



Sunday, January 22, 2017, 3pm
Zellerbach Hall

Emanuel Ax, *piano*

PROGRAM

- Franz SCHUBERT (1797–1828) Four Impromptus, D. 935 (Op. 142)
 No. 1 in F minor
 No. 2 in A-flat Major
 No. 3 in B-flat Major
 No. 4 in F minor
- Frédéric CHOPIN (1810–1849) Impromptus
 No. 1 in A-flat Major, Op. 29
 No. 2 in F-sharp Major, Op. 36
 No. 3 in G-flat Major, Op. 51
 Fantaisie-Impromptu in C-sharp minor,
 Op. 66

INTERMISSION

- SCHUBERT Klavierstück No. 2 in E-flat Major, D. 946
- CHOPIN Sonata No. 3 in B minor, Op. 58
 Allegro maestoso
 Scherzo: Molto vivace
 Largo
 Finale: Presto non tanto

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Steinway Piano



Four Impromptus, D. 935 (Op. 142) Franz Schubert

On January 31, 1827, Franz Schubert turned 30. He had been following a bohemian existence in Vienna for over a decade, making barely more than a pittance from the sale and performance of his works, and living largely off the generosity of his friends, a devoted band of music-lovers who rallied around his convivial personality and exceptional talent. The pattern of Schubert's daily life was firmly established by that time: composition in the morning; long walks or friendly visits in the afternoon; companionship for wine and song in the evening. The routine was broken by occasional trips into the countryside to stay with friends or families of friends—he visited Dombach, near the Vienna Woods, for several weeks in the spring of 1827 and Graz in September. A curious dichotomy marked Schubert's personality during those final years of his life, one well suited to the Romantic image of the inspired artist, rapt out of quotidian experience to carry back to benighted humanity some transcendent vision. "Anyone who had seen him only in the morning, in the throes of composition, his eyes shining, speaking, even, another language, will never forget it—though in the afternoon, to be sure, he became another person," recorded one friend. The duality in Schubert's character was reflected in the sharp swings of mood marking both his psychological makeup and his creative work. "If there were times, both in his social relationships and his art, when the Austrian character appeared all too violently in the vigorous and pleasure-loving Schubert," wrote his friend the dramatist Eduard von Bauernfeld, "there were also times when a black-winged demon of sorrow and melancholy forced its way into his vicinity; not altogether an evil spirit, it is true, since, in the dark concentrated hours, it often brought out songs of the most agonizing beauty." The ability to mirror his own fluctuating feelings in his compositions—the darkening cloud momentarily obscuring the bright sunlight—is one of Schubert's most remarkable and characteristic achievements, and touches indelibly upon the incomparable series of works—*Winterreise*, the *Great Symphony* in

C Major, the last three piano sonatas, the String Quintet, the two piano trios, the Impromptus—that he created during the last months of his brief life.

Schubert began his eight pieces titled Impromptu in the summer and autumn of 1827; they were completed by December. He did not invent the title. The term "Impromptu" had been current in Vienna since at least 1822, when the Bohemian-Austrian composer Johann Vojtěšek issued a set of brief, ternary-form works of extemporized nature under that name. The term (from "unprepared" or "unpremeditated" in French) was meant to convey a certain sense of improvisation-like spontaneity, but in a clearer form than was usually implied by the title "Fantasia." Schubert was familiar with Vojtěšek's pieces, as well as with the many independent piano works by Beethoven, Field, Tomášek, and others that were flooding the market in the wake of the burgeoning piano manufacturing trade (and falling consumer prices) of those years. Schubert sold his eight Impromptus to Haslinger in Vienna, who agreed to publish them in small lots to test their acceptance. He issued the first two numbers of the series (in C minor and E-flat Major) in 1828 as Schubert's Op. 90, Nos. 1 and 2, with some success, but the composer's death on November 19th of that year halted the project, and the remaining pair of Op. 90 Impromptus was not published until 1857 or 1858; the four others were issued at the end of 1839 by Diabelli as the Op. 142.

