Schubert

Piano Sonata in A minor D537
Piano Sonata in A major D664
German Dances D820 and D790

Mitsuko Uchida *pf*
PHILLIPS CD470 265-2, £15.99

Notes and translations included.

If the experience of listening to a Schubert sonata is, as T. W. Adorno believes, akin to wandering around a landscape,[1] the role of the modern interpreter is that of a navigator. Despite the apparent simplicity of both of the sonatas on this disc, this role is far from simple. The early A minor Sonata (D537) is perhaps most notable for the Rondo theme of the second movement, which returns as that of the finale of the late A major Sonata (D959). While this connection may invite unfavourable comparisons between the early and late works – in the former we hear more chaotic modulations and tempestuous dynamic shifts, while the latter assimilates these into expansive sections and mature lyricism – we may also be surprised by the characteristically Schubertian devices which already appear in the earlier work. These include the subdominant recapitulation, the imaginative phrase structures, the pre-cadential (Toveyan) 'purple patches' and the development which fails to develop, as well as the inner-voice pedals and the lyrical upper voice, doubled in octaves reminiscent of the F minor Fantasy, the piano trios and the 'Trout' Quintet.

Certain aspects of the form of this sonata require a confident guide through Schubert's formal trickery. The subdominant recapitulation, for example, functions as a kind of double-edged 'in-joke'. Often this device is used to bypass the need to recompose the transition. However, in a typical minor movement a subdominant recapitulation provides no such short cut; the second subject is typically in the relative major, that is, a third (not a fifth) above the tonic. Furthermore, in D537 the second group is in F rather than C major anyway! In a typically Schubertian manner, the final return to A is achieved with one simple harmonic shift.

As mentioned above, the development is also unconventional. Rather than developing primary material, it obsesses (much like the late A major Sonata) on the closing figure of the exposition, a two-note sigh figure from which a relaxed lyrical A flat section unfolds. Herein lies another aspect of Schubert's musical personality, the variation technique latent within non-variation movements. For Carl Dahlhaus this is epitomized by the various manifestations of the *passus duriusculus* in the G major Quartet D887.[2] Adorno describes this trait as 'shifting perspective'; Schubert's music never develops, but illuminates themes and

[1] T. W. Adorno, 'Schubert' in *Moments musicaux*, repr. in *Adorno: Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. R. Tiedemann, vol. 17 (Frankfurt am Main, 1982), 18–33.

[2] 'Sonata Form in Schubert: The First Movement of the G-Major String Quartet, op. 161 (D. 887)', in *Schubert: Critical and Analytical Studies*, ed. Walter Frisch (Lincoln, Nebr. 1986), 1–12.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800002032 Published online by Cambridge University Press

figures in different lights. The result is that a recapitulation arrives not through the force of musical logic, but rather because it is time for it to do so. Consequently, the sensitive interpreter of Schubert must signpost moments of structural significance and must sensitively draw attention to the aspects of variation technique which lie beneath the surface of the composer's unassuming lyricism.

It is these kinds of subtlety which Uchida brings out in this recording. The opening phrases are elegantly shaped around Schubert's written-out fermata on the fourth and fifth bars, and the first group is carried through by the momentum of this bright, crisp opening. While Uchida maintains a regular metrical pulse (in contrast to Andras Schiff's typically fluid rubato on EMI 4403092), within this she responds to the rhythmic subtleties of the score. In the purple patch on the Neapolitan of the closing theme, her second-quaver-beat accents appear momentarily to shift the downbeat, emphasizing the identity of this phrase with a similar moment from the first group (bars 14–15) as if halting and glancing backwards towards where we have come from.

If the first movement is unusually metrical, the second attains a narrative quality through the sensitive use of rubato, particularly before each return of the closing phrase of the main theme. Schubert's phrasing is carefully observed and the delicate placing of the staccato left-hand line creates a beautifully understated tone. (By contrast, Schiff's recording is more thickly pedalled and the chords gently spread rather than deliberately placed.) In the final movement, the opening gesture is imbued with electrical energy, while the second theme is played with a delicate musical-box-like quality which puts one in mind of the trio of the G major Sonata D894.

Uchida's treatment of the 'little' A major sonata (D664) is just as effective. In this sonata too the falling second (B–A) is an important gesture; it closes the first movement and opens the other two. In the first two movements this sigh figure is associated with a quiet resigned tone which becomes thematic for the sonata as a whole. This tone is elegantly expressed in the modulation to the second subject; this emerges after the new thematic material has begun and takes the form of a resigned plagal slide rather than a triumphant emphatic tonicization. Even in the recapitulation, the second subject in the home key area is captured with the same feeling of willed acceptance. The second movement is executed with this same tone. Uchida quietly rounds off the premature-sounding seventh bar close to the opening phrase with the feeling of having given up through exhaustion. The appellation 'little', one which has emerged to differentiate this sonata from D959, is rather misleading. The finale is surprisingly expansive and Uchida carries it off with a rhythmic vibrancy which, to my ear, is unmatched by other recordings. In this movement the sigh figure is no longer resigned but is instead the beginning of an upbeat phrase to a large, humorous sonata-form movement. New phrases flow effortlessly out of the endings of others and when the motion briefly stops on the sustained chord of the second group, the dramatic pause is executed with a wry smile. Indeed, the pairing of these sonatas with two sets of dances further emphasizes the dance-like qualities latent in the finale of D664. Just as Schubert returns to his themes and figures and finds in them new meaning, Uchida demonstrates in this recording that the modern interpreter can and must return to these unassuming works, discovering new perspectives and offering exciting interpretations.

Richard Bruce
University of Durham

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479409800002032 Published online by Cambridge University Press