

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

Faces of musical ambivalence and their meaning

(A demonstrated lecture accompanying a performance of the sonata, July 2012)

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This opus posthumous sonata is the last piano sonata of Schubert. It is the third of the last three great sonatas written in the last year of his life. They were published in Vienna by Diabelli in 1838 ten years after his death (only three of Schubert's complete sonatas were published in his lifetime). The sonata was written in the last months of his life. The final version was finished probably by the end of September 1828, a month and a half before his death at the age of only 31. It is said that Schubert played these last three sonatas to his friends, but I don't know how reliable this story is. Schubert intended to dedicate these sonatas to Hummel, but Diabelli, who published them in 1838, dedicated them to Schumann.

During a long time, certainly up to the thirties of the century and even later, Schubert's piano sonatas were not highly considered, in fact, they were neglected, and sometimes even degraded. For example, in his book *Schubert – the Ariel of Music* (1949), the American writer and critic Robert H. Schauffler devotes to the sonatas only few pages and writes that they are the weakest genre of Schubert's work, that they are of poor quality and that the last ones are "one long torture". He presents it as a quite common opinion, and surveys various proposals for explaining this, adding one of his own according to which this was due to Schubert's improvisational talent on the piano, which tempted him to hasty and uncritical composing.

Today these sonatas are considered highly as exemplary works, among the peaks of the classical-romantic piano sonatas. They are often performed and recorded by the best pianists. A landmark in this change of attitude towards them is undoubtedly the great pianist Arthur Schnabel, who had high regard for them, performed them in his recitals and recorded them. (By the way, I can hardly think of a similar case in which a masterwork was for a long time looked down and neglected, though known and accessible (unlike for instance Bach's Passions, which for a long time were unknown and inaccessible), and then redeemed and won high regard due to a performer).

This sonata is especially long – even more than its two predecessors, which were already longer than usual. Like its two predecessors and many of Schubert's sonatas, it is written in the general mold that Beethoven initiated in his early sonatas (for instance no. 4 in E-flat op. 7 and no. 7 in D op 10/3) – a sonata consisting of four movements, the first and last of which are in sonata-form (or in the case of the last – a rondo). This was very unusual, practically non-existent before Beethoven, but became quite standard beginning with his early sonatas (7 out of his first 12 are of four movements). In addition, the main "mass" – compositional thought and emotional message – laid in the first two movements, which were also the longest, while the third – usually a Scherzo – served as a sort of light relaxation from this heavy burden, and the last – usually a rondo – was more balanced and carried a happier mood. Schubert adopted this format in many of his sonatas, including the last three. Also like in many of his other sonatas, there are in our sonata important thematic links between the various movements (a famous extreme example of this is the Wanderer Fantasy). There are of course other formats and other ways of thinking of the relationships between the individual movements and the entire work, but we shall not get into this here.

First Movement – Allegro Moderato

Apart from the beauty, the emotional power and the harmonic richness, which are regular with Schubert, two main factors in **the exposition** of this movement deserve special mention: certain ambivalence with regard the secondary subject, and the meaning and role of the mysterious trill on G-flat in the first subject. It is worth pending a bit on both. There are in fact three main subjects in the movement – in B-flat major, in F-sharp minor, and in F major, though the middle one (in F-sharp minor) can be regarded as a (particularly long) transitory subject. Its structural status is therefore somewhat ambivalent. As we shall see in the sequel this ambivalence is meaningful in the development section, and is combined and intermingled with other manifestations of ambivalence typical of Schubert.

The **first subject** is a lyric doleful and introvert melody, moving closely around the tonic. As many have observed there is marked similarity between this movement and the first movement of Beethoven's Archduke Trio op. 97: they are both in the same key of B-flat; the tempo indication in both is "Allegro Moderato", which is not very common; the general pace and character of the main motive is similar; the emphasis on the sub-dominant right at the beginning; the long pause between the two first occurrences of the

