



Franz Schubert: Late Piano Works, Vol. 1

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On only two previous occasions have I had the opportunity to review an album by pianist Andrea Lucchesini, and on one of them, which included a performance of Saint-Saëns's early Piano Quintet in A Minor, Lucchesini was just one of five players in a chamber ensemble rather than a soloist. That album, nonetheless, received an urgent recommendation from me in 40:5, and made it onto my 2017 Want List.

The past being prologue, as Shakespeare tells us, my first encounter with Lucchesini was on his album of Schubert's Impromptus in 35:6, a recording I very much enjoyed, and would have given an even more enthusiastic endorsement to than I did if not for the glut of competing versions vying for an ever-shrinking market. And here, some seven and half years later, we have Lucchesini once again in a new album of works by Schubert, this one titled Late Piano Works, which contains the composer's penultimate sonata, the A Major, D 959, and contrarily the Sonata in A Minor, D 537, which dates from 1817 and isn't "late" at all.

One might argue, I suppose, that for a composer who lived to be only 31, it's not too much of a stretch to label even works he wrote in 1817 at the age of 20 as "late." It could also be argued, however, and probably should be, that assigning cardinal numbers to Schubert's sonatas, as Lucchesini does, is a practice that long ago fell out of favor among pianists who have surveyed the composer's oeuvre in the genre. That is true of Alfred Brendel, Radu Lupu, Andràs Schiff, Maurizio Pollini, Paul Lewis, and others, including Barry Douglas in his recent and still ongoing cycle. All of them identify the sonatas only by their keys and Deutsch numbers, as now do almost all Schubert catalogers, curators, and music historians.

While I imagine that the last three sonatas will always be thought of as Nos. 19, 20, and 21, just as the "Unfinished" Symphony continues to be programmed on record and in concert as No. 8, despite the tantrums of the academics to demote it No. 7, there is good reason not to assign sequential numbers to the sonatas because it turns out that, according to the Neue Schubert-Ausgabe, Series VII/2, volume 1–3, there are only 19 complete sonatas, while according to IMSLP and the Wiener Urtext Edition, there are 21, and ... wait for it ... according to the Franz SCHUBERT: Catalogo delle composizioni at flaminioonline.it and the Franz Schubert Catalogue: 610—Oeuvres pour piano at musiqueorguequebec.ca, there are 23. Debate among authorities arises mainly from whether to include in the count, especially among Schubert's early sonata efforts, quite a few movements, either whole or fragmentary, that represent beginnings abandoned.

That confusion is evident on this very release, for what is identified here as the Piano Sonata No. 20 in A Major, D 959, is identified as the Sonata No. 22 in the above-cited two Franz Schubert catalogs; as No. 14 in Franz Schubert's Werke:

Kritisch durchgesehene Gesamtausgabe—Serie 10: Sonaten für Pianoforte (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel (1888)); and as No. 18 in the above-noted Neue Schubert-Ausgabe.

Bewilderment runs amok when it comes to the Sonata in A Minor, D 537, identified on the present disc as the Sonata No. 4. According to Wikipedia's detailed and annotated list of Schubert's complete works for solo piano, No. 4 is assigned to a one-movement fragment in E Minor, with its former D number, 994, most recently reassigned the D number, 769A. The three-movement A-Minor Sonata, D 537, performed on the recording by Lucchesini, appears in the list as the Sonata No. 5. So, the best advice is to ignore the cardinal numbers that Lucchesini and Audite provide, and just go by the Deutsch numbers, which everyone seems to agree on.

Not mentioned at the top is that this release is labeled Volume 1 of Schubert's "Late Piano Works," so we know it's not a one-off. What remains to be seen is what in Schubert's solo piano output constitutes "late" according to Lucchesini, since, as noted above, this first installment already includes the A-Minor Sonata from 1817, which, as most years for Schubert, is filled with songs. But the two Overtures in the Italian Style, D 591 and D 592; the "Grand Duo" Violin Sonata, D 574; and seven other piano sonatas date from the same year, as does the beginning of work on the so-called "Little" C-Major Symphony (No. 6), D 589. The line between "early," "middle," and "late" is not as clearly drawn in Schubert's output as it is in Beethoven's.

I find myself most impressed, not to mention, deeply moved, by Andrea Lucchesini's playing on this disc. The A-Major Sonata, D 959, affects me on an even deeper emotional level—or at least a different one—than the great B♭-Major Sonata, D 960, that follows it. I hear the B♭ Sonata as music of exalted, sublime munificence. Its spirit escapes gravity and rises heavenward.

The A-Major Sonata, in its first movement, is moody, restless, and emotionally unsettled. But it's the second movement, the Andantino, that I find chilling and profoundly disturbing. Schubert seems to go to a place that's very dark. The music's slow, inexorable tread, the "hole-in-the-middle effect" of its open, wide-spaced chording, and the F♯-Minor tonality, with its unrelenting insistence on the E♯ leading tone, contribute to a doleful tolling effect. Furthering the cold, terrifying trepidation are the gaunt, stabbing, fp, open fourths—F♯-B, second inversion chords momentarily missing their third (D)—which deliver hollow, numbing shocks. Surely, this movement projects one of the most baleful visions in all of music. I can think only of moments in Shostakovich's works that portray a similar rictus, frozen in place by a horror so overwhelming it becomes surreal. The mind, body, and senses detach from it, and we see it unfold in slow motion as onlookers, unfeeling and paralyzed to act.

Few, if any, pianists I've ever heard play this movement as Lucchesini does. His halting gait, as if too fearful to go forward for what lies ahead, captures the essence of Schubert peering over the rim into the abyss with shocking and shattering clarity. Lucchesini is able to make the movement's central section, with its uncontrolled paroxysm of rage, sound truly manic, as it should. And when the altered A section returns, and Schubert adds the bell-like tolling in the treble voice, Lucchesini turns it into a shudder. This isn't just pianism of consummate technical skill, it's artistry that makes the instrument speak and tell us a story; and terrible as that story may be, it rivets us. This is what music-making, in its finest sense, is and should be about.

There's logic in Lucchesini's programming of his disc. The second movement of the A-Minor Sonata, D 537, opens with a subject whose rhythm Schubert would modify slightly and then use as the Rondo theme in the finale of his A-Major Sonata, D 959,

11 years later. D 537, by the way, is Schubert's first sonata left in a completed state, and its stormy first and last movements, surrounding its serene, songful middle movement, foretell things to come.

Schubert composed the Allegretto in C Minor, D 915, we're told, shortly after his first and only face-to-face meeting with Beethoven in March of 1827, just days before the elder composer expired. It was a bittersweet meeting, filled with inexpressible joy for Schubert, who practically idolized Beethoven, and yet at the same time a sense of injury, for Beethoven was the one composer in Vienna who could have helped Schubert gain recognition but didn't. Beethoven lurks not far beneath the surface of Schubert's Allegretto, so beautifully and sensitively played here by Anndrea Lucchesini.

Based on this first volume of Lucchesini's survey of Schubert's "late piano works"—whatever limit that imposes on the contents of future releases—I have to say that we have here something that is very special. Urgently recommended.