

Khatia Buniatishvili

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Schubert Piano Sonata in B-flat major, D. 960

Schubert-Liszt *Ständchen*

Schubert-Liszt *Gretchen am Spinnrade*

Schubert-Liszt *Erlkönig*

Liszt Transcendental Étude No. 4 in D minor (“Mazeppa”)

Liszt Hungarian Rhapsody No. 6 in D-flat major

Piano Music by Schubert and Liszt

The piano represented a considerably different instrument for Franz Schubert than it did for two of his idols, Mozart and Beethoven — let alone for Franz Liszt. While these other composers used the keyboard to establish their reputations as virtuoso performers, Schubert most likely didn't even own a piano, and he certainly never made his living from the instrument. Those who heard him at informal music gatherings praised the singing quality and sensitive touch of Schubert's playing, but his lagging technique was also noted.

Still, the piano remained a central tool for Schubert the composer, and piano sonatas extend across his all-too-brief creative life — right through his final months in 1828, when he completed his last three contributions to the genre. Each of these sonatas focuses on

different facets. The first one, in C minor, most explicitly echoes young Beethoven, who had died only recently, in 1827. The middle sonata in this trilogy, in A major, embraces contradictory attitudes. With the final one, the **Sonata in B-flat major, D. 960**, Schubert embarks on a visionary landscape that is expansive and serene. This sonata is arguably the jewel of the set and comes closest to the spirit of Beethoven's own last sonatas — though Schubert's late style is distinctly his own.

The first movement is the longest in his entire final trilogy of sonatas. But quite apart from such an obvious measurement, Schubert manages to transport us beyond our sense of mundane time by juxtaposing near and far, close-up and panorama. The relaxed though solemn flow of the opening theme, hymn-like in character introduces a mysterious trill deep beneath its closing chord (followed by a long pause). The effect of this is to cast an enigmatic doubt — or at least to raise a question — that reverberates throughout the first movement's sprawling expanse. This disruption alters the color of the opening theme and points the way toward further harmonic detours.

The slow movement shifts to the minor key (a surprisingly remote C-sharp minor) and expands on the contemplative and profoundly patient character of the first movement. A contrasting middle section further enhances the effect of stepping outside everyday time. In the evocative essay that accompanies her new release on Sony, Khatia Buniatishvili remarks: “to love Schubert is to see the

beauty hidden in the shades of everyday life and to understand the art of patience.”

The Scherzo, unusually delicate, gently returns us to more earthly spheres, while its middle Trio swerves unexpectedly into the minor. Schubert concludes this vast sonata with a gesture of indirection, moving down by a step from C minor to the real home key of B-flat major. The surprise of that “false start” is analogous to the effect of the mysterious trill from the opening. The pianist Alfred Brendel once observed that the finale’s overall character is “neither innocent...nor tooth-gnashing” but “somewhere between the humor of Jean Paul and the well-known Viennese saying that life is ‘hopeless but not serious.’”

Schubert’s last piano sonatas remained unpublished for some time — they didn’t make it into print until eleven years after his death — and even then were often ignored or at best undervalued for another century or so. The composer had much better luck with the profusion of art songs (more than 600!) by which he became far better known by his contemporaries and by the Romantics of Franz Liszt’s generation.

Schubert figures especially significantly among Liszt’s transcriptions for solo piano. Along with his original compositions across a vast spectrum of genres (including ones essentially of his invention such as the symphonic poem), Liszt devoted a great amount of attention to adapting music by nearly 200 other composers. These “reworkings” could be relatively faithful transcriptions at one extreme — his versions of symphonies by

Beethoven and others, for example, were crucial in helping to circulate familiarity with orchestral music in the pre-mass media era — but they also included highly original paraphrases and fantasies freely taking off from the source material.

Liszt quarried Schubert's music again and again throughout his career, starting with his first song transcription in 1833 (in some instances returning to the same songs to transform Schubert's voice-and-piano original into works for voice and orchestra).

Khatia Buniatishvili has chosen Liszt's solo piano transcriptions of three of Schubert lieder. Like the B-flat major Piano Sonata, *Ständchen* comes from the end of Schubert's life: it was written as part of the collection posthumously published as *Schwanengesang* ("Swan Song").

