

Schubert: Impromptus

A lecture accompanying a home performance of the eight Impromptus,
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Part I: Impromptus op. 90 (1-4)

In 1827 Schubert wrote two sets of Impromptus, each consisting of four, middle-size pieces, very different in character. The first two of the first set were published still in his life and given the opus number 90 (now, D899). They were called Impromptus by the publisher, but probably with Schubert's approval. The second set was published after his death in 1839 as op. 142 (now D935), and in a letter to a publisher Schott Schubert himself refer to them as Impromptus. The last two of the first set were published about twenty years later. In May 1828 he wrote three other Klavierstuecke D946, which some regard also as Impromptus, but we shall not. Some people claim he was influenced by the Impromptus op. 7 of his friend Jan Vaclav Vorisek and by works of Tomasek, who may be regarded as the inventor of this genre.

In each set the first piece is in a minor key. This can almost be said also of the last in each set. The last one of the second set is in F minor, and although the last in the first set is marked A-flat major, it begins with its main motif in A-flat minor, which is rather an unusual key. It should be also noticed that the first in each set is of a grand epic character – almost a sort of a ballade – and is the longest in the set. Many of them, but definitely not all, are in a triple song form of A-B-A'. Though some people (including Schumann) suggested that the second set was a sonata in disguise, this has been recently refuted both by analysis and by the fact that Schubert marked them 5-8, following the numbers of the previous set. So, these are two sets with many common lines between them.

Opus 90 number 1, in C minor

Like all the Impromptus this work is very homogenous and compact in its motivic material, but it is quite distinct in its unusual form and its epic and tragic character. It has two main subjects, which are thematically close to each other, and there is no significant other material except some developments of them. After an unison, wide-spread octave on G, which fades out gradually with a fermata, the first subject (bb.2-17) consists of two classical, well balanced periods, each beginning with a solo tenor, playing a dotted motive in the dominant around D (bb.2-5; 9-12). This sounds much like a tragic hero proclaiming his suffering fate, in a calm, ensured voice with a far-reaching look. It is

echoed in harmonized form in the second stanza in chorus-like affirmation of his statement (bb.6-9; 14-17), carrying it back to the tonic (C).



There is a distinctly Schubertian sadness and tragic character here, but, again typically, with no bitterness or revolt (as one would expect e.g. in Beethoven). This is perhaps the general most typical characterization of Schubert's music: deep sadness with a complying realization and acceptance. These two periods are then repeated with fuller voice and richer harmony, but again in perfect balance and symmetry.

A transitory passage consisting of elements of the previous periods modulates into A-flat major, to the **second subject**. This, though starting by using the material of the first motive, soon develops into a much freer, more open and more animated theme, whose kernel is a descending sixth F-Eb-Db-C-Bb-Ab (bb.43-46), accompanied in a constant movement of triplets in the left hand.



Unlike the clear periodic structure of 4+4, going from dominant to tonic, of the first subject and its closed and static character, this one consists of four phrases of 5, 5, 4, and 5 bars, all virtually in the tonic (the second going to the median), and it is much more spread out, lively and dynamic. This is then repeated where the two hands change roles.

What comes next is somewhat baffling. Some people see the whole Impromptu as a theme with variations, so that what we regarded as a second subject is the first variation and what comes later are further variations. I find this unconvincing. I think it fits the work better to regard what comes later as a sort of **development** section, which begins at (b.74), dealing once and again with the two subjects in turn. It starts with the descending sixth of the second subject from F (b.75) to Ab (b.79), with a marked change in the texture of the accompaniment.



It then turns to the first subject (b.88) stirring it up to a very dramatic climax, ending with a Neapolitan cadence (bb.114-115). This actualization of the dramatic potential of the first subject highlights, by contrast, the introvert complying character of this subject at the beginning. The development then turns again to the second theme (bb.125-160) agitating it even more than before until it sort of rests on a G major repeat of the beginning of the development (b.152), which was, to recall, on A \flat .

This shift from A \flat , at the beginning of the development, to G at its end, is emphatically condensed into the fortissimo chords (bb.112-113) preceding the above neapolitanic cadence. This whole climatic passage hides in its upper inner voice the descending sixth (A \flat to C) of the second theme.



The development ends by a shift to the major of the first theme, and the whole piece ends with a typical **coda**, using the first motive and restoring the calm, sad and complying character of the beginning. The coda also alternates between the major and minor, so typical of Schubert in general and of this piece in particular. It ends in the major, but calmly, evenly, and with characteristic compliance.

Opus 90 number 2 in E-flat major

This Impromptu, a much more conventional piece than the first, is in a tiple form of two main contrasting subjects, i.e. A-B-A', where both the A and the B sections are composed of three parts of the form a-b-a', though the difference between the a and the b sub-sections is rather slight. It ends with a **coda** which is a variant of B. The B section is prepared to be in C-flat, but it is of course enharmonically transformed to B.¹ Besides its obvious structure one should notice the B (b.83) - C# (b.86) – D (b.90) move of the opening theme of B, compressed to the same rising third in b.85 of section B.



¹ A similar twist occurs in the Impromptu no 4 in A-flat minor, and in Moment Musicaux 5, b.35. Schubert's music is replete with enharmonic changes and modulations, and there are many examples also in the Impromptus.