Robert Schumann, one of Schubert's earliest champions and the catalyst for the first performance of the *Great Symphony* in C Major (conducted, at Schumann's insistence, by Mendelssohn at the Leipzig Gewandhaus concerts in 1839), knew the Impromptus in manuscript copies, and wrote of their special instrumental character: "As a composer for the piano, Schubert stands alone (in some respects, even above Beethoven), in that his writing is more pianistic, that is to say, the piano's full resources are effectively brought into play, than is Beethoven's piano writing, in which tone color is achieved more orchestrally." Perhaps the most remarkable quality of the Impromptus is the

manner in which Schubert leavened their inherent pianism with his incomparable sense of melody, a situation for which Kathleen Dale proposed the following explanation: “Schubert’s continued experience of song-writing had by now so strongly developed his wonderful natural gift of apprehending the spirit of a poem and re-creating it in music, that when he turned from songs to write for piano solo, he inevitably composed works which, though specifically instrumental in character, are so truly lyrical in essence that each is a poem in sound.” A Poem in Sound—music that is flowing, evocative, reflective of the rhythms of the heart and the soul and of life itself. Such is the gift that Schubert left the world.

Schumann contended that the four Op. 142 Impromptus (D. 935) comprise a loose sonata cycle, with the opening F-minor number standing as the first movement. Schumann’s argument founders because of the lack of fully realized sonata-allegro form in the F-minor Impromptu (there is no development section) and the unconventional tonal relationships among the later movements, but he was correct in recognizing the grand scale and expressive weight of this opening piece. The initial theme, a stair-step descending motive in dotted rhythms, promises drama with its bold opening gesture but reveals its true character as amiably melancholy. Three related ideas comprise the second theme group: a tenor melody in evenly paced notes, strewn with right-hand arpeggios, of emotionally unsettled character; a sweet song of inspired lyricism, grown from the preceding evenly paced motive, in chordal harmonies; and an episode of rippling arpeggios woven around a theme divided between a close-interval call in the treble and an answering response in the bass. The series of themes is repeated, with some truncation, as the second half of the piece, which ends with a reminiscence of the opening stair-step motive.

The Impromptu in A-flat Major, based on a melody of disarming purity and tranquil simplicity, is the most gentle of dances, perhaps a nostalgic recollection of the old minuet, long out of fashion by 1827, or the Austrian *Ländler*, which evolved into the modern waltz during

Schubert’s lifetime. The central trio is more active rhythmically and harmonically than the music that surrounds it.

Schubert was apparently particularly fond of the lovely melody of the Impromptu No. 3 in B-flat Major—he had used it previously in the Entr’acte No. 3 for the Incidental Music to *Rosamunde* (1820) and the String Quartet in A minor, D. 804 (1824). It here serves as the theme for five variations that are led into some deeply expressive harmonic areas as they proceed. The brief coda recalls the theme in its original form.

The last of the set, in F minor, is in the nature of a brilliant folk dance, perhaps of Gypsy origin. The piece demands several flights of virtuosity, especially in the rolling scale passages and mercurial broken chords of the middle section, before coming to a bravura close.

Impromptu No. 1 in A-flat Major, Op. 29
Impromptu No. 2 in F-sharp Major, Op. 36
Impromptu No. 3 in G-flat Major, Op. 51
Fantaisie-Impromptu in C-sharp minor, Op. 66
Frédéric Chopin

Chopin first tried out the idiom and the Impromptu designation in his Fantaisie-Impromptu of 1834 (later the source of the hit Tin Pan Alley tune “I’m Always Chasing Rainbows”), but that piece was not published until 1855, six years after the composer’s death, as his Op. 66. The earliest impromptu Chopin guided into print was the one in A-flat Major, written in 1837, the memorable year in which he first met George Sand. The piece was issued in December with a dedication to Countess de Lobau, one of his aristocratic pupils.

