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## Schubert's piano duets

*The Musical Times*, Feb., 1976 (pp. 120-121) © The Estate of Eric Sams

The 30 original duet works (Appendix I) have always made a special appeal to Schubertians. They were most popular with the contemporary public, and therefore with publishers; and also, in a way, with Schubert himself. Of all his 1000 works in 20 different genres, they began earliest and lasted longest, from the schoolboy essay of 1810 (D10) to the masterly romances and dramas of 1828 (D940 etc.) They are essentially household music, and they begin and end in fantasies. In the world of creative imagination Schubert's mind was in every sense at home.

The most complete of current editions is the serviceable and scholarly Henle Urtext, which omits only the Overture in G minor, D668, presumably on the ground that (like D592, 597, 773, 798 and the unnumbered arrangement of D644) it was a transcription of an orchestral work. But even so, D668 would still be like the Overture in F, D675 in existing solely in duet form; and its inclusion would have been justifiable as well as convenient.

There are two problems of authenticity. The two-movement so-called "Sonatine" D968 was questioned by the late Maurice Brown. Its dating is admittedly obscure, and the blandly naive style is not instantly familiar. Yet there is a holograph manuscript; the quality is surely Schubertian; and the style seems readily enough explicable on the hypothesis that the work was designed for a young friend or pupil (like the similarly innocent-sounding *Kindermarsch* D928 for the little Faust Pachler). The adroit craftsmanship and tonal restraint, together with the presence of piano pupils, suggests 1818 as a tenable date.

Conversely, the authenticity of the Variations in B flat, D603 has been challenged by others but championed by Maurice Brown. It sounds to me as genuine as it is delectable. Yet there is no known manuscript, and the identity and provenance of the copy used by its Hamburg publisher in 1860 are alike mysterious; hence its rejection from the canon by, for example, Nottebohm. But perhaps these questions are not beyond all conjecture. After all, Julius Stockhausen from Vienna, a well-known collector, was (long before 1860) a close friend and collaborator of Brahms in Hamburg – also a well-known collector, anonymous editor and intermediary. Another Schubert piano duet (D618) is known to have been located chez Stockhausen in 1872 – by Brahms, who sent it to a publisher. In the 1850s, many of Schubert's friends were rummaging through their files and music cabinets at the request of biographers; one example was Albert Stadler, a keen copyist and known owner of at least one piano duet manuscript (D48).

So much for the canon; what of its range? These 30 pieces vary widely in calibre. But the field they cover has much common ground; each speaks with a personal voice. Indeed, their usual purpose was to provide a salute, whether for a special friend or a special occasion; and much of the music was simply designed to make and keep friends. After all, the shortest distance between two musicians is the melodic line joining them; and though "Notre amitié est invariable" for example may be only a publisher's title for the Rondo in D, D608, it well epitomizes both that work (especially those amused moments when the tune passes from hand to hand like a loving cup) [*fn 1*: though the further linked-arms effect (bars 233ff of the first edition) as if drinking *Bruderschaft* seems to have been invented by Diabelli] and the oeuvre as a whole. Again, the technique of the duets must owe much to that of the duettists. No doubt Schubert was *Primo inter pares*; but his favourite partners (e.g. Josef von Gahy, Franz Lachner) were excellent pianists, and the independence and interest of the Secondo part of the major works (especially the *Gran Duo*) are sustained with what looks like deliberate altruism.

Social occasion and milieu also had their part to play. Nearly half Schubert's duets were written during or in connection with his 1818 and 1824 sojourns at Zseliz, where he gave piano and singing lessons to the Esterházy daughters Marie and Caroline. No doubt those privileged young ladies disported or diverted themselves to the strains of the *Ländler* D818 and the *Divertissement à la hongroise* D818. The Hungarian themes of the latter were wafted through the windows, while the French air of the Variations in E minor, D624 emanated from the Zseliz library.

Later on, contemporary events such as the death of Alexander I of Russia and the coronation of Nicholas I were commemorated in duets (D859 and 885), partly no doubt as a publisher's sales device, but partly also because Schubert's creative mind responded so eagerly to day-to-day actualities. Another vital stimulus was his own musical experience. The earlier and later duet works (D48 and 952) contain fugues that sound as if Bach had been given the freedom of Vienna. Elaborate homage is paid to Beethoven; there is the Pastoral Symphony at bars 26-9 of the introduction to D603, the Second in the slow movement of the *Gran Duo* D812 and the Seventh at bars 121ff of the Variations in A flat, D813.

Here we find the focus of the Schubertian social and musical circle. In the large-scale duets a lofty quasi-symphonic content is commonly expressed in fashionable keyboard style. Those who feel (like

Schumann and Joachim) that the *Gran Duo* is really a symphony, and those for whom (like Joseph Müller-Blattau) it is really contemporary pianism, are surely both right; each isolates one element of the Schubertian compound. His duet music is the testament of his mission in life: to introduce sublimity into the Biedermeier drawing-room. Once there, the sublime is not merely made to feel at home. It is taught to dance and sing; and these accomplishments render it, for the first time in history, genuinely welcome and truly popular. A more sophisticated artist might have adopted *vox populi, vox dei* as a conscious device. For Schubert, the two voices seem always to have sounded in unison.