This third is very operative in the sequel of B as well (e.g. bb.113, 117, 119, 121, 125). It may be derived from the opening bass of A. One should also note the rhythmic pulse of the triplets on the weak second beat, which recalls the rhythmic pattern in the left hand of the main motive in the A section. Thus with all their difference in character, A and B are thematically and rhythmically tightly related.

Opus 90 number 3, in G-flat major

This Impromptu is renowned as one of the most lyric pieces in the piano repertoire. It is in the rather unusual key of G-flat major, and though marked *andante* its meter is marked *double alla breve* (four halves), which minimizes the bar-lines and clearly indicates a not too slow tempo with continuous flow. (The awkwardness of the G-flat key drives Schubert to enharmonically transform bb.78-9 to G (natural) minor.) It is in a conventional triple song form of A-B-A', where the B section (from b.25) is in the relative minor of E_b minor. Its main subject is a classical period of 4+4, which is followed by another, slightly more activated classical period of 4+4, which is repeated with slight variations at the bass. Its perfect fluency and balance are maintained also in the more excited section B in the relative minor (E_b), with its wonderful modulations to C-flat (bb.31-35) and back to E-flat (bb.47-51). The return of the main subject (A') at (b.55) is quite usual except for a slight abridgement at 70 and the closing section (from 75) with its emphatic "German sixth" chords at b.76 and b.81.

The general character of the B section is again a distinctive Schubertian mixture of deep sadness with heroic awareness of it and compliance at its being objectively there as part of human condition. There are no complaints, no desperate cries and no revolts in Schubert (unlike in Beethoven for example), but rather a realistic acceptance of the pain and agony of human condition. It is a similar kind of feeling to that expressed by the altogether different opening of the C minor Impromptu discussed above (or the middle sections of nos. 2 and 4, as well as in the first and second movements of the B-flat sonata D 960, for example and many other works).

Though the accompaniment runs smoothly in sixlets (i.e. six notes per half) one should note sometimes a subtle rhythmic ambivalence between a half (minim) and a quarter (crotchet) – e.g. in b.18. Schubert was very fond of such ambivalences which sometimes have the effect of a sort of hemiola. See for instance *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.

Opus 90 number 4 in A-flat major

We have already remarked that though the official key mark here is A-flat major, it begins in A-flat minor, which is again, a rather unusual key. It is once again in the triple song form of A-B-A'. Though, like its E-flat predecessor, fluent and leggiero, it is marked Allegretto in 3/4, which may suggest a not too fast tempo. The main subject is distinct in its non-symmetric structure, straightened up in the sequel into a more symmetric pattern. It is three times 4+2, and then 4+8, with unusual changes of harmony, going to the median and to the enharmonic median minor. The tonic appears fully only at b.31. The 2-bars phrases (and the 8-bars phrase) contrast melody with rhythm by beginning with a melodic upbeat which is rhythmically on a strong beat – the first beat of the bar – thus causing the melodic main tone to fall on the second, weakest, beat of the bar.



There is a hint to this strange conflicting pattern in the left hand of the beginning of the subject (and all its recurrences), where the main, long chord of A-flat is on the weak second beat and lasts for two halves. One could easily imagine a more natural rhythmic phrasing here by taking the first quarter (now on the first beat of the bar) to be an upbeat to the second on which the bar should begin (move the bar line one quarter). In fact, many pianists play it like that. But Schubert wanted it otherwise, and besides being his wish (which is conclusive on its own) it is also wise, for it inserts a special delicate tension into this sweeping subject.

Things, as said, are straightened up from b.39 where harmonic and phrase tempi are gently and gradually intensified and accelerated, and additional tension seems superfluous. This goes together with majoring the harmony, and it reaches its peak in b.64. Here is a sample, from bar 37:



A new phrase in a different triplets texture (bb.72-79) bridges this to a repeat which brings to section B (b.107).

Section B is in C# minor, which is the enharmonic equivalent of D-flat minor, which is the key the previous passage really prepares. This then is the same as in the E-flat Impromptu (no. 2) where the B section was in B minor instead of the prepared C-flat

minor. This section, marked **Trio**, is of a totally different texture and character than the first. It consists of a highly emotional melody built on up and down minor seconds, with a permanent semi-quaver chords accompaniment. These minor seconds are actually suggested by condensing the C_b-B_b move of the first phrase (bb.1-4), the D-C# move of bb.19-20, etc. of the main theme. Likewise, the descending third of (b.112) may be derived from the descending third of bb.5-6.



Thus, once again we see a contrasting B section, very different in character from the main theme, but tightly connected to it thematically. Section A is then repeated with no significant changes. And once again, as we elaborated with regard to all previous Impromptus, this highly emotional B section combines expression of deep sadness with courageous dignity of realizing and complying with this sadness and pain as constitutive features of human condition. This general characterization of a distinctive trait of much of Schubert's late music is connected with various features, such as the rapid interchanges of major and minor (often of the same motive or theme) to the point of their integration to one expressive device,² various rhythmic and harmonic ambivalences, and more. Some were pointed out above, and some will be pointed out in discussing Impromptus op. 142.

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² There are endless examples of this. See e.g. Moment Musicaux no. 1, bb.51-8, no. 2, bb. 1-15.