Piano Series

MURRAY PERAHIA

J.S. Bach
French Suite No. 6 in E Major, BWV 817
Allemande
Courante
Sarabande
Gavotte
Polonaise
Menuet
Bourrée
Gigue

Schubert
Four Impromptus, D. 935
No. 1 in F Minor: Allegro moderato
No. 2 in A-flat Major: Allegretto
No. 3 in B-flat Major: Andante
No. 4 in F Minor: Allegro scherzando

INTERMISSION

Beethoven
Sonata in B-flat Major, Op. 106 (Hammerklavier)
Allegro
Scherzo: Assai vivace
Adagio sostenuto
Largo—Allegro risoluto

This performance is made possible by a generous gift from Richard and Mary L. Gray.
Johann Sebastian Bach
Born March 21, 1685; Eisenach, Germany
Died July 28, 1750; Leipzig, Germany

French Suite No. 6 in E Major, BWV 817

COMPOSED
ca. 1725

From 1717 to 1723, Bach was director of music at the court of Anhalt-Cöthen, north of Leipzig. He liked his job. His employer, Prince Leopold, was a well-educated man, twenty-four years old at the time he engaged Bach (who was thirty-two). Leopold was fond of travel, books, and paintings, but his real passion was music. (Reports had it that Leopold spent a whopping twenty percent of the court’s annual budget on his musical establishment.) The prince was an accomplished musician who not only played violin, viola da gamba, and harpsichord well enough to join with the professionals in his household orchestra, but who also had an exceptional bass voice.

He started the court musical establishment in 1707 with three players (his puritanical father had no use for music), and by the time of Bach’s appointment, the ensemble had grown to nearly twenty performers equipped with a fine set of instruments. It was for these musicians that Bach wrote many of his outstanding instrumental works, including the Brandenburg Concertos, orchestral suites, violin concertos, and much of his chamber and keyboard music. Leopold appreciated Bach’s genius, and Bach returned the compliment when he said of his royal patron: “He loved music, he was well-acquainted with it, he understood it.”

The first four of the so-called French suites must have been composed at Cöthen, since they appear in a manuscript collection of six such works dating from 1723, the year Bach left for Leipzig. The last two suites in the 1723 set—now known independently as BWV 818 and BWV 819—had been replaced with the French suites nos. 5 and 6 by 1725, when the collection, much revised, reached its definitive state. The six French suites (BWV 812–817) form a pendant to the earlier English suites, though they are smaller in scale (they eschew the elaborate opening preludes), more melodic in character, and lighter in texture.

The source of the term “French” in the title is unknown. The heading of the 1725 manuscript was written in French, but so was that for the English suites, and neither one mentioned “French” or “English” in its title. The composer’s first biographer, Johann Nikolaus Forkel, suggested that the works were “written in the French taste,” but nineteenth-century Bach scholar Philipp Spitta countered that “there is no idea of imitating or carrying out any specially French characteristics.” What is certain about the title of the French suites is that it was not authentic with Bach and that it provides a convenient means of identifying the pieces.

The French suites follow the standard succession of stylized dances comprising the baroque form, established in German practice with the works of Johann Jakob Froberger around 1650: allemande, courante, sarabande, gigue. In the French suites, two to four additional dances of differing character (bourrée, gavotte, menuet, air, loure, polonaise, anglaise) are inserted before the gigue. The fourth suite adds a pair of menuets. The moderately paced allemande, if its French name is to be trusted, originated in Germany in the sixteenth century. French composers found it useful for displaying their most elaborate keyboard ornamentations and passed it back to German musicians in that highly decorated form.

The courante was an old court dance accompanied by jumping motions that was frequently paired with the smoothly flowing allemande. When the sarabande traveled to Spain from its birthplace in Mexico in the sixteenth century, it was so wild in its motions and so lascivious in its implications that Cervantes ridiculed it and Philip II suppressed it. The dance became...
considerably tamer when it was taken over into French and English music during the following century, and it had achieved the dignified manner in which it was known to Bach by 1700. The gavotte was a dance of moderate liveliness whose ancestry traces to French peasant music. The polonaise seems to have originated in connection with Polish court ceremonies, and had become a separate instrumental genre by about 1700. The menuet was originally a quick peasant dance from southwestern France, but it had become more stately and measured by Bach’s time. The bourrée was a French folk dance that was adopted by the court as early as the sixteenth century. The lively gigue arose from an English folk dance; it became popular as the model for instrumental compositions by French, German, and Italian musicians when it migrated to the Continent.

Franz Schubert
Born January 31, 1797; Vienna, Austria
Died November 19, 1828; Vienna, Austria

Impromptus, D. 935

COMPOSED
1827

On January 31, 1827, Franz Schubert turned thirty. He had been following a bohemian existence in Vienna for over a decade, making barely more than a pittance from the sale and performance of his works, and living largely by the generosity of his friends, a devoted band of music lovers who rallied around his convivial personality and exceptional talent. The pattern of Schubert’s daily life was firmly established by that time: composition in the morning; long walks or friendly visits in the afternoon; companionship for wine and song in the evening. The routine was broken by occasional trips into the countryside to stay with friends or families of friends—he visited Dombach, near the Vienna Woods, for several weeks in the spring of 1827 and Graz in September.

