

Performance Practice of Schubert's Last Piano Sonata

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ABSTRACT

Considered nowadays a milestone among some pianists' repertoire, Franz Schubert's Sonata in B flat Major is not only remarkably long and complex in structure, but also full of details that make this piece worthy of a deeper study. Nevertheless, the Sonata was only re-discovered by the Russian School of the 20th Century, establishing a very specific performance practice of it that was not concerned with historical approach. This paper aims to analyze different sources from Schubert's time, as well as contemporary articles about the subject, in order to get as close as possible to the original ideas of the composer.

Keywords

Performance practice, Franz Schubert, Historical performance, Piano literature

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INTRODUCTION

It is of mutual agreement that the best interpreters are the ones that understand the meaning of the music they perform the most and that are able to deliver the message that the composer wanted to convey in the clearest possible way. Nevertheless, if we hear the same work performed by a selection of the considered "best interpreters" not only we perceive significant differences in their playing, but we could even guess who is playing only by listening.

From this apparent paradox, we can conclude two things: that the personality and the ego of the interpreter is also a very important part of their work, and cannot be eliminated from the performance, and that it is almost impossible to truly understand the text in the context that it was written.

By comparing different recordings of the piece, studying the characteristics of the Viennese pianos of Schubert's time, and analyzing the manuscript and different editions of the score, it is the purpose of this paper to get rid of preset ideas about the Sonata and understand how it would have been played at the time of the composition.

RECORDING HISTORY OF THE SONATA

In order to have an overview of the history of the recording of Schubert's last sonata, I chose 6 different pianists that I find relevant for understanding the evolution of the interpretation of the piece: Artur

Schnabel, Sviatoslav Richter, Alfred Brendel, Andrés Schiff, Malcolm Bilson and Paul Badura-Skoda. The selected recordings are just a small sample of what different views on this piece one can have, but there are many others that would deserve to be commented as well. I chose these particular ones based on chronological overview, contrasting interpretations and impact on the performance practice of the piece due to its popularity or written essays that support the musician's ideas. I also tried to compare recordings that use different instruments, since it is a very important aspect when researching on historical interpretation. All the observed parameters were also applied in further specific sub questions.

The first recording of the Sonata was made in 1939 by Artur Schnabel and it serves as a highly valuable source of information due to its historical value. His tempi became a reference to many later interpretations of the piece; however, the recording of Sviatoslav Richter differs in many aspects from Schnabel's. He chooses an extremely slow tempo for the First Movement, whereas for the rest of the piece his tempi are faster. Due to his numerous writings about Schubert's last sonatas, Alfred Brendel's interpretation is worth mentioning. He chooses to adjust the tempo of the piece according to the character and material of each section, creating a big contrast between the different parts rather than keeping a unified vision of the whole movement. Another pianist who also spoke about the Sonata repeatedly is Andrés Schiff. His first recording of the piece was made for the Decca label in 1995 playing a Bösendorfer piano. Later on, in 2015, he recorded the Sonata for ECM on an 1820's Viennese fortepiano, despite his early opposition to performing on such instruments¹. Malcolm Bilson and Paul Badura-Skoda both recorded the piece on period instruments and, surprisingly enough, their interpretations are extremely free, even though they are considered a part of the Performance Practice Movement.

THE INSTRUMENT

By the end of the 18th century, there were two main types of keyboard instruments being developed in Europe: the Viennese (fortepiano) and the English (pianoforte). The first ones, made by Johann Andreas Stein (early 1770) and developed later by piano makers such as Anton Walter and Conrad Graf, were substantially different from the English, developed by Americus Backers and John Broadwood, that would ultimately lead to the well-known brand Steinway & Sons (1853).

¹ Schiff, A. (1995)

The mechanism of the Viennese fortepianos is simpler; the hammer is fixed on the key and points toward the player. They have a lighter, quicker, refined action and a very sensitive touch. The tone decay is bigger and the registers have more differences in tone quality. Because of the heavier mechanism of the Steinway, fast and articulated passages with a *leggiero* feeling require more strength and training than in a Viennese fortepiano, and these are quite frequent in Schubert's piano music. Due to the crossed strings and the iron frame of the modern piano, the registers are more unified and the length of the tone bigger. On the other hand, the strings of a Viennese fortepiano carry far less tension, and the hammers are smaller and harder. As a result, an intimate singing quality is easier to be achieved on the second one, whereas in a modern piano one has to struggle to get a soft and quiet melody to sing without the left hand disturbing it or being too plain and inexpressive.

