

Moments Musicaux, Op. 94 (D. 780) No. 2, in A Flat Major

Impromptus, Op. 142 (D. 935) No. 2, in A Flat Major

by Franz Schubert (1797 – 1828)

Synopsis: This paper includes biographical information about the composer Franz Schubert as well as insight into his Moments Musicaux and his Impromptus.

Keywords: music, Schubert, program notes, piano, Romantic Era, composition

Franz Schubert had an intense love for music that drove him to compose continually over the course of his tragically short life. As Karl Kobald puts it, he “sacrificed his strength and health on the altar of art.” (Kobald, 1928) Or, to quote Leo Black, “nothing could be as vivid and all-consuming as his art.” (Black, 2003) Schubert prioritized the creation music over nearly everything else in his life, including making efforts to improve his financial situation in life.

Franz Schubert was born on January 31, 1797, in the Himmelpfortgrund suburb of Vienna, Austria. With the help of his father, he started to learn music from a young age, and earned a place singing in the Court Chapel at the age of eleven, and began going to school at the Stadtkonvikt. (Kobald, 1928) There, he was discovered by the composer Antonio Salieri, who began giving Schubert private lessons. (McKay, 1996) Salieri, and many others who heard Schubert perform, were impressed with his musical talents, especially his compositions. He began composing in his early teens, and his prolific tendencies soon became apparent due to his large volume of works. (Kobald, 1928) After leaving the Stadtkonvikt, Schubert’s father wanted his son to train to be a schoolteacher, a recommendation which Schubert reluctantly accepted. Although he disliked teaching, Schubert made the most of his spare time by continuing to compose. “In the period from November 1814 to September 1816...Schubert composed in the time left to him after schoolteaching some 360 of his total of around 1,000 works.” (McKay, 1996) He was accustomed to devoting intense concentration to his compositional process. As

Leo Black phrases it, “Deep concentration of that kind is a creator’s road to the secrets of his inner world.” (Black, 2003)

Schubert lacked self-confidence, and had difficulty seeking out ways to better his situation. However, he found a group of friends who were willing to help him. These included Josef von Spaun and Franz von Schober. Schober introduced Schubert to the singer Johann Michael Vogl, which started their long-lasting personal and professional relationship. Schubert is best known for his lieder, or songs, and he composed many of them with Vogl’s voice in mind. (Kobald, 1928) Another important opportunity Schubert attained was the chance to become a music teacher for the family of Count Johann Karl Esterhazy, which involved living in their home in Zseliz, Hungary, and tutoring the Count’s two teenage daughters. As before, he used his time when not working to continue composing. (McKay, 1996)

Around 1822, Schubert began to show the initial signs of having contracted syphilis. (Kobald, 1928) The disease, along with his manic-depressive tendencies, had a negative impact on his mental health, although this did not prevent him from composing. (McKay, 1996) Indeed, some of his most memorable works date from his last few years of life, including his Moments Musicaux, Op. 94 (D. 780), and his Impromptus, Op. 142 (D. 935). These pieces were composed in late 1827, the year before he died. They are solo piano pieces, not his more characteristic lieder, but they are still “unmistakably Schubertian.” (Reed, 1972) The pieces have an intimate feel to them. Karl Kobald describes them as “beautiful miniatures in music – tone-poems, intimate confidences from Schubert’s innermost soul; melodies in chords, elaborated with a delicate filagree of runs and flights of harmony that bring us straight into the blessed sphere of romance.” (Kobald, 1928) As such, they are very representative of the Romantic era of music in which they were written. Other composers in the Romantic era had composed similar short piano pieces, “but it was Schubert who raised it to an art form of the highest order.” (Newbould, 1997)

Schubert died on November 19, 1828, officially of typhoid fever, but most likely due to complications from syphilis. Earlier that year, his friends had helped him arrange a public concert of his works, the only one to occur in his lifetime. (Kobald, 1928)

I have been playing piano since age seven, but for most of that time, I knew very little about music history. I would play pieces, knowing next to nothing about the composer's life, or even the musical era in which they were written. Taking a course on the history of Western music during my semester abroad inspired me to incorporate this. I chose this AHS Capstone project for a twofold purpose – to return to practicing technical piano music, and to learn music while simultaneously studying its history and composers. I specifically decided to focus on Schubert for this project because of a course I took last semester at Wellesley College – “Schubert, Schumann, and the Lyric Impulse.” From the course, I grew to know and appreciate Schubert's music, while also learning about his life. Now, through research for this project, I have greatly expanded my knowledge of Schubert. I have also gained an intimate knowledge of the two pieces I have worked on over the course of the semester. Knowing that Schubert wrote many lieder helped me notice and focus on having the melody line “sing out” over the rest of the notes. Additionally, I have become very familiar with the emotional aspect of the pieces, an attribute associated with many works from the Romantic Era. More specifically, I have become more attuned to the darker passages of the pieces, and how they may reflect Schubert's unstable mental state during the last few years of his life. However, the overall beauty of the pieces reflects the fact that Schubert was still capable of overcoming his mental and physical struggles to do what he loved best – composing.

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