A curious dichotomy marked Schubert’s personality during those final years of his life, one well-suited to the romantic image of the inspired artist, rapt out of quotidian experience to carry back to benighted humanity some transcendent vision. “Anyone who had seen him only in the morning, in the throes of composition, his eyes shining, speaking, even, another language, will never forget it—though in the afternoon, to be sure, he became another person,” recorded one friend. The duality in Schubert’s character was reflected in the sharp swings of mood marking both his psychological makeup and his creative work. His friend the dramatist Eduard von Bauernfeld wrote:

If there were times, both in his social relationships and his art, when the Austrian character appeared all too violently in the vigorous and pleasure-loving Schubert, there were also times when a black-winged demon of sorrow and melancholy forced its way into his vicinity; not altogether an evil spirit, it is true, since, in the dark concentrated hours, it often brought out songs of the most agonizing beauty.

The ability to mirror his own fluctuating feelings in his compositions—the darkening cloud momentarily obscuring the bright sunlight—is one of Schubert’s most remarkable and characteristic achievements, and touches indelibly upon the incomparable series of works—Winterreise, the Great C major symphony, last three piano sonatas, string quintet, two piano trios, impromptus—that he created during the final months of his brief life.

Schubert began his eight pieces entitled impromptu in the summer and autumn of 1827;
they were completed by December. He did not invent the title. The term “Impromptu” had been current in Vienna since at least 1822, when the Bohemian-Austrian composer Jan Václav Voříšek issued a set of brief, ternary-form works of extemporized nature under that name. The term (from “unprepared” or “unpremeditated” in French) was meant to convey a certain sense of improvisation-like spontaneity, but in a clearer form than was usually implied by the title “Fantasia.”

Schubert was familiar with Voříšek’s pieces, as well as with the many independent piano works by Beethoven, Field, Tomášek, and others that were flooding the market in the wake of the burgeoning piano manufacturing trade (and falling consumer prices) of those years. Schubert sold his eight impromptus to Haslinger in Vienna, who agreed to publish them in small lots to test their acceptance. He issued the first two numbers of the series (in C minor and E-flat major) in 1828 as Schubert’s op. 90, nos. 1 and 2 with some success, but the composer’s death on November 19 of that year halted the project, and the remaining pair of op. 90 impromptus was not published until 1857 or 1858; the four others were issued at the end of 1839 by Diabelli as op. 142.

Robert Schumann, one of Schubert’s earliest champions and the catalyst for the first performance of the Great Symphony in C major (conducted, at Schumann’s insistence, by Mendelssohn at the Leipzig Gewandhaus concerts in 1839), knew the impromptus in manuscript copies, and wrote of their special instrumental character: “As a composer for the piano, Schubert stands alone (in some respects, even above Beethoven), in that his writing is more pianistic, that is to say, the piano’s full resources are effectively brought into play, than is Beethoven’s piano writing, in which tone color is achieved more orchestrally.” Perhaps the most remarkable quality of the impromptus is the manner in which Schubert leavened their inherent pianism with his incomparable sense of melody, a situation for which Kathleen Dale proposed the following explanation:

Schubert’s continued experience of song-writing had by now so strongly developed his wonderful natural gift of apprehending the spirit of a poem and re-creating it in music, that when he turned from songs to write for piano solo, he inevitably composed works which, though specifically instrumental in character, are so truly lyrical in essence that each is a poem in sound.

“A Poem in Sound”—music that is flowing, evocative, reflective of the rhythms of the heart and the soul and of life itself. Such is the gift that Franz Schubert left the world.

Schumann contended that the four op. 142 impromptus (D. 935) comprise a loose sonata cycle, with the opening F minor number standing as the first movement. Schumann’s argument founders because of the lack of fully realized sonata-allegro form in the F minor impromptu (there is no development section) and the unconventional tonal relationships among the later movements, but he was correct in recognizing the grand scale and expressive weight of this opening piece. The initial theme, a stair-step descending motive in dotted rhythms, promises drama with its bold opening gesture but reveals its true character as amiably melancholy.

Three related ideas comprise the second theme group: a tenor melody in evenly paced notes, strewn with right-hand arpeggios, of emotionally unsettled character; a sweet song of inspired lyricism, grown from the preceding evenly paced

A sketch of Schubert’s study, with his piano

...
motive, in chordal harmonies; and an episode of rippling arpeggios woven around a theme divided between a close-interval call in the treble and an answering response in the bass. The series of themes is repeated, with some truncation, as the second half of the F minor impromptu, which ends with a reminiscence of the opening stair-step motive.

