

LEON McCAWLEY plays piano music by
FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

Drei Klavierstücke, D.946 [24:33]

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|---|-------------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | No.1 in E-flat minor: Allegro assai | 8:27 |
| 2 | No.2 in E-flat major: Allegretto | 11:20 |
| 3 | No.3 in C major: Allegro | 4:45 |

Five Songs arr. Franz Liszt, S.558

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|---|-----------------------------------|------|
| 4 | Sei mir gegrüsst, S.558/1 | 4:41 |
| 5 | Die junge Nonne, S.558/6 | 4:09 |
| 6 | Du bist die Ruh, S.558/3 | 4:47 |
| 7 | Auf dem Wasser zu singen, S.558/2 | 3:48 |
| 8 | Der Wanderer, S.558/11 | 5:25 |

Fantasy in C major, 'Wanderer', D.760 [20:17]

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|----|---------------------|------|
| 9 | I Allegro con fuoco | 5:40 |
| 10 | II Adagio | 6:29 |
| 11 | III Presto | 4:34 |
| 12 | IV Allegro | 3:33 |

Total Duration: 67:54

Recorded at Turner Sims, University of Southampton on November 17 & 18, 2017

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Steinway 'D' Concert Grand

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SCHUBERT
piano music

LEON McCAWLEY



SCHUBERT

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My first serious piano teacher, Ronald Smith, wrote a two-volume book entitled *Alkan, Who Was Alkan?*, its first instalment tellingly subtitled ‘The Enigma’*, in which he observed it was necessary for him to die in order to believe he had lived. No such witty (if somewhat macabre) rejoinder is necessary where Franz Schubert is concerned.

Indeed, to ask who Schubert was seems absurd given his stature among the greatest of all composers. But time was, during his tragically brief life (1797-1828) when he was viewed – at least, when he was viewed at all – as a lightweight, tuneful, even engaging composer, but one of decidedly small standing when set beside his great predecessors, Bach, Mozart and Beethoven.

Today, we owe an immeasurable debt of gratitude to the pioneering work of both Artur Schnabel and Edward Erdmann who alerted us to Schubert’s stature and calibre. Also, if more generally, to Donald Tovey who reminded us that in a musical dictionary published in 1827 mention was made of no less than five Schuberts but Franz Schubert was not among them.

To an exceptional degree Schubert suffered the fate of all true pioneers, both musical and literary, achieving belated and ironic posthumous glory. For Beethoven’s earliest listeners his music was crude and gnarled, a rude alternative to the earlier grace and polish of his predecessors. Later, Clara Schumann begged her husband, Robert, for more clarity and less obscurity. Schumann in turn was baffled by Chopin’s audacity (as was Mendelssohn). Liszt’s later works, where he “hurled his lance far into the future”, were seen as evidence of senility while the Paris Conservatoire felt that in Debussy they had “nursed a viper in their bosom”. Fauré, too, was left to lament that his time would come only after his death. So, in this sense Schubert lies at the very heart of a tradition in which posterity is left to make amends for the inherited failings of earlier uncomprehending critics and audiences.

Who would have thought that beneath Schubert’s outwardly genial nature – so keenly reflected in the jolly musical evenings around the piano that came to be known as Schubertiads, together with a lively social life in Vienna’s beer cellars – lay a seething inner life in which a profoundly sensed future was clouded by a hostile and uncomprehending present? A born outsider who would awe and astonish only after his death at the age of 31, Schubert was the eternal solitary alienated from his surrounding world, one who, in his own bleakly solipsistic words, “came into this world for nothing else but to compose”.

Schubert remains the most enigmatic of all musical geniuses in the sense that his work is of infinite variety. He can be epic or enshrine a heart-stopping mood with a simplicity that sheds all notion of flamboyance. There is anger, too, beneath outward resignation (that astonishing outburst in the A major Sonata, D.595) and in an ever-increasing technocratic age the quantity and above all the quality of his work seems nothing short of miraculous. Few composers have shown more graphically, in George Steiner's words, "the harsh contrivance of spirit against death, the hope to overreach time by force of creation".