By the summer of 1838, Chopin’s health was showing disturbing signs of decline, and he decided that he needed to leave Paris that autumn, before damp winter set in. He settled on the distant Mediterranean island of Majorca, off the eastern coast of Spain, which friends (who had not been there) assured him was blessed with abundant sunshine and fresh air. The trip was a disaster, plagued by terrible weather, shabby accommodations, and the lack of a piano on which he could compose. The venture’s nadir was reached when he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. A piano finally arrived from

Paris and he was well enough by the end of December to begin composing again. The Impromptu No. 2 in F-sharp Major, sketched during Chopin's ill-fated stay with George Sand on Majorca early in 1839 and completed that summer at Sand's country house at Nohant, is reminiscent of a nocturne in its placid flow and gentle spirit. The opening section contains a sweet, simple melody in even notes and a more animated one supported by block chords. The central episode is given over to a theme of sturdier character presented above a leaping, dotted-rhythm ostinato in the bass. The opening phrase returns as expected (at first, however, in the surprising tonality of F Major), but the reappearance of the second theme is delayed by a passage of sweeping figurations in the right hand.

The Impromptu No. 3 (G-flat Major, Op. 51) was composed at the beginning of 1842 for Chopin's concert with mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot at the Salle Pleyel on February 21st, one of his rare public appearances in Paris. The event, which attracted a crowd of the city's most notable socialites and musicians, was received rapturously. "Chopin is a pianist apart," assessed the critic of *La France musicale*, "who should not and cannot be compared with anyone else." When the score was published the following year by Hofmeister in Leipzig and Schlesinger in Paris, it carried a dedication to Countess Jeanne Batthyany-Esterházy, one of Chopin's most blue-blooded pupils. "The G-flat Impromptu is salon music with a slight difference," wrote Herbert Weinstock in his biography of the composer. "It aims at nothing more complex or—for Chopin—more difficult than charm. But it does not mistake banality for charm, and its nuances of rhythm and, even more, harmony are legion. It flows, not in strophes or stanzas, but like a stream slowed by curves, in which it momentarily deepens."

The Fantaisie-Impromptu, Op. 66, dates from 1834 (though it was not published until 1855), the time when his friendship with the brilliant but short-lived Italian opera composer Vincenzo Bellini was at its zenith. (Bellini died the next year, at age 34.) Bellini's long melodic arches, precise and tasteful ornamentation, and

subtle harmonic vocabulary worked a profound influence upon Chopin, the effect of which is clearly heard in the broad melody that occupies the center of the Fantaisie-Impromptu. Despite the work's title, there is nothing improvisational about its form, whose boundaries are precisely marked by the contrast between the agitated music in the outer sections and the spacious theme in the middle.

**Klavierstück ("Piano Piece") No. 2
in E-flat Major, D. 946**

Schubert

Schubert was among the first practitioners of the so-called "character piece," the species of compact, single-movement, sharply etched piano composition designed for the burgeoning home music market of the early 19th century. There grew to be a virtual musical tidal wave of these popular miniatures in the years after Schubert's death in 1828—the masterful examples by Chopin, Schumann, Brahms, Liszt, Mendelssohn, Fauré, Grieg, and others occupy the heart of the piano literature—but the form was still new when he took it up around 1815 to provide keyboard entertainment at the convivial local gatherings, known as "Schubertiads," that featured his music and performances. Beginning in 1824, during what proved to be the last years of his pitifully brief life, Schubert created a fine and characteristic series of character pieces that parallel his superb late sonatas. First among this group were the endearing *Moments Musicaux*, whose six movements occupied him between 1824 and 1827. During the last six months of 1827, he composed eight pieces he called Impromptu. It seems likely that the three piano pieces Schubert wrote in May 1827 were intended as the nucleus of a third set of impromptus, though their manuscripts bear neither title nor number. When Johannes Brahms edited them and oversaw their initial publication in 1868, he labeled them simply *Drei Klavierstücke*—Three Piano Pieces.

The *Drei Klavierstücke* are arranged according to a pleasing tonal plan: E-flat minor, E-flat Major, and C Major. They are in simple three-part structures (the second adds an additional intervening episode: A–B–A–C–A) and almost

opulent in the warmth of their sonority and harmony. No. 2, in E-flat Major, is based on a tender theme that Schubert borrowed from the chorus that opens Act III of his 1823 opera *Fierrabras*; the movement's two contrasting episodes are unsettled and mysterious.