I am not in the opinion that a composer's music should only be played on the same instrument for which it was written because different tones and types of sound can also bring out hidden qualities of the piece that might not be enjoyed on a period instrument. But I also think that it is not wise to forget what tools they had in hand when they created their works because that influences inevitably the characteristics of the piece. Extremes are to be avoided. Neglecting the possibilities that a modern piano can offer when performing an older piece is as misguided as disregarding the qualities of period instruments and considering them "primitive instruments" that were more limited and poorer in sound.

THE SCORE

Different editions

One of the most crucial aspects for a thorough study on any piece of music is the source of information: the score. Performers usually read from the most reliable editions that are available, the so-called *Urtext*. These are the ones that, by definition, attempt to reproduce the original text of the composer in the closest possible way, using the autograph and first editions of the piece. Nevertheless, due to the possible unclear writing of the manuscript and given printing mistakes of the first editions, the editor of the *Urtext* score also has to make choices and, in a way, to change some things according to the "common sense". Therefore, it is of equal importance to compare different *Urtext* editions, and, if available, the manuscript and first edition of the piece. In this case, I analyzed the differences and performance practice suggestions of the following editions:

- Preliminary draft (autograph) from 1828. Facsimile provided by Wienbibliothek im Rathaus
- First edition from 1838. Published by Anton Diabelli und Comp.
- Henle *Urtext* from 1973. Edited by Paul Mies.
- Wiener *Urtext* from 1999. Edited by Martino Tirimo.
- Bärenreiter New Schubert Edition from 2013. Edited by Walburga Litschauer.

When facing inconsistencies in Schubert's text, each editor makes a different choice that ultimately affects the result, as one can find, for example, in measures 2-3 and 11-12 of the First Movement. In the exposition, the F (middle voice of the last beat of the right hand) is repeated in eight notes, while in the recapitulation the F is kept as a quarter note. What is interesting here is to look at the critical notes that the editor

provides for this peculiarity. In Wiener *Urtext*, we can read: "mm. 2-3, 11-12 rh beat 4 middle part: at Cp mm. 217-218, 226-227 Ms [Autograph] has one quarter-note f' instead of two 8th-notes. Difference obviously intended."

On the other hand, Bärenreiter, which writes a dotted slur between the two eight notes of the beginning suggests "The ties have been added for consistency with mm. 217,218, 226 and 227, which have a quarter-note instead of the two eight-notes in these bars."

Finally, Henle *Urtext* writes: "The two eight-notes of the middle voice of the last beat in the upper staff here and in the following passages are without tie according to autograph and first edition. In the recapitulation from M 217 on, Schubert in several instances wrote a quarter note instead of two eight-notes. Whether or not the composer intended this notation throughout is open to question."

While Wiener and Bärenreiter assume opposite positions on the subject, Henle gives the performer the possibility of choosing to play them in the same way or distinctively, being more impartial and just conveying what is written in the original source.

Other discrepancies regarding dynamics and articulation are analyzed in depth in the full-length paper, as well as the so-called *theory of alignment*. This refers to the possible simultaneity of rhythms that are mathematically not together but that are, in fact, meant to be played at the same time. In Schubert's music there are many examples of this, and the B flat Sonata is not an exception. In measure 52 of the Second movement, Schubert writes a double dotted sixteenth note against an accompaniment made of sixteenth triplets, which would not fall together mathematically. Nevertheless, several aspects of this specific fragment should be taken into account when performing it. First of all, this melody has been presented for the first time in bar 43, but this time with a regular sixteenth accompaniment. One could say that Schubert's first idea of this melody relies on a regular 3/4 rhythm that he happens to slightly modify later on with a triplet feeling, but the melody remains the same. Also, taking into account the obvious lyricism of the passage, it would sound forced and too energetic to play the 32nd in the real measure. Looking at how editors deal with this issue, we can see that Wiener *Urtext*, the First Edition and Bärenreiter place the last notes of the confronting rhythms aligned vertically, the last one suggesting in its Notes on Performance Practice that Schubert did intend this particular rhythm to be aligned. On the other hand, Henle *Urtext* writes out the last 32nd note after the sixteenth triplet, forcing the performer to play without alignment, and not even providing a critical note on it.

By taking only a few examples of what differences one can find between *Urtext* editions it is quite obvious that they are never a copy of the manuscript. Although they are the ones that come closer to it, compared with the interpretative editions, *Urtext* editors also have to make choices. In this case, it is difficult to decide which of the three editions that have been analyzed is the best one, because they all differ clearly and sometimes their suggestions limit the decisions that the performer should take. For this reason, it is the duty of the performer to compare different editions and decide on each confronting case what he/she really wants to do with it. At the end of the day, a good performance of a piece has to rely on a big deal of personal interpretation, but only when all the options have been considered and carefully thought of.

Interpretation issues

Tempo

When dealing with Schubert's tempo indications there are three schools that have different perspectives on the subject, according to Montgomery.² The first one believes that Schubert was very strict about his markings and therefore, no major tempo fluctuations are allowed. The second one agrees on the seriousness of the composer's indications but not on its consistency. The last one, which is represented by most musicians nowadays, relies more on personal intuition and sensitivity towards the flow of the piece.

The basic problem that one can face with Schubert's tempo indications is that most of his works have no metronome marks. In the chapter dedicated to *Tempo, Time and Character*, Montgomery tries to give a suggested range of metronome marks that can be applied to each type of tempo indication in Schubert's music by taking as a reference the *relative tempi*, that is, the range and hierarchy of general tempo categories that we can find in Schubert's compositions, as well as the type of meter of the bar signature. Montgomery's effort to establish metronome marks for Schubert's music that can serve as a reference for historical performance is remarkable, although perhaps not perfect. Due to the subjective terms that the composer usually writes in his indications, it is almost impossible to establish an absolute value that can be used in any piece, for each one has its own unique material and character that influences the tempo. Schubert did know the metronome from its appearance in 1813, but he didn't choose to use it that often. Perhaps because he didn't think it was necessary, or because he didn't believe in a too strict interpretation of his works. Regarding the subject of tempo fluctuation, Alfred Brendel supports the idea that tempo indications in Schubert's music apply to the beginning of the movement, being flexible to change throughout the piece.³ Montgomery, on the other hand, implies that tempo fluctuation devices are so widely accepted in modern performance practice only because of the romantic tradition and the development of music history.

Let us take as an example the First Movement. Considering the opening theme, with all voices moving together at a quarter-note speed, accompanied by a line of eight notes that gently keep the flow of the music, and its quiet, hopeful, serene atmosphere, choosing a too fast tempo would probably distort the character of it. But on the other hand, if one should keep the same tempo for the passages with the triplets motive (mm. 30-31...), these would sound too heavy, and therefore, a slightly fast tempo would fit better the lighter character of this part of the movement. In my opinion, performers should find a suitable tempo for each movement that enhances their character, and that has a good equilibrium between the other movements. We can find this out by analyzing the textures, thematic material and other small details that Schubert employs. Also, external factors such as instrument and hall should be taken into account.

Repeat of the exposition in the First Movement

Due to its length, some pianists deliberately decided not to take this repeat (even performers like Malcolm Bilson or Andreas Staier, considered to be in the "historical performance" field), and there are many arguments in favour and against this decision. Alfred Brendel believes that the proportions of the whole Sonata should be taken into account, in order to avoid a lack of balance between the length of the First movement and the others, as well as the differences between the exposition and the recapitulation.⁴ For him, because the B flat Sonata has an almost exact recapitulation, compared to the exposition, it is unnecessary to repeat the same material three times. He also argues that "the transitional bars of the B flat sonata upset the magnificent coherence of his movement, whose motivic material seems quite unconnected to the new syncopated, jerky rhythm"⁵ as a reason not to take the repeat. Many pianists have argued against Brendel's opinion on the subject, relying on the core idea that the composer should always be trusted and respect everything he wrote.

