

Leonskaja plays Schubert

Sunday 17 October 2021 | Sage One



Elisabeth Leonskaja piano

Schubert

Piano Sonata in C minor, D958

Piano Sonata in A, D959

Interval

Piano Sonata in B flat, D960

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Elisabeth Leonskaja

Pianist

For decades now, Elisabeth Leonskaja has been among the most celebrated pianists of our time. In a world dominated by the media, Elisabeth Leonskaja has remained true to herself and to her music, and in doing so, is following in the footsteps of the great Russian musicians of the Soviet era, such as David Oistrakh, Sviatoslav Richter and Emil Gilels, who never wavered in their focus on the quintessence of music despite working in a very difficult political environment. Her almost legendary modesty still makes her somewhat media-shy today. Yet as soon as she walks out on the stage, audiences can sense the force behind the fact that music is and always has been her life's work. Born in Tbilisi, Georgia, to a Russian family, she gave her first concerts as early as age 11. Her exceptional talent soon brought her to study at the Moscow Conservatory.

While still a student at the Conservatory, she won prizes in the prestigious Enescu, Marguerite Long and Queen Elizabeth international piano competitions. Elisabeth Leonskaja's musical development was shaped or influenced to a decisive degree by her collaboration with Sviatoslav Richter. The master recognized her exceptional talent and fostered her development not only through teaching and musical advice, but also by inviting her to play numerous duets with him. A memorable musical

event! The musical partnership and personal friendship between Sviatoslav Richter and Elisabeth Leonskaja endured until Richter's death in the year 1997. In 1978 Elisabeth Leonskaja left the Soviet Union and made her new home in Vienna. Her sensational performance at the Salzburg Festival in 1979 marked the beginning of her steadily blossoming career as a concert pianist in the west.

In addition to her many solo engagements, chamber music remains an important part of her work. She has performed many times with string quartets, such as the Belcea, Borodin Artemis and Jerusalem quartets. She also had a longstanding musical friendship with the Alban Berg Quartet, and their piano quintet recordings are legendary.

Numerous recordings bear testimony to the outstanding artistic achievements of this pianist and she has been awarded prizes such as the Caecilia Prize for her Brahms piano sonatas, or the Diapason d'Or for her recordings of works by Liszt. Other significant recordings include the Tchaikovsky Piano Concertos with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra under Kurt Masur, the Chopin Piano Concertos with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra under Vladimir Ashkenazy, and the Shostakovich Piano Concertos with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra.

Leonskaja's most recent CD recordings appeared on the Berlin based Label eaSonus (www.easonus.com). "Paris", with works by Ravel, Enescu and Debussy, was named the Solo Recording of the Year 2014 by the ICMA Jury. "Saudade", an homage to Russian culture with works by Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich and Rachmaninoff, was released in November 2017. A complete recording of Franz Schubert's piano sonatas in two volumes of four CDs each has been available since April 2016 and May 2019 respectively. A double-CD with variations and sonatas by Robert Schumann followed in January 2020.

In her second homeland, Austria, Elisabeth Leonskaja is an honorary member of the Vienna Konzerthaus. In 2006 she was awarded the Austrian Cross of Honor for Science and Art, First Class, for her outstanding service to the culture of the country. It is the highest award in Austria. In Georgia, she was named Priestess of Art in 2016, this country's highest artistic honor. In 2020 she received the International Classical Music (ICMA) Lifetime Achievement Award.

Franz Schubert 1797 - 1828

Franz Schubert was one of the torch-bearers in the funeral procession for his beloved Beethoven in March 1827, but the influence of the master on the young composer was not to be buried with him.

Schubert himself was to die little more than a year and a half later, but he could not have expected that his three piano sonatas – in C minor, A major and B flat major – would be the last to flow from his pen.

Schubert was frustrated by the fact that what little public reputation he had in Vienna rested upon his prolific talent as a writer of songs. In October 1828 publisher Heinrich Probst ignored entreaties by the now-ailing Schubert that his three latest sonatas for solo piano should be accepted for publication and dedicated to Johann Hummel. Probst only wanted songs and piano duets, which were then much in demand.

Schubert died the following month. A year later his brother Ferdinand sold the sonatas to Anton Diabelli, who took another 10 years to publish them. Hummel was by now also dead and, against the late composer's wishes, Diabelli dedicated them to Robert Schumann, who had praised a number of Schubert's works.

Although public appreciation of his music began to grow following a

successful concert in the spring of his last year, this long gap in publication did nothing to promote Schubert's work for much of the remaining century. His sonatas were pigeonholed as being too long and lacking in formal structure. Ironically, Schumann, dedicatee of the last sonatas, lamented Schubert's 'voluntary renunciation of shining novelty where he usually sets himself such high standards'. Johannes Brahms, on the other hand, found them interesting and expressed a wish to 'study them in depth' in relation to his own compositions.

However, it was well into the 20th century – perhaps triggered by the 1928 centenary of Schubert's death – before serious interest in the piano sonatas began to stir. Some late-20th century scholars have even argued that Schubert's trilogy of late sonatas should rank alongside Beethoven's most mature works in that field.

Sonata in C minor, D958

Allegro - Adagio - Menuetto (Allegro) - Allegro

Of the three late sonatas, the one in C minor is most distinctly influenced by Beethoven, though more in homage to the lamented composer than in imitation.

The opening *Allegro* opens dramatically, contrasting defiant themes with the wistful and the reflective. But if there are Beethovenian overtones here Schubert instills much of his own inspiration as the work progresses, transcending the master's influence and developing a musical lyricism that's so much his own.

