of the sunset) from his cycle *Schwanengesang* (Swan Song).

Conclusion

In conclusion, many composers have written piano sonatas since Schubert, but in a small number. The most prolific composers of sonatas since then have been Russians, wrote sonatas with an intention for the concert virtuoso. In Schubert, it is all about essential intimacy, tenderness, and art itself; his sonatas represent all kind of life facets, from the wonder of being alive, from happiness to hope to introspection, intimacy, tenderness, terror, rage, and desolation.

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