

## Schubert's 1817 Sonatas

"[A] beautiful touch, a quiet hand, clear neat playing, full of insight and feeling. He still belonged to the old school of good pianoforte players, whose fingers had not yet begun to attack the poor keys like birds of prey." Stadler, one of Schubert's close friends during his school years, wrote of Schubert's piano playing. The piano must have been an important instrument for Schubert, as more than 700 works of 998 listed in Deutsch's catalog include a piano part. He must also have felt at ease with piano writing early on, because by 1815 he had already composed pieces with both poetic and demanding piano parts, such as *Gretchen am Spinnrade* (D. 118; 1814) and *Erlkönig* (D. 328; 1815). It is peculiar then that he wrote only three piano sonatas prior to 1817. All the more curious is his sudden interest in the piano sonata in 1817 - between March and August 1817, he wrote six piano sonatas. Why the long wait and the sudden interest?

A few biographical details may help to explain Schubert's choices. In early 1817, after having taught at his father's school for three years, Schubert decided to leave home and accept his friend Franz von Schober's offer to live with him and his mother, as they had a house with a vacant room near the inner city of Vienna. This must have given him a great musical advantage, as the inner city of Vienna was the center of all musical activities in Europe. A few months prior to the move, Schubert had composed his first commissioned work, the cantata *Prometheus* (now lost) for which he was paid 100 florins, an amount more than his annual income as a schoolteacher at his father's school. His journal entry on June 17, 1816 proudly reads, "Today I composed for money for the first time." This must have given him confidence that he could earn a living as a freelance musician. In December 1816, Schubert also stopped taking lessons from Salieri with whom he had studied for several years. Even in early 1816, he had proudly signed his manuscripts as "Pupil of Herr. v. Salieri." Interestingly, around this time, he seemed to have re-examined Beethoven's influence on him as well. It is widely known that Schubert admired Beethoven throughout his life, but in 1816 and 1817, he seemed to have struggled with his sense of identity. For example, his friend Ebner records that after Schubert played the song, *Die Forelle* for his friends, "suddenly Holzapfel cried: "Good Heavens, Schubert, you got that out of 'Coriolan'" . . . Schubert saw this at once, too, and wanted to destroy the song, but we would not allow it and thus saved that glorious song from destruction."

The budding 20-year-old composer also sought to publish his works, as even though he had written more than 500 works by this point, none had yet been published. We have evidence of him and his friends trying to publish his works from around this time. For example, there is a surviving letter from a Dresden composer named Franz Schubert addressed to Breitkopf & Härtel saying that the score of *Erlkönig* that he had received from Breitkopf & Härtel was not his own. Schubert or his friends must have sent *Erlkönig* to the publisher, who then sent the score to the better-known Schubert for clarification. *Erlkönig* was eventually published as Op. 1 in 1821. His first publication is thought to be the song *Erlafsee* in 1818.

It is also worth noting that the piano sonata genre would have been the least desired medium for any aspiring composer, as the piano sonata was already falling out of favor with publishers. There was more to gain financially by publishing lighter works such as variations, overtures, and potpourris. The 1816-1817 catalog of Viennese publisher Sigmund Anton Steiner contains about twenty sets of variations for piano. When Steiner published Beethoven's new sonata Op. 101, he titled the series *Musée Musical des Clavicinistes* (*Museum of Piano Music*), probably to boost up sales. It is startling to think that a newly written work is thought to belong to a museum.

In light of such efforts and circumstances, it is indeed remarkable that Schubert turned his attention to the piano sonata in 1817. He must have finally felt ready to tackle this mountainous genre to grow as a mature and serious composer. Schubert's 1817 sonatas show compositional characteristics that reflect the young composer's boldness and confidence. For this current album, I have chosen to record D. 537, D. 557, D. 566, and D. 575 and leave out D. 571 and D. 567, as D. 571 is thought to include incomplete movements and the sonata in D-flat major, D. 567 was reworked as the sonata in E-flat major, D. 568, at a later date.

The most notable feature in these sonatas is Schubert's experimentation with the sonata form. In the first movements of D. 537 and D. 575, he uses what scholars have called the "subdominant" recapitulation, where the

recapitulation begins in the subdominant key. Although this device guarantees a move back to the tonic key with no changes required in the recapitulation, Schubert changes small details or adds a coda and provides variety. It is also interesting to note that the first movement of D. 575 has four distinct keys and motives in the exposition as well as in the recapitulation. This inevitably results in a heavily reduced amount of the tonic key area in the movement, which I believe is linked to creating a cyclic sonata where all four movements share a key scheme (B, G, E, and F-sharp majors) and a motive (scale degrees 3-4-5) in a progressive manner. His choice of the key B major is also peculiar, as Classical composers rarely used B major.

Schubert's lyricism is also observed to be already at its finest, especially in the slow movements. The *Allegretto quasi Andantino* of D. 537 is particularly noteworthy, as he later reused its thematic material in the *Rondo* of his famous A major sonata, D. 959.

It should also be added that D. 566 is an example of ongoing Schubert scholarship. Only three of his sonatas were published during his lifetime, and he left many sonatas unfinished. Both *Wiener* (edited by Tirimo, 1996) and *Henle* (edited by Badura-Skoda, 1997) urtext editions include D. 506 as the fourth movement of D. 566. I have chosen to follow the *Bärenreiter* edition (edited by Litschauer, 1999; taken from *Franz Schubert, Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke*), which only includes three movements.

During the time I spent researching and learning these pieces, I have come to truly admire Schubert for his devotion for this art form; I hope that you will also get a glimpse of the genius at work at the age of 20. For further information on Schubert's 1817 sonatas, please visit my website, [www.sookkyungcho.com](http://www.sookkyungcho.com).