The *Adagio* is also haunted by Beethoven; a gentle lament with dramatic flourishes of anger and irritation as the opening theme is varied. However, all the elements are acknowledged and resolved before the movement closes.

In the *Menuetto (Allegro)* Schubert gets very much into the stride of his own style. It's based on a theme he used back in 1810 or 1811 in his very first string quartet, catalogued as D18. This lilting light-hearted scherzo with its witty hesitations resembles a *ländler*, an Austrian slow waltz.

It leads swiftly into the energetic and rhythmic *Allegro* finale, which has often been likened to the pace of a galloping horse. Schubert makes this conclusion to his delightful sonata more of a steeplechase than a mere gallop with the music taking great leaps as it gathers speed.

Hummel

Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778-1837) was an Austrian piano virtuoso and composer who made an important impression on Schubert when they briefly met in Vienna in 1827.

Sonata in A major, D959

*Allegro - Andantino - Scherzo: Allegro vivace; Trio:
Un poco più lento - Rondo: Allegretto*

The A major sonata, D959, like its D960 in B flat major partner, makes use of cyclic motifs and tonal connections that enable a musical narrative to thread through the work. There are a number of subtle references to Beethoven's works.

In the opening *Allegro* a chordal fanfare proclaims the challenge that lies ahead, followed by gentle descending triplet notes counterbalanced by ascending chords. This passage of contrasts becomes the motif for much of what follows. Eventually, after so much conflict, delicate arpeggios – spreading, harp-like chords – steer the movement towards serene closure.

Despite a solemn beginning that's more like a funeral procession, the opening bars of the *Andantino* still manage to make reference to the fanfare that launched the sonata. The middle section has an improvisatory feel, but abrupt modulations of key declare more serious intent and reach a terrifying climax in fortissimo C sharp minor chords. The shock of this is absorbed with some grace and, despite a few more angry chords and rumbles, the path towards tranquillity is eventually swept clear.

A flirtatious beginning to the *Allegro vivace scherzo* revives spirits, but immediate memories of the previous movement's stormy outbursts are briefly recalled. A gentle trio tiptoes in at midpoint before more robust material reasserts itself.

The structure of the *Rondo: Allegretto* finale is borrowed from that of Beethoven's *Sonata in C sharp minor, Op.31, No.1*, but there is also a theme from Schubert's own A minor sonata, D.537, written back in 1817. Musicologists have laid claim to several more links to Schubert's hero, including six bars at the end of the finale's development section that would appear to recall part of the first movement of the Op.27, No.2, best known as the 'Moonlight' Sonata.

Of necessity, Schubert has to have the last word – and in the final pages he seems to hesitate as to which precise expression of farewell is most appropriate. As ever, his choice is impeccable.

Sonata No.21 in B flat, D960

*Molto moderato - Andante sostenuto - Scherzo:
Allegro vivace con delicatezza; Trio - Allegro ma non troppo; Presto*

The B flat major sonata D960, like its D959 in A major partner, makes use of cyclic motifs and tonal connections that enable a musical narrative to thread through the work.

There are a number of subtle references to Beethoven's works. The opening theme of the B flat major sonata's *Molto moderato* first movement recalls that of the 'Archduke' Trio, Op.97, in the same key, and some bars later the first movement of the 'Emperor' Piano Concerto, is referenced.

Many have pictured the sonata's opening movement as Schubert gently strolling through the countryside with the rumbling figure from the piano's left hand hinting at an impending thunderstorm. There is some acceleration, (whether or not to dodge raindrops!) but this music is ever alert and responsive to shifts in mood – at one moment passionate and, at another, absorbed in deep contemplation.

The key shifts to C sharp minor for the *Andante sostenuto* slow movement, comparable in style to that of Schubert's remarkable *String Quintet in C, D956*, that Schubert was working on at this time and the one destined to be his final chamber work. In the main section, a melancholic and introspective melody is introduced over

a persistent rocking rhythm. As the coda approaches there is an unexpected switch to C major.

Schubert marked his lively *Scherzo* to be performed 'with delicacy', and its joyful spirit comes as a welcome change of mood from the turbulent emotions and introspection of the sonata's previous movements.

Going against his normal practice, Schubert sketched the finale to the B flat minor sonata before any of the other movements. Its main theme is a chirpy **rondo**, which is made much use of in this energetic farewell. A second theme follows which revels in a long melody played over an uninterrupted flow of semiquavers. A third theme follows, beginning in F major, *fortissimo*, then moving back to the major mode, *pianissimo*.

Schubert now resolves to propel his last sonata towards a triumphant close by speeding its remaining notes through an explosive *Presto coda*.

rondo

Literally, a 'round'. A passage of music in which a theme recurs intermittently. It's made up of a principal theme, called the refrain, which alternates with a contrasting theme, called an episode.

2020-23 Crisis, Recovery and Renaissance campaign

The Covid-19 pandemic has created a financial emergency for Sage Gateshead. In 2020/21, 80% of our income was affected, and we had to adapt our organisation. We have weathered the storm thanks to the support of many generous people and organisations, and the investment from Arts Council England and DCMS. Our sincerest thanks to you all.

Looking ahead, the impact of the pandemic will be felt deeply. We are determined to play a proactive role in our region's recovery. Meanwhile, operational and financial challenges continue, with our box office and trading income set to be half of that in a pre-Covid year. This year, we again need to raise £1 million through our Crisis, Recovery and Renaissance campaign, to ensure we can continue to share world-class music by artists from all genres, support our communities' health and wellbeing, and create vital artist development and inspiring educational opportunities. If you'd like to help Sage Gateshead, please donate online on www.sagegateshead.com/support or get in touch with Natalie.Heath@sagegateshead.com.

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