main theme, and more. Besides the turn around the tonic conspicuous in the first motive is an extension of a third (D, b.2) to a fourth (E-flat, b.5). These two elements – the turn around the tonic and the extension of the third to the fourth – are important in the entire sonata, and are characteristic, for example, of the main subject of the second movement. Notable in the first subject is also, as mentioned above, the mysterious trill on G-flat, in piano in the bass, resting in F. It sounds as a threatening, almost devilish shadow within a subject which on its face is a calm and lyric cantabile. The resulting overall move, G-flat – F – B-flat, besides the minor mode with which it colors the first subject (which is in major) is also the kernel of the harmonic structure of the entire exposition, whose subjects are, as mentioned, in the same tones, with an enharmonic change of G-flat to F-sharp.¹ This mysterious trill recurs at eminent positions in the movement, and G-flat (which is a lowered VI) turns into a new tonal centre with the entrance² of the slightly developed first subject (from (b.19) to the return of the main subject in B-flat in forte (b.36). But then occurs something both surprising and typical of this movement – a bold enharmonic modulation (bb.45-47) to the transitory subject in F-sharp minor (b.48). F-sharp is of course the enharmonic equivalent of G-flat – which intensifies the meaning of the trill concerned on G-flat. This enharmonic change recurs in the third movement, when G-flat (b.38) is replaced by F-sharp (b. 50).

The secondary subject in F major (b.78) consists of arpeggi in triples. The exposition ends once again with bold enharmonic modulations (bb.104-105) with a clear indication by Schubert to repeat it (which most pianists dare not to do! A. Schiff aptly denounced this in strong terms in *Schubertian Studies*, ed. B. Newbould, p. 197)

The **Development** section begins with the first subject in the remote key of C-sharp minor (which, by the way, is the main key of the second movement). But it immediately gets to the secondary subject in A major (b.140). The beginning of the development in C-sharp minor enhances the ambivalence regarding the secondary subject discussed above. For this is the fifth degree of F-sharp minor, which may give some corroboration to regarding the (transitory) subject in F-sharp minor as the secondary subject. We thus have three "strange" phenomena that strengthen the status of F-Sharp (=G-flat) as the opposite pole of B-flat in the movement: The mysterious trill on G-flat and the entrance into G-flat

¹ Schubert's music is replete with enharmonic changes and modulations. For famous examples see e.g. Impromptu op. 90/4 bb.18-19; 106-7; 164-165; Moment Musicaux 2 in Ab b. 18, etc.

² In most editions this entrance is prepared by a written out 32s trill on G-flat. A. Schiff reports that in the autograph, this is simply written as "trill" without writing the 32s in full. He suggests that the trill should be executed less rapidly, since the whole movement should be played faster than it usually is.

in the main subject; the long transitory subject in F-sharp minor; beginning the development in C-sharp minor. In light of these there is strong temptation to hear the F-sharp minor subject as a secondary subject, and F-sharp as the opposite pole of B-flat. Yet, the "official" dominant and the official secondary subject are in F major. And indeed, the greater part of the development is of this secondary theme in F major. This is obvious in the section beginning with the entrance to A major (b.140), which consists mainly of harmonic modulations on that theme, but it is also true, though less obvious, for the longer section, with the more ingenious development, beginning with D-flat at b.160 until the D minor with its trill at b.195. This section is also a development of the second (F major) theme, mainly of its bass. The transitory subject is not dealt with in the development at all, and only towards the end of the development (b.197) there is a fragmented mention of the first subject.

At the end of the development the devilish trill on G-flat recurs (b.223). The **recapitulation** is quite standard with no special surprises. At its end we have a **coda** (b.345), and the movement ends softly with the main subject and the mysterious trill.³

I have emphasized above the **ambivalence** regarding the F-sharp transitory subject. Arguing about whether a passage is a transitory or a secondary subject may appear a pointless semantic legalism. But the above ambivalence seems important to me since it is combined and intermingled with other expressions of ambivalence which are, I believe, typical of Schubert and contribute to the special character of his music. Schubert is known as a master of the ambivalence of major and minor. This is a typical feature of his music and there are endless examples of it. Here, in our movement there are in addition other expressions of ambivalence, both with regard the relationships between G-flat and F-sharp (and even F), and with regard the structural status of the F-sharp minor subject – whether it is a transitory subject or the secondary one (with its key being the contrary pole of B-flat). Besides the musical interest in these features, it seems to me – and this is a bit more speculative – that being aware of them is important for sensing the softened, appeasing and complying character of Schubert's music. Schubert is almost always sad and painful. But, unlike e.g. Beethoven, he is never bitter, complaining and revolting.⁴ His sadness is introvert and complying, as if coming to terms with the sadness of human

³ The mysterious trill and the general harmonic structure of the movement have been interpreted in light of Schubert famous report of a "Dream" (1822): his being banished from home; his return upon his mother's death, watching her funeral, his second banishment, etc. See C. Fisk: *Returning Cycles*, Berkeley, 2001.

