

Distinguished Artists Series  
Present  
Jonathan Biss in Recital



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**Franz Schubert**  
(born 1797, Vienna; died 1828, Vienna)

Four Impromptus, D. 935

Schubert's genius was equally well suited to the epic scale and to the miniature. In piano sonatas and chamber music works of 40 minutes or longer, he takes existing forms and expands them, testing their natural limits and turning digression into a sublime art; in hundreds of lieder, each no more than a few minutes long, he pierces and, in some case, shatters your heart with a single change of harmony or turn of phrase.

The *Four Impromptus, D. 935* occupy a middle ground. Already deeply moving when heard individually, they become something greater when experienced in their entirety. Written exactly a year before Schubert's death at the age of 31 (consider it: 935 pieces of music written by the age of 30), the successive tonalities, forms, and moods of these four freestanding pieces suggest a grand sonata in f minor.

However, freed from the strictures of the word "sonata" and the long shadow it — and Beethoven's 32 towering examples of the form — casts, Schubert's imagination becomes even more uninhibited, the results even more wondrous. The first Impromptu is not a sonata form; it has no development. Instead, its expected two themes — the first tragic, the second consoling but still so full of sorrow — are supplemented by an unexpected third. Marked *pianissimo appassionato*, it is many seemingly contradictory things at once: fervent, mysterious, urgent, halting, haunting. Its effect is transformative: when it is followed by the return of the Impromptu's opening idea, it has moved away from defiance and towards resignation. Acceptance is still a long way off, but the fight has been revealed to be futile.

The second piece, an Allegretto, is quintessential Schubert: evocative of a Viennese dance, perhaps a *ländler*, in an A flat Major that is somehow more deeply sad than the f minor music that preceded it, and so simple on its surface that any attempt to explain how profoundly moving it is would be doomed to failure. If the first Impromptu is discursive, taking the listener down a wandering and unpredictable path, this one takes a very different route to the sublime, using an unadorned A-B-A form, the simplest in all of music. Not one of its motivic or harmonic events is jarring; few of them are unexpected. In spite of because of this sense of inevitability, the music finds the core of Schubert's vulnerability, and ours.

The third Impromptu has another kind of deceptive simplicity, its lilting B flat Major theme falling and then rising in perfect symmetry: a child's poem. But over the course of five wide-ranging variations, it develops into something different. Even the variations which merely embellish the theme somehow deepen it in the process; Schubert is constitutionally incapable of writing meaningless music, and every appoggiatura, every neighbor tone, shades and complicates the music's narrative. That narrative is further complicated by the journey two of the variations take away from the B flat Major home, first to b flat minor, then to G flat Major. The former is often dark and always suffused with *sehnsucht* — longing. (*Sehnsucht* is the central fact of Schubert's existence.

A line from *Die Taubenpost*, his final song — “Sie heißt die Sehnsucht” [“She is called longing”] — could be considered his motto.) The latter tries to be light-hearted, doesn’t quite manage, and in the process only grows more sehnsuchtsvoll: a Schubert signature. Almost every bar features a series of large upward leaps, a gesture that would be carefree in any other pair of hands. But even when Schubert yodels, he does so mit Sehnsucht.

The end of the last variation is not the end of the Impromptu; there is a partial reprise of the theme, in a lower octave and at a slower tempo. It now bears the weight of its history — a history it did not have when we first heard it, only ten minutes earlier. It has lost its innocence and grown even more beautiful.

The final Impromptu returns to f minor and is another study in surface lightness that is not, in fact, light. Marked Allegro Scherzando, its predominant characteristic is not playfulness. Eely in its misterioso middle section, featuring pianissimo scales slithering up and down the keyboard, it is otherwise steely, staring fate in the eye and showing no remorse. If the first Impromptu ended with resignation but not acceptance, the last exhibits neither: it ends with a *fortississimo* downward scale, spanning the entire piano and landing on a single, terrible, low f. Schubert’s extraordinary gift for lyricism and consolation is matched — balanced is not the word — by the intensity with which he confronted the pain of life and the horror of death. In these Impromptus, both qualities are given magnificent expression. But it is the horror that gets the last word.

## **Robert Schumann (born 1810 in Zwickau; died 1856 in Bonn)**

### Geistervariationen

In the early hours of February 17th, 1854, Schumann composed a theme in E flat Major; by the 23rd, he had written five variations on it. On the 27th, he made revisions and wrote out a clean copy of the work.

On the 26th, he threw himself into the Rhine.