Leon McCawley's richly comprehensive recital ranges through the outsize demands of the *Wanderer* Fantasy (D.760) to the more introspective and boldly experimental *Drei Klavierstücke* (D.946) and Liszt's transcriptions of five songs, a memorable tribute from one composer to another.

Unique in Schubert's output in its virtuoso opulence, the **Fantasy in C**, familiarly known as **Wanderer**, was composed in 1822 when the composer was 25. If its opening blaze of C major defiance recalls the start of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* Sonata (Beethoven was chief among Schubert's loves) its driving dactylic rhythm permeates a massive structure that looks far ahead to Liszt's B minor Sonata. The transformation of ideas includes an astonishingly florid elaboration of Schubert's earlier song *Der Wanderer* (D.493) quoted in the *Adagio*. The demands on the pianist are relentless

and include a rapid play of octaves in the opening *Allegro* that have been known to fox even the most intrepid players – I once heard Sviatoslav Richter fling all restraint (and accuracy!) to the winds in this passage. Unlike, say Chopin, Liszt and Rachmaninov, Schubert was himself no virtuoso at the keyboard. Daunted by his own creation he exclaimed, with a comprehensible degree of frustration, "the devil may finish it!"

It is hardly surprising that Liszt's love and admiration for Schubert should be qualified, regarding the *Wanderer* Fantasy, by a sense of strain, of a form of over-reaching, of making the piano do more than it realistically can. Accordingly, he reworked his source for piano and orchestra creating, as it were, the Piano Concerto that Schubert never wrote. Again, that Schubert's original should feature expressive tremoli at the end of the second movement led to Liszt's frequent use of and, indeed, delight in such a formally frowned-upon device (as in, for example, *Vallée d'Obermann* and *Les jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este* from the first and third volumes of his own *Années de pèlerinage*). But if Liszt sought to liberate or 'set free' Schubert, he left a work which, while admirably intentioned, hardly replaced let along excelled Schubert. Today, Schubert rather than Schubert-Liszt is the more frequently performed.

The D.946 **Drei Klavierstücke** belong in another world. Following the *Wanderer* and composed in May 1828, just six months before his death

in November that year (although unpublished until 1868) Schubert now reaches out in yet another radically new direction. Here poetic ambiguity reigns supreme – a sore challenge for his contemporaries. Wild, feverish, disjointed and intimate, this is visionary music with a vengeance. The opening Impromptu is breathless and agitated before subsiding into greater stability. Yet any sense of convention is contradicted by the near-Alkanesque oddity of rushing scales and shuddering tremolandi. The third piece is a syncopated whirl of events, with a gentle insistent central pulse and a wildly exultant close.

Finally, to Schubert-Liszt. For Liszt, Schubert was “the most poetical composer who ever lived”, an opinion that simply but shrewdly suggests Schubert’s own seemingly endless depth and scope. Musical (un-musical?) puritans who frown on the world of Liszt’s transcriptions and paraphrases are misled. If Liszt was never the complete altruist, he nonetheless sought to enlighten listeners to the qualities of his source material even as he was prompting an awareness of his own legendary pianistic prowess.

Liszt wrote nearly 400 arrangements for solo piano and of these more than 50 are of Schubert songs, composed between 1833 and 1846. Chopin may have unleashed a savage contempt for Liszt (they were of a wholly different character and temperament, their supposed friendship little more than a veneer) saying “he wants to attain Parnassus on another

man’s Pegasus. This is *entre nous* – he is an excellent binder who puts other people’s works beneath his covers. I still say that he is clever without a vestige of talent”.

Liszt, more generous-hearted but intimidated by such vehement sarcasm, waited until Chopin’s death before offering tribute in the form of his *Funérailles*, the two *Polonaises*, *Mazurka*, *Berceuse* and the *Étude de Concert*, *La Leggerezza*. But times change and today dedicated Lisztians (most notably Alfred Brendel) are quick to acknowledge Liszt’s glory, his supreme respect for Schubert even when combined with his own combustible charisma and pianistic wizardry. The days are mercifully long past when musicians considered arrangements second class. Liszt’s evangelical mission – his desire to share the finest music with as wide an audience as possible blended with his own indelible and entirely 19th-century personality, is nevertheless an astonishing feat of generosity.