⁴ There are of course exceptions like the F# minor outburst in Moment Musicaux no. 2 in Ab, but even this is very short and soon gets restrained back into the complying mood

condition. It needs of course a detailed analysis to show how this character and kind of expression is affected, into which I cannot enter. But various features of ambivalence in his music seem to me relevant here: They soften and appease the directed, bold and uncompromising Beethovenean directedness by which Schubert was of course highly influenced. As a general, rough and very inaccurate generalization I would say that often they portray the major subjects with grey and sometimes painful colors, on the one hand, while enriching the sad minor subjects with sober, mature and complying outlook. (On a different kind of ambivalence – a rhythmic one – we shall add some remarks with regard to the third movement).

Second Movement (Andante Sostenuto)

The movement is in the triple form of A – B – A' in C-sharp minor, which, to remind, is the key in which the development section of the first movement begins, and on whose significance in that movement we made some remarks above. The middle section B is in A major.

The main theme of this movement is also a doleful, almost mournful melody turning around a central tone (this time G-sharp, the dominant), and there is a notable similarity in this respect between the two themes. The main subject A is built in a rather strange way from 8 (bb.1-8) + 5 (bb.9-13) + 4 (bb.14-17) bars. In fact, the 5 bars of the middle part here are a sort of filling (or barrier) between the two edges, which are in one sequence of three units of four bars. The theme returns in E major (from b.18), but here, in the return, the middle part is of 4 bars (bb.26-29). The rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand is of a very special character and contributes to the strong and special atmosphere of the movement.

The middle part B in A major is a solemn cantabile, almost choral in character, with dense chords in the low register. A major is the VI of the tonic C-sharp. We noted above the importance of the VI degree in the first movement (G-flat=F-sharp) and this is another respect in which the two movements are connected. The main theme (a) of this middle section is a classical period (4+4) and the general structure of this section is transparent and interesting: the main period returns (a*) with the broken chords filling (bb.48-51) and a modulation to the sub-dominant – D (b.62). Then comes a variation of the main theme (b), whose second part (c) in B-flat (from b.63), has a strong neapolitanic effect. In this part a transitory bar is added to the 4 bars period, leading back to A. The main theme (a) returns abridged: the first period returns with slight variations of

major/minor changes (bb.68-75), and after it, instead of repeating it with the broken chords, we have such a repeat on the above variation in E major. We can sum up the structure of this section B in the following scheme:

$$[a - a^*] - [b - c] \text{ --- } [a - [b^* - c^*]] - d \text{ (coda)}$$

Section A returns with slight harmonic and rhythmic changes.

Third Movement – Scherzo

This movement, again in B-flat major, is a cheerful gesture, sweeping upwards and freeing us from the massive, almost depressive, weight of the two previous ones. Its main theme is built once again narrowly around the tonic, like in the previous movements. It is a period of 8+8. Section A of the scherzo is built itself in a three-part structure, whose middle part is especially long (bb.17-68). It is a sort of development of the main theme, and uses its motivic and rhythmic materials. This movement also contains conspicuous enharmonic moves, like the one leading to A major through F-sharp minor (bb.49-50). We have already noticed in the first movement the enharmonic equivalence of G-flat (b.38) and F-sharp (b.50) here.