He survived, obviously. But within days he was moved to an asylum where he spent the last two terrible years of his life. The relationship between Schumann’s creativity and his mental illness is a difficult subject: necessarily and maddeningly speculative at best, voyeuristic and demeaning at worst. The only thing that is clear is that the Variations in E flat Major — often called *Geistervariationen*, or *Ghost Variations* — are an astonishingly moving product of a life’s waning edge. Schumann’s inspiration — genius, if you prefer, and in this case, I do — is intact; it is the vitality that has been drained from him. With certain of Schumann’s qualities no longer present, some of his greatest and most distinctive ones — his inwardness, his poetry, his ability to access and express his most private self — are heightened. If you give yourself over to the piece, without judgment for what it is not — brilliant, certainly, or even much interested in its listener — the experience is profound and profoundly unsettling. We do not normally visit these places.

In the period in which Schumann wrote these variations, he believed that angels and demons were playing music for him. This particular theme, he said, came from Schubert — the most angelic of the angels. Schumann must have loved it very much — a reimagined version became the main theme of the equally moving slow movement of his violin concerto. It is Schubert through the lens of Schumann: more fragile, less sure-footed. Often, it lingers, finding a particular note or suspension difficult to let go of; even when it does not, not much happens. It is less an expression of simplicity (of which Schubert was perhaps the supreme master), more an expression of intimacy. Its many upward intervals reach for something that remains unreachable.

The variations, too, have journeys but not destinations, desires but not fulfillments. Often, they are little more than the theme itself — presented in cannon, one voice trailing after another, or encircled by moving notes that try to give the theme a liveliness that is not in its nature. But this paucity of events has the effect of heightening the meaning of everything that does happen. Each altered interval, each suspension makes us hold our breath: we feel that the effort is costing Schumann lifeblood.

Schubert and Schumann are our two greatest poets of solitude; to hear their music is to know what it means to be alone. But the aloneness of Schubert and of Schumann are different things. Schubert's is the aloneness of a person who never truly shared his life with another person. Schumann, by contrast, did share his life with another person — and what a person! But in spite of this, in spite of his extraordinary bond with Clara Wieck, in spite of her willingness to marry and share her life with him, and in doing so, to make her talent and creativity and ambition subservient to his needs — the needs of his fragile mental state and compositional genius and male ego — he remained alone. Schumann's aloneness is the aloneness that will not be assuaged. The aloneness of a person who wants to be known, but is terribly frightened of it.

Clara, too, was frightened at the prospect of Schumann being known. Frightened for herself, surely, but also frightened for him. After he dedicated the *Geistervariationen* to her, she suppressed its publication: she was so afraid that it would reveal his weakness, she could not hear how it revealed his essence. Finally published in 1939, we need not make the same mistake. A window this deep into the soul of a great artist is a rare gift; we should accept it with gratitude, and go with him into the darkness and the light.

### **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (born 1756 in Salzburg; died 1791 in Vienna)**

#### Rondo in A minor, K. 511

Mozart is the most objective of the great composers. Neither an optimist nor a pessimist, Mozart is simply a realist — a stenographer of emotion. If this sounds cold, the results are anything but. Mozart's mind is so omniscient, his understanding of psychology is so sophisticated — and, of course, his mastery of his craft is so staggering — he can convey, in sound, the changeability and illogic of human feeling and the frequent stupidity of human behavior in a way that is both unnervingly precise and deeply moving. With a single harmonic shift, he can move from exhilaration to melancholy; with another, he can leave the melancholy behind, laughing or shrugging it off. His music, like our inner lives, is in a constant state of flux.

What, then, accounts for the *Rondo in a minor, K. 511*? For the entirety of its ten devastating minutes, it drops any hint of third-person remove, and for the great majority of them, it conveys a profound, inescapable grief. Written early in 1787, when Mozart was 31, no biographical detail helps explain its genesis. The *e minor Violin Sonata, K. 304* and the *a minor Piano Sonata, K. 310*, are similarly uninterrupted expressions of anguish — but they come in the immediate aftermath of the unexpected and likely preventable death of Mozart's mother, whom he adored. By contrast, the beginning of 1787 was a relatively happy and stable time in Mozart's complicated life. The motivation for the a minor Rondo is as inexplicable as is the devastating impact it has on the listener.