The A-flat major impromptu, based on a melody of disarming purity and tranquil simplicity, is the most gentle of dances, perhaps a nostalgic recollection of the old minuet, long out of fashion by 1827, or the Austrian ländler, which evolved into the modern waltz during Schubert’s lifetime. The central trio is more active rhythmically and harmonically than the music that surrounds it.

Schubert was apparently particularly fond of the lovely melody of the Impromptu no. 3 in B-flat major—he had used it previously in the entr’acte no. 3 for the incidental music to Rosamunde (1820) and the A minor string quartet, D. 804 (1824). It here serves as the theme for five variations that are led into some deeply expressive harmonic areas as they proceed. The brief coda recalls the theme in its original form.

The last of the impromptus, in F minor, is in the nature of a brilliant folk dance, perhaps of gypsy origin. The piece demands several flights of virtuosity, especially in the rolling scale passages and mercurial broken chords of the middle section, before coming to a bravura close.

Ludwig van Beethoven
Born December 16, 1770; Bonn, Germany
Died March 26, 1827; Vienna, Austria

Sonata in B-flat Major, Op. 106 (Hammerklavier)

Thus ensued nearly five years of bitter legal battles between Beethoven and Johanna over the custody of Karl, who was mired in misery all the while by the unsettled state of his young life. The case was first decided in Beethoven’s favor in February 1816. Johanna instituted subsequent proceedings (usually after Karl had fled to her from the smothering attentions of his uncle), and the courts again formally took up the matter in 1818. Litigation dragged on for the next two years. The eventual settlement in 1820 was painful for Beethoven, even though he won the suit (but alienated the boy so thoroughly that six years later, he tried to kill himself).

In addition, the proceedings revealed that he was without noble ancestors, a lifelong belief that he held tenaciously until it was publicly exploded in court. With declining health, shattered hearing, and family turmoil sapping so much of Beethoven’s energy during that time, it is little wonder that half decade was the least productive period of his creative life. Between the two cello sonatas, op. 102 of 1815 and the Piano Sonata in E major, op. 109 of 1820, the only major works
that he completed were the song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte* and the piano sonatas in A (op. 101) and B-flat, the *Hammerklavier* (op. 106).

It was during the summer of 1817 that Beethoven began his *Hammerklavier* Sonata (so-called because in 1816 the nation-proud composer instructed his publishers to henceforth use that German term for his keyboard works rather than the common Italian word “pianoforte”). He had escaped from Vienna to rusticate in Heiligenstadt, Nussdorf, and Baden; it was completed late the following year. Upon its publication by Artaria in October 1819, the score was dedicated to the Archduke Rudolf, Beethoven’s student and most dependable patron, who had been elected archbishop of Olmütz a few months before.

The *Hammerklavier* Sonata is among the first manifestations of Beethoven’s “late style,” when he was simultaneously striving for both greater concentration and greater expansion than he had achieved in his earlier music. The major works of his last decade—the *Missa solemnis*, the Ninth Symphony, the quartets, and the piano sonatas—evoke an unprecedented range of emotions and power of expression through the use of distant key relations, bold juxtapositions, vast formal proportions, muscular rhythms, and daring harmonies. The element of concentration, which at first seems inimical to that of expansion, is here inextricably allied with it, since Beethoven was able to increase the density of this music—its specific emotional gravity—through complex counterpoint and exquisite control of motivic figuration at the same time that he increased its scope and duration.

It is this joining of apparent antitheses—the extension of form alongside the heightening of measure-to-measure expressive intensity—that makes the late works of Beethoven the most profound and challenging in the entire realm of music. Martin Cooper, in his 1970 study of Beethoven’s last decade, wrote that these works:

...concede nothing to the listener, no attempt is made to capture his attention or hold his interest. Instead the composer communes with himself or contemplates his vision of reality, thinking (as it were) aloud and concerned only with the pure essence of his own thoughts and with the musical processes from which that thought itself is often indistinguishable.

The *Hammerklavier* Sonata is epic in scale yet inexhaustibly subtle in detail. Its four movements—a sonata-form Allegro with a cantabile second theme, a scherzo with a contrasting central trio in quick duple meter, an Adagio in sonata form of almost unparalleled sublimity, and a vast fugue that employs virtually every contrapuntal technique—encompass and bring into balance an enormous range of emotional states that find no counterpart in mere words. Opposites are here joined. The sonata contains the broadest slow movement that Beethoven ever wrote, as well as one of his most minutely realized fugues; the work is firmly rooted in traditional formal procedures, yet seeks constantly to break their fetters; those who perform the *Hammerklavier* must bring to it both the physical endurance of an athlete and the most exalted interpretative skills of the artist.

The words of Artaria’s notice in the *Wiener Zeitung* of September 15, 1819, announcing the publication of the *Hammerklavier* Sonata still apply well to this extraordinary music:

We shall now put aside all the usual eulogies, which would in any case be superfluous for the admirers of Beethoven’s great artistic talent. We note only that this work, which excels all this master’s other creations in its rich and grand fantasy, artistic perfection and sustained style, will mark a new period in Beethoven’s piano compositions.

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