In fact, Liszt transcribed no less than 56 of Schubert’s songs, those included here published within the dozen-strong collection of *Lieder von Franz Schubert*, S.558. “Such is the spell of your emotional world,” Liszt remarked in admiration, “that it very nearly blinds us to the greatness of your craftsmanship”. Living somewhere between free paraphrase and simple replica, they remain uncannily faithful to the originals while adding an extra dimension of drama and sophistication.

In *Sei mir gegrüsst* (Schubert's D.741 'I Greet You', with lyrics by Frederic Rückert) there is a sufficiently true sense of a love which "only yearning can reach" to make you temporarily forget the absence of a singer, while in the setting of the Italian merchant, poet and dilettante Jacob Nicolaus Craigher's *Die junge Nonne* ('The Young Nun', D.828) all of unrest is resolved in an ultimate and transcending love. Another Rückert setting, the third of six, *Du bist die Ruh* ('You are Rest and Peace', D.776) is surely among the most personal of all Schubert's songs, a challenge for Liszt as strong as, say, Benjamin Britten's setting of William Blake's *The Sick Rose*. Yet, here is all of Schubert's simplicity even when touched and glossed with Lisztian grandeur.

In *Auf dem Wasser zu singen* ('To be Sung on the Water', D.774) one of nine texts by the poet and lawyer Friedrich Leopold Graf zu Stolberg-Stolberg set by Schubert, among them the earlier *Morgenlied* (D.266) and *Abendlied* (D.276) – where love achieves love – the cascading figuration rises to the height of drama and declamation with storming octaves in a recognizable Liszt tradition. Listening to this, I was transported back to a performance by Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears given during my school days in Canterbury; an indelible experience.

Finally, *Der Wanderer* (D.489), which made famous a poem by Georg Philipp Schmidt (Schubert's only setting of the Lübeck-based doctor-

administrator and part-time poet) returns us full-cycle to a song at the heart of the *Wanderer* Fantasy with its final reminder ("I am alone") of the isolated nature of Schubert's genius; a combination once more of the union of a child of nature (Schubert) with a worldly sophisticate (Liszt).

*Both volumes were re-published as *Alkan, The Man, The Music* by Kahn & Averill in 2006.

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LEON MCCAWLEY

British pianist Leon McCawley won both First Prize in the International Beethoven Piano Competition in Vienna and Second Prize in the Leeds International Piano Competition in 1993.

Notable recitals in past seasons include the London Piano Series at Wigmore Hall (where he is a regular performer), International Piano Series at London's Southbank Centre, New York's Lincoln Center, Hong Kong Arts Festival and the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC.

McCawley performs frequently with many of the top British orchestras and has performed several times at the BBC Proms. Further afield he has performed with the Dallas Symphony, Philadelphia Orchestra and St. Petersburg Symphony Orchestra among others.

McCawley's wide-ranging discography has received many accolades including two Editor's Choice awards in *Gramophone*, a *Gramophone* Critic's Choice for his recording of Barber's Piano Music (SOMM) and two *Diapason d'Or* for his boxed set of Mozart's Complete Piano Sonatas (AVIE) and Haydn's Sonatas and Variations (SOMM).

Leon studied at Chetham's School of Music, Manchester with Heather Slade-Lipkin and at the Curtis Institute of Music with Eleanor Sokoloff. He also worked with Nina Milkina in London.

Leon is a professor of piano at London's Royal College of Music and is married to the painter, Anna Hyunsook Paik.

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HAYDN Piano Sonatas SOMMCD 0162

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Diapason d'Or – Diapason, July 2017

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The Classical Reviewer, March 2015

BRAHMS Piano Music SOMMCD 0116

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BBC Music Magazine, October 2012

BARBER The Solo Piano Music SOMMCD 0108

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Gramophone, November 2011