The *a minor Rondo* is extraordinary among Mozart's works not only for its single-mindedness, but for its extreme compression. This is a function not primarily of the density of its events, but of the notes themselves: this is surely the most chromatic work Mozart ever composed. This produces countless points of tension — the intervals that open the first and second measures of the piece are so uncomfortable, they produce a physical sensation in the body. But equally, this chromaticism conveys a difficulty in moving, the sense of being stuck, trapped. The notes are too close together; the effort in rising a mere fifth, as happens over two full measures in the first phrase, is so exhausting, the only possible response is to fall back down to where we started. It is a declaration of hopelessness, just moments into the piece.

For all the ways in which the *a minor Rondo* is atypical, it is vintage Mozart in that it owes so much to the world of opera. This is less a question of the vocal quality in it — achingly beautiful though it is — and more a function of how deeply attuned Mozart is to how the piece works as a narrative. As the name “Rondo” would imply, its principal material is twice interrupted by a contrasting episode. Both episodes are in the major mode, bringing, if not actual hope, then the possibility of hope; both lead back to the *a minor* music of the opening by way of a transitional passage even more claustrophobically chromatic than the main theme itself. These brief windows into a less bleak world make the one we come back to ever bleaker.

Bleaker still is the coda. As is so often the case with Mozart's codas, it draws its power in part from its superfluosity; Mozart has already said everything that needs saying. But he is not finished. Incorporating suggestions of the two major-key episodes, and transforming them into music as desolate and oppressive as the rest of the piece, he then brings the opening idea back one last time. It is chromatic as ever, but shortened to a mere fragment, as if the effort required to play the phrase in its entirety is by now simply impossible. This fragment was once a beginning, an invitation to more music; it has now become an answer, a devastating confirmation that the grief will not be assuaged. All that can follow it is a two-note pianissimo cadence, the ultimate expression of resignation, bringing this singular masterwork to a whispered, shattering close.

## **György Kurtág** **(born 1926 in Lugoj)**

### Játékok

Go to [YouTube](#) and you will find, alongside the makeup tutorials and the woodworking demonstrations and the professionally enraged people screaming about all sorts of things, a curious treasure: two rather small octogenarians sit at an upright piano in Budapest, playing the music of Bach. Arms intermingled, minds and souls seemingly inextricable from one another, their concentration is absolute but serene. As they play, the last three centuries and all of life's practical concerns fall away. Bach is there.

These are Márta and György Kurtág. Each is a profound example of what a life lived through music can be; that they found one another is a miracle. Márta, sadly, is no longer living, but György, now in his 98th year, remains one of the essential musicians of our time, and one of the great composers.

Kurtág's ability to realize his singular musical vision should be credited in large part to two women. The first, of course, is Márta, who for the 62 years that they were married provided both infinite support and an intellectual and creative mirror. The other is the dedicatee of his String Quartet, Op. 1, the psychologist Marianne Stein. The downside of an attunement to the greatest music of the past as deep as Kurtág's is that it can be paralyzing: by the age of 30, Kurtág was in a depression and unable to compose. Stein not

only lifted him from the depression, she provided him with an aesthetic path forward. As Kurtág himself encapsulated her message to him:” Simplicity allows for direct, personal expression.” The scope was no longer the point; the absolute truth of the idea and the precision with which it was expressed was what mattered. In the many decades since Stein helped Kurtág towards this revelation, he has produced thousands of works, most of them only minutes or even seconds long, each of them revelatory in their honesty and in their intellectual and emotional depth.

The *Játékok* (“Games”) exemplify this. They are a compendium of characteristically tiny pieces, begun in 1973 and by now comprising ten volumes. As the name would suggest, they were conceived, at least in part, as a holistic and joyous instructional manual for young pianists. A surprising number of the great composers have written works that are explicitly for children (though, like the best children’s books and films, also richly rewarding for adults): Bach, Schumann, Bartók, just for starters. But Kurtág’s contribution to this genre is unique, both for the breadth of its imagination, and for the profundity he finds in simplicity. These works exhaust (and then expand) the encyclopedia of sonorities the piano can produce, but the sonorities themselves are never the point: they are the building blocks of poetry that is emotionally pure and wryly witty.

Kurtág dedicates many of these pieces to the memory of people no longer living – some of them friends, but more often, composers of the past. His music is in constant conversation with theirs. To listen to the *Játékok* is to deepen your connection not only to their author, but to the hundreds of years of a musical tradition that lives on with him.