The text of ***Ständchen*** ("Serenade") is by the poet and critic Ludwig Rellstab (best known today for coming up with the nickname "Moonlight Sonata" that has since been inextricably linked to one of Beethoven's piano sonatas). Moonlight also happens to appear as one of the images in the lover's pleading in this song for his beloved to join him.

Gretchen am Spinnrade ("Gretchen at the Spinning-Wheel"), from Schubert's teenage years (1814), is the very first poem he set by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the inspiration for many of his lieder. The despairing text is from the point of view of the young woman who has fallen in love with Faust (in Part One of Goethe's masterwork). Gretchen's feelings create a sense of inner turmoil, and Faust will manipulate her to betray everything she values. Schubert also set a text by Goethe in ***Erlkönig***

(1815), an unsettling poem about a child being abducted by an evil forest elf while riding on a horse with his father in the middle of the night.

Even without the words, each song immerses the listener in a unique atmosphere and conveys the underlying dramatic situation. Gretchen's agitated psyche as she tries to distract herself from thoughts of Faust with her spinning is coded into Schubert's original accompaniment figure, while the piano part he wrote for *Erlkönig* is so effectively turbulent it shows up transformed in the orchestral prelude depicting a storm at the beginning of *Die Walküre* in Richard Wagner's *Ring* cycle. For all three of these transcriptions, Liszt ensures that Schubert's indelible melodies and dramatic sensibility are preserved, but at the same time he overlays that original voice with figurations derived from his own formidable keyboard personality.

We can more or less thank Franz Liszt himself for inventing the format of the public piano recital. He declared the instrument to embody "the microcosm of music," regarding virtuosity for its own sake as nothing but empty showmanship. Ironically, his mastery of the state-of-the-art keyboard and his innovative playing technique cast such a spell over audiences — what the poet Heinrich Heine termed "Lisztomania" — that detractors dismissed him as nothing more than a showy super-virtuoso. Eventually, Liszt retired from his career of endless touring and chose the relative calm of a conducting post at Weimar, which provided him with an opportunity for the sustained concentration he needed to compose.

Liszt's Weimar phase lasted from 1848 to 1861, and it was during these years that he published his *Études d'exécution transcendante* (*Transcendental Études*) as well as the bulk of his *Hungarian Rhapsodies*. The *Transcendental Études* date back to his early career as a performer, when he found a model for pushing instrumental boundaries in the violinist Niccolò Paganini. (Both celebrity soloists were rumored by some to have made a Faustian bargain with the devil.) Liszt initially intended to put together an encyclopedic series of etudes covering all 24 major and minor keys; he completed 12 of these.

Transcendental Étude No. 4 in D minor is among the most fiendishly difficult of the set Liszt published in 1852 (revising an earlier set of etudes). The programmatic subtitle refers to Ivan Mazeppa, a controversial 17th-century figure in the history of Ukrainian nationalism. Thanks to treatments by Lord Byron, Alexander Pushkin, and Victor Hugo, his stock rose again among artists of the Romantic era — including Liszt, who drew on the figure for a symphonic poem as well as this etude.

Hugo's poem (published in 1829) recounts an episode from the legend of the Cossack warlord. The husband of his Polish lover has discovered their affair and ties the naked Mazeppa to a horse. Liszt starts with a fantasy-like cadenza and then subjects his main theme to a dramatic series of alterations — with a prominent role for stampeding octaves and breakneck passages — that mirror the horse's wild journey. At the end, after Mazeppa has survived the ordeal, Liszt concludes the *Étude* in a spirit of unbridled triumph.

Liszt assembled 15 of his 19 *Hungarian Rhapsodies* for solo piano in a collection he published in 1853 but as regards the use of original ethnomusicological material. Following an introductory section — a proud march followed by rapid-fire music — the ***Hungarian Rhapsody No. 6 in D-flat major*** reflects the archetypal pattern of the *verbunkos*: a dance originating from Hungarian folk music that was associated with military recruiting in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A slow section, characterized by a mood of quasi-improvisation, gives way to an energetic fast part that accelerates at the end into a state of wild abandon.

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