Sonata No. 3 in B minor, Op. 58 Chopin

Chopin first met the flamboyantly iconoclastic novelist George Sand late in 1836 at a party given by Franz Liszt. Their friendship deepened into sincere if tempestuous and unconventional love during the following months, and Sand served for the next decade as Chopin's muse and protectress. Beginning in 1839, they escaped from the summer heat and dust of Paris to Sand's country villa at Nohant, near Châteauroux in the province of Berry. Just as the couple was preparing to leave for Nohant in May 1844, Chopin learned that his father had died in Warsaw. The news devastated him, exacerbating the tuberculosis that was beginning to sap his strength, and Sand took him to Nohant as soon as he had recovered sufficiently to travel. She was concerned enough over his health and state of mind that she wrote to his mother, suggesting that a visit from the family might help to restore him. It was agreed that his sister Ludwika, who had not seen Chopin for 14 years, would travel to Paris with her husband, Kalasanty. Sand wrote back that the guests would stay first in her Parisian apartments and then continue to Nohant. Chopin was stirred enough by the news of Ludwika's visit that he started to compose again, and began sketching a large piano sonata in B minor in July.

Early in August, Chopin hurried to Paris to meet Ludwika and Kalasanty. Brother and sister fell tearfully into each other's arms, and Frédéric celebrated their reunion by shepherding the couple around Paris—sightseeing, attending *Les Huguenots* at the Opéra, arranging *soirées* to show her off to his friends, visiting the aristocrats in whose apartments he performed. Chopin was worn out after two weeks

of this hyperventilated activity, and gladly took Ludwika and Kalasanty to Nohant. Chopin was greatly revived in mind and body (Sand later wrote to assure Ludwika that she was “the best physician he has ever had, because merely speaking to him about you is enough to restore his love of life”), and returned to his B-minor sonata with enthusiasm after his sister's departure at the beginning of September. The work was completed by the time he returned to Paris in late autumn.

The key of B minor was virtually unprecedented in the Classical piano sonata literature—no such works by Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Dussek, or Hummel exist in that tonality. (Liszt did not begin his Sonata in B minor until 1852.) Chopin apparently chose the key for both the darkly colored emotional ambiance it creates for the music and for the opulent sonorities it allows to be drawn from the piano. Both of these qualities are evident in the opening movement, which is marked by the rich figurations, precise motivic control, and melodic fecundity that characterize the creations of Chopin's fullest maturity. Formal delineation is provided by the contrasting second theme, an arching lyrical inspiration buoyed by a rippling arpeggio accompaniment. The remainder of the movement proceeds according to the traditional sonata model, except for the not unimportant point that the main theme is omitted in the recapitulation, which therefore begins directly with the lyrical subsidiary subject. The compact Scherzo balances its mercurial outer sections with a smoothly flowing melody in the baritone range for the central trio. The Largo, reminiscent in its rapt eloquence of Chopin's finest nocturnes, was judged by Alfred Frankenstein to be “one of the high points in all of Chopin and in all of the music of the Romantic era.” The closing movement, compounded formally of elements of sonata and rondo, is febrile and almost tempestuous until it turns to the brighter tonality of B Major for its energetic coda.

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Emanuel Ax (*piano*) was born in modern day Lvov, Poland, and moved to Winnipeg, Canada, with his family when he was a young boy. His studies at the Juilliard School were supported by the sponsorship of the Epstein Scholarship Program of the Boys Clubs of America, and he subsequently won the Young Concert Artists Award. Additionally, he attended Columbia University, where he majored in French. Ax made his New York debut in the Young Concert Artists Series, and captured public attention in 1974 when he won the first Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Competition in Tel Aviv. In 1975 he won the Michaels Award of Young Concert Artists, followed four years later by the coveted Avery Fisher Prize.

Always a committed exponent of contemporary composers—with works written for him by John Adams, Christopher Rouse, Krzysztof Penderecki, Bright Sheng, and Melinda Wagner already in his repertoire—Ax performed the world premiere of the newly commissioned Piano Concerto by HK Gruber earlier this month with the New York Philharmonic and Alan