How may one define or explain this process of distilling profundity with trivia and expressing the ensuing essence in intensely vivid and personal terms? It is at least possible to point to parallels in the journals, day-books, letters or diaries of contemporary Romantic writers (Coleridge, Keats); and it is worth noting that a literary parallel was instantly and instinctively drawn, at first hearing, by the most gifted and sensitive of all Schubert's immediate successors, namely Robert Schumann. Of the Rondo in A, D951 he wrote "As others have diaries to which they entrust their fleeting feelings, so Schubert has manuscript paper". Further: "Playing Schubert is like reading a Jean Paul novel turned into music" (letter to F. Wieck, 6 Nov 1829); and when Schumann himself sought to do exactly that in *Papillons*, it was the four-hand Polonaises D599 and 824 that he turned, as the most modern of musical models. He heard peasant wedding ceremonies in the *Divertissement* D818; exotic grandees in the marches (?D733), romantic tales and poetic expression in the *Gran Duo*; and so on.

It seems humane to assume that all this was not mere hallucination but factually recorded experience. Even without such testimony, one would expect to find expressive quasi-verbal quality in Schubert, who must surely rank among the best-educated and most literary of all composers. So it would clearly be rewarding to hear the duets speaking as they spoke to Schumann. In that interest, here is a tentative attempt at a basic vocabulary. First, Schubertian melody often sounds very like the cadence of German verse. The Rondo theme noted by Schumann is one eloquent example; another is the opening strain of the F minor Fantasy D940, with its overtones (almost overt tones) of impassioned harangue, whether or not addressed to its dedicatee, Countess Caroline Esterházy. Next, shifting and fluid tonality suggests the interplay of emotions, and indeed is often deliberately used (as in the songs) for exactly that purpose. Then energy and variety of rhythmic device convey a lively sense of physical participation, as in the Trios of D618 or the *Divertissement* D818 (in time with which the normally restrained Mendelssohn observed to be violently stamping his feet).

Such immediacy is enhanced by keyboard imitation of band music, fiddle and fife, trumpet and kettledrum, cymbal or cimbalom. Thence springs a whole new crop of quasi-orchestral textures and devices, designed (again as in the songs) to bring total expressiveness within the grasp of the home music-maker. Thus the domestic parlor becomes not only a concert-hall but an opera-house, with keyboard images of lighting, costume, dialogue and action. And all these, plus the spectacle of bravura technique, are deployed not to impress an audience but to express new personal modes of thought and feeling. Examples abound; thus many of these strains can be heard commingling in the underrated *Variations on a Theme from Hérold*, D908. Finally, the forms and structures of the duet music imply literary equivalents, whether ball-scenes, pageants, tableaux or picaresque plots with episodes and digressions to vary their central themes.

This Schubertian theatre of the mind seems to have been closed to the general public for many years now. To judge from most concert programmes and record catalogues, the duets need once again to be brought home to music-lovers; which is where they belong.

I –SCHUBERT’S ORIGINAL PIANO DUETS (Deutsch catalogue number in brackets; \* means published in Schubert’s lifetime)

1	Fantasia in Sol (1)	1810	16*	8 Variazioni su un tema orig., in Lab	1824
2	Fantasia in Sol minore (9)	1811	17	(813)	1824
3	Fantasia in Do minore (due versioni) (48)	1813	18*	4 <i>Ländler</i> (814)	1824
4	Sonatine (968)	?1818	19*	<i>Divertissement à la hongroise</i>	c1824
5*	4 <i>Polonaises</i> (599)	1818	20*	6 Grandes marches (819)	c1825
6*	3 <i>Marches héroïques</i> (602)	?1818	21*	<i>Divertissement à la française</i> (823)	1825
7	Introduzione e 4 var. su un tema orig., in	?1818	22*	<i>Grande marche funèbre</i> (859)	1825
8	Sib (603)	1818	23*	<i>Grande marche héroïque</i>	1826
9*	Rondò in Re (“Notre amitié est invariable”)	1818	24*	6 <i>Polonaises</i> (824)	?1826
10	(608)	1818	25*	2 <i>Marches caractéristiques</i> (886)	1827
11*	Sonata in Sib	1818	26	8 Variazioni su un tema di Hèrold	1827
12	<i>Deutscher Tanz</i> , con 2 trii, coda, e 2	1819	27	(908)	1828
13*	<i>Deutsche</i> (616)	1819	28	<i>Kindermarsch</i>	1828
14*	8 Variazioni su una canzone francese (624)	c1822	29*	Fantasia in Fa minore (940)	1828
15	Ouverture in Sol minore	1824	30	Allegro in La minore	1828
	Ouverture in Fa minore e maggiore			(“Lebensstürme”)	
	3 <i>Marches militaires</i>			Rondò in La (951)	
	Sonata in Do ( <i>Gran Duo</i> ) (1812)			Fuga in Mi minore	

II – SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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