## **Ludwig Van Beethoven (born 1770 in Bonn; died 1827 in Vienna)**

### **Piano Sonata No. 31 in A♭ major, Op. 110**

In 1821, Beethoven was 50 years old. Not yet an old man, he was the most revered composer in Europe; he was also a tragic figure, and a pathetic one. Functionally deaf, suffering from rheumatic fever, jaundice and gastrointestinal distress, and mired in a thoroughly ugly dispute with his brother’s family, he ended up spending a night in jail that summer through a set of circumstances both extraordinary and entirely in character: having gotten lost while on a walk and carrying no identification, he grew so hungry he started looking through the windows of private houses and was apprehended by the police, who would not believe that this hapless, unkempt man could be The Great Beethoven.

It is indeed beyond comprehension that this person, at this point in his life, could compose the *Sonata in A flat Major, Op. 110*. That this person who, on account of both a miserable run of luck and the core of his character, had absolutely no mastery of any aspect of his life, could produce a work of surpassing rigor and transcendent vision. That Beethoven, whose life was an encyclopedia of disappointments, could conceive of a piece of music that, in spite of moments of utter despair, retains its idealism and ends in absolute euphoria. To say that what he achieved with this work in the face of overwhelming obstacles is inspiring would be totally insufficient. Op. 110 is life-giving and life-changing.

Like so many of Beethoven’s late works, the scope of Op. 110 expands as it progresses: the sonata begins with great beauty but no hint of the grandeur to come. The opening theme is marked “sanft” — like all the best German words, it is untranslatable, but somewhere near its core is “gentleness.” This gentleness, this softness of texture immediately opens the heart but conceals the enormous ambition of the journey we have just embarked on.

Beginning a work that aims for the infinite with such modesty feels fitting, for Op. 110 is altogether a sonata of paradoxes. While it conveys great generosity and contains some of the most sheerly beautiful music Beethoven ever wrote, it is a remarkably tight construction — less than 20 minutes long, with not a note wasted. That “sanft” opening theme — a very deliberate climb, each upward step followed by a smaller downward one — is not just the first movement’s main motive: pared down, it will become the subject of the fugal finale. The notes remain practically the same, but the emotional transformation will be enormous: from *amabile*, to philosophical, to utterly ecstatic.

If the first movement is somewhat compact, the second is dramatically so: barely two minutes from start to finish, this scherzo (in the “wrong” meter of 2/4) has a concentrated intensity that is equal parts controlled fury and slapstick — another paradox. The source material for this music is a pair of folk songs that Beethoven might well have heard in the beer halls he frequented: “Our cat has had kittens,” and — no joke — “I am slovenly; you are slovenly.” Beethoven’s lack of refinement or social graces is imprinted on this music. The elbows-out brusqueness is a reminder that Beethoven’s music is as much about the physical as it is about the metaphysical — that while he often seems superhuman, he remains awkwardly, painfully human.

In spite of the many wonders to be found in these first two movements, they are mere prelude to the finale, one of Beethoven’s most complex and most profound achievements. Nearly double the length of the first two movements combined, it is comprised of five sections with a wide range of musical forms, and conveying an even wider range of feeling: from total desolation to the euphoria that can come only in its wake.

This movement offers yet another paradox: In one sense, the music is backward-looking. Throughout, there are hidden and not-so-hidden connections to the (equally wondrous) Sonata Op. 109, written the previous year; in this sonata’s most desperately dark moment, it quotes its predecessor literally. But Beethoven doesn’t just refer to his own previous work: the forms he uses in the finale of Op. 110 — recitative, arioso, fugue — are all borrowed from Bach.

Perhaps “borrowed” is the wrong word. As Stravinsky said, “Bad composers borrow; great composers steal.” Beethoven’s forms might belong to Bach, but the content is sublimely, startlingly his own. Bach would not, in a recitative, have repeated the same note 27 (!) times in a row — a manic, pleading cry into the void. Bach wrote a great many tragic ariosos, but they do not contain massive crescendos, building and building to a climax that never comes, followed instead by a sudden retreat to piano — a musical representation of hope, snuffed out. And Bach is likely the greatest master of the fugue of his or any time, but his fugues are ends unto themselves. They do not expand, and seek, and strive, until they evolve into something else entirely — into outpourings of pure melody (pure spirit, really) at the extreme upper end of the piano, the accompanying left hand at the extreme lower end (because the piano was never, ever enough for Beethoven; the whole world was not enough for Beethoven). Bach is the template here, but the music is nothing but Beethoven. Beethoven, looking not to the past, but to the future — a future that, the last 50 years be damned, might yet be beautiful.