When facing this seemingly polemic choice, performers should in the first place be faithful to what works better in their performance, whether it is a matter of time management, focus ability or preoccupation with the audience's patience. But, in my opinion, it is not reasonable to argue that the composer's indications are questionable in this specific case. By examining the first draft of the movement, we can see that Schubert initially only planned the first ending and not the second one. Even if the G flat trill appears here pianissimo, as Brendel rightly says, the material of the first reprise is clearly written out, although slightly expanded in the final version. This proof alone should be enough to respect the repeats, and if the pianist decides not to take them, the reason should not be in regard to the influences of older compositional fashion or the superficiality of its material.

Articulation and pedaling

When playing this Sonata on a modern piano, articulation accuracy and the use of pedal become the most challenging aspects, since they depend a lot on the natural sound of each piano and its mechanism. Schubert himself didn't write almost any pedal indications for this Sonata, so this becomes a decision for the performer. Only in the Second movement he writes *col pedale*. The issue here lies on the detailed articulation and the rests of the left hand, which would be lost if the pedal is not changed through the bar. In the first draft of this movement, Schubert does not write the pedal indication yet, but he writes *ligato* between the staves. Whether this applies only to the melody of the middle voices or to the whole construction of the music is not clear. It would be possible to play this melody legato without the help of the sustained pedal, because there are no big leaps on it, but this would result in a very dry and inexpressive sound. According to Montgomery, "the pedal is not meant to drench the movement, but merely to enhance the central duet in the right hand without losing the possibility of articulating the

² Montgomery, David (2019) pp. 210-211

³ Brendel, Alfred (2007) p. 160

⁴ Ibid. pp. 160-162

⁵ Ibid. pp. 162-163

left.”⁶ Nevertheless, most pianists choose to play this movement with a sustained pedal that supports the whole bar, despite the written rests and short values.

It is worth to study what is the real meaning of this specific type of writing by reading pedagogical sources of Schubert's time. In Hummel's treatise from 1828, he describes the Staccato technique: “The fingers must be hurried away from the keys, very lightly and in an inward direction. The greater the lightness with which these detached notes are played, the more pleasing the effect which they will produce.”⁷

Although he, as well as Czerny, rejects the overuse of the sustaining pedal and suggests to use it as a special effect, and not as a rule, he does write some examples in which the pedal is to be held for a longer period. In one of the examples⁸, we can see a kind of notation very similar to Schubert's: a slow movement marked pianissimo with a low bass and higher eight-notes, all of them separated by rests, but with the pedal indication lasting for the whole bar. For the rest of the Sonata, where no indications at all are written by him, it is suggested by the authors mentioned before to play it with as less pedal as possible, and only at selected points.

CONCLUSION

There is hardly any written proof that we can use as a reference to get closer to Schubert's way of playing his piano pieces, apart from a couple of very vague letters. We can, of course, study the sources of the pedagogues from his time, like Czerny and Hummel, and experience the sound of the instrument for which the Sonata was written (if we have that possibility at all), but it is pointless to try to become the composer himself. Interpreters are also creators of their own work, only they don't start from scratch, like a composer, painter or writer, but depart from the fixed work and bring it back to life through their knowledge and sensitivity.

Nevertheless, I do believe that interpreters should base their decisions on a combination of instinct and information. Very often, and I myself must be included, musicians rely almost exclusively on intuition and “whatever feels right”, and neglect their responsibility as messengers. Once the knowledge about historical performance practice is gathered, several editions compared, and the difference between the instruments considered, one can choose to follow these directions or go another way. In my opinion, it is not about limiting performance to certain aesthetic rules that are very far away from our present, but to be aware of them and make an informed choice that together with personality will result in a convincing and truthful performance.

This research has helped me not only to understand better such a complex work of art but to be aware of how learning about the historical context of any piece to be performed, reading different opinions on it by musicians and scholars, and specially studying in depth the text and its available editions can lead to a much more personal and convincing interpretation of it.

ROLE OF THE STUDENT

This research has been entirely conducted by the undergraduate student Irene Comesaña Aguilar in the year 2018. Her decision to perform the forenamed piece at her final exam and a lately increased interest in academic research on historical performance has lead her to choose this specific topic. Through the process of writing the research paper, Irene Comesaña Aguilar was assisted by her supervisor prof. Lucia Arends.

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⁶ Montgomery, David (2019) p. 170

⁷ Hummel, Johan Nepomuk (1828) p. 65

⁸ Hummel, Johan Nepomuk (1828) vol. 3 p.63