The trio in B-flat minor is irregularly short. It displays a **rhythmic ambivalence**, typical of Schubert, between a triple rhythm (meter of 3, which is the correct one) and a dual one (meter of 2). The dual meter may seem to fit the melody itself, but the syncopated sforzandi in the left hand emphasize the triple one. This is another kind of ambivalence, which should be added and combined with others we noted in the previous movements. It should be remarked incidentally that there are many examples of rhythmic ambivalence in Schubert, sometimes getting to the point of having an hemiola effect: An example is *Moment Musicaux* no. 1 in C major bb.6-8, 15-17, 27-29, which though written in 3/4 are naturally heard in 2/4. The same occurs, with even greater effect, in the third section, bb.38-44. The second movement of the A major sonata is another example of such delicate ambivalence. The *Impromptu* op. 90 no. 3 in G-flat major portrays delicate ambivalence in the middle voice accompaniment, which proceeds generally in halves, but at certain points (e.g. b.18) is heard more naturally in quarters. And this is a conspicuous point in *Impromptu* op. 142 no.4 in F minor. In our movement one should also note the Schubertian play with breaking symmetries, for instance in the unitary bar 57 as against the couples in bars (bb.39-40), (bb.45-46), (bb.51-52), and also in the insertion of b.68.

Fourth Movement – Allegro ma Non-Tropo

The movement is in sonata form with three main subjects. In the **first subject**, in B-flat one should notice the declarative opening octave on G, which is repeated every time the subject recurs. This and the very beginning of the main theme tend towards C minor, but B-flat is soon established. Schubert might have felt that beginning this movement with the main tonality (B-flat) right after the B-flat of the previous movement would be too much. There is a notable similarity to the Finale of the piano quintet ("Trout") of ten years earlier – not only in the opening declarative octave in Forte, but also in the general character of the main theme (One could compare it to the opening of the first Impromptu op. 90 in c minor, which, in spite of the opening declarative octave, has a totally different character). The opening octave in forte sounds like a dramatic declaration preparing a drama to be followed – something like "Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please!". But quite surprisingly what follows is a dance-like gentle theme in piano, very undramatic in character. This is another face of the typical Schubertian ambivalence of which we talked above. The duality between B-flat major and G minor (the relative minor) is also very prominent here. The main theme here is of a peaceful, easy going dance, which turns around the tonic, like in the previous movements. Also noticeable in the main theme is the repeated minor second (bb. 3-4). We shall call it "the minor second motive". It is followed by a contrasting simple diatonic motive of quarters on the tones of the chord G – E-flat – C (bb. 20-21). We shall call it "the contrasting motive".

The **second subject** is a singing melody in F major (from b. 86), with arpeggio filling in the right hand and a light syncopated accompaniment in the left. Note its three different cadences – to C (92-96), to D (102-103) and to F (136-137).

The **third subject** (or perhaps it is a second part of the second subject) is a shocking chordal eruption in F minor fortissimo (from b.156). At its end, as a transition to the development Schubert uses materials from the first subject (bb.216-224).

The development deals only with the first subject. It begins in repeating the first subject, and its main part (from b. 255) is a contrapuntal combination of the two main motives of the first subject – the minor second motive with the square rhythm of the contrasting motive. The minor second motive develops into a real chromatic descent, while the contrasting motive is developed into a synthesis of the quarter-rhythm (or the contrasting motive) and the minor second motive. At b.265 the right hand takes up this

synthesis (which was earlier played by the left) and combines it with a development of the minor second motive. This move gets an emotional and dramatic push in a modulation to B-flat (b.282). This synthesis of the motives and its development is quite remarkable even in Schubertian standards. Yet, it is worth noticing that only the first subject is dealt with here – the second and third subjects are not touched. All the three subjects are repeated in the recapitulation (from b.314).

The movement ends with a presto **coda**, which repeats the main idea of the development explained above – i.e. the synthesis of the minor second motive and the contrasting one.

The real ending of the movement is a remarkable full bar of general pause. This is a quite strange phenomenon on which I expanded in another place with regard to Beethoven (see my "Pause and Silence – The General Pause End Bar in Beethoven"). It is strange in that in general a pause is between heard tones, but here it is between a pause (in the previous bar) and the general ambient silence after the work is terminated. As I remarked there with regard to Beethoven, this strange phenomenon, which is unprecedented before him, occurs in more than twenty of his works of 1795-1800. In all of them it seems to serve a structural purpose of completing the last phrase into a symmetrical one. This seems to me also the case here, and it is hard to doubt that Schubert did it under Beethoven's spell. But whereas in Beethoven it occurs in his early works and disappears later, in Schubert it occurs only in this sonata – the last one (It can also be found in Schubert's symphonies – notably the sixth where there is a general end pause of three bars! – and hardly after him).

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