

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1213

KATHARINA WOLPE – Volume 2

Schubert's piano music is closely related to his songs, and many melodies in the Impromptus bring to mind the Miller's Brook, the Wanderer's eternal steps and the Winter's Journey. Schubert's simplicity is awe-inspiring: he mixes sorrow and joy impartially taking up no special stance for either. There has never been a less self-important genius.

These pieces were composed during the last year of Schubert's short life. He did not, as is often supposed, invent the impromptu, but his eight works with this title are still unsurpassed. The description impromptu is itself not to be taken too literally; there is nothing here that is casual, slight or unconsidered. All Schubert's impromptus are impeccably structured and composed with the refinement and genius that so distinguish his later works, in so far as any work of Schubert (or, for that matter, Mozart) can be called "late".

Impromptus D.899 (Op.90)

No.1 in C Minor Of the four pieces in this set this is the least "Impromptu". Its beginning and its opening pages are more symphonic than improvisatory and it is only with the second theme that the music becomes more flowing, free and lyrical. It ends as it began, with that bleak solo melody; Schubert in his saddest winter mood.

No.2 in E flat In greatest contrast to the first, this impromptu feels free and spontaneous, as if it had been improvised this minute. It is in Scherzo-Trio-Scherzo form, the Trio dramatic and strongly rhythmic, but the outer sections of an almost unclouded joyfulness rare in Schubert.

No.3 in G flat With its time signature of double alla breve and its six flats, the third impromptu looked too complicated to Schubert's posthumous publishers. They changed the key from magical G flat to ordinary, everyday G major where it becomes pianistically awkward and loses the glow of its original key. It is now always played in G flat and is one of the most simply beautiful of all the impromptus, a true "Song without Words".

No.4 in A flat It doesn't seem possible that a series of arpeggios interspersed with a few chords could take us over so great an emotional range, from chilling stillness to the rush and twirl of a dance. The form is like that of the second impromptu; its turbulent, tragic Trio a not very distant relation to parts of the Winterreise. But we return to the first part, and the fourth impromptu and this whole set ends glowingly and brilliantly in A flat major.

Impromptus D.935 (Op.142) Schumann considered it a possibility that the second set of impromptus was intended to form a sonata. True, the first and last pieces are in the same key, but there is little else to support the idea. In the first piece formal structure is particularly clear and architectural, but by no stretch of imagination could this impromptu be in sonata form, the most obvious reason being that there is absolutely no development section. On the other hand, to be overly firm would be dangerous; the Moonlight Sonata also has no movement in sonata form.

No.1 in F minor This is the most complex and discursive piece of the four. Its moods range from an austere, almost martial opening, to long passages of great poetic fantasy and lyric intensity. Schubert's love for a rippling watery accompaniment is very noticeable here.

No.2 in A flat The second impromptu is so very like a song that words seem to hover just below its surface. The middle section again flows and ripples like the Miller's Brook. Even for Schubert with his unsurpassed melodic genius this must surely be one of the most beautiful and haunting tunes.

No.3 in B flat A set of five variations on a theme which Schubert used more than once; notably in the Rosamunde ballet music. The long, short, short dactyl rhythm is very significant in Schubert's work, it occurs over and over again; it sets the stark mood of the Wanderer, but is here transformed into being almost sunny. "Almost", for when Schubert was asked why he never wrote any happy music he responded: "Is there such a thing?"

No.4 in F minor Dark, dramatic and turbulent, this very dynamic piece races through many themes, never letting go of its tarantella-like fierceness. It ends at great speed with a ferocious downward run spanning almost entirely the length of Schubert's keyboard.

Katharina Wolpe

KATHARINA WOLPE first appeared in London playing the Schoenberg Piano Concerto at a BBC Promenade Concert, learning the work at very short notice. This achievement immediately established her reputation in the British Isles, and as a result she was invited to play with all the major British orchestras. She has been a soloist, amongst others, with the London Symphony Orchestra, the London Philharmonic, the Philharmonia, the BBC Symphony Orchestra and the English Chamber Orchestra as well as all the major provincial orchestras. In addition, she plays regularly for the BBC, on both radio and television. Distinguished performances of the Viennese classics established Katharina Wolpe as one of the most interesting and eloquent pianists of her generation.

In another field, her brilliant and authoritative interpretations of twentieth century and avant-garde music have contributed towards creating her unique reputation and such is her apparently effortless understanding of twentieth century idiom that many composers have been inspired to write works especially for her.

Katharina Wolpe has toured widely, gaining great critical and public acclaim. While on tour in Canada she was invited to become Pianist in Residence at the University of Toronto, where she proved herself to be an exceptional and creative teacher. She held this post for two years and now returns frequently to Canada for Master Classes and Workshops as well as her regular concerts. She recently spent four months in America, touring and as Distinguished Visiting Artist to the University of North Carolina. The impression she made with her concerts, lectures and Master Classes was such that CBC decided to record some of these events. The resulting half-hour film has been widely shown on television in the United States. Katharina Wolpe is the daughter of the composer Stefan Wolpe and she has performed many of his works including his Piece for Piano and Sixteen Instruments which is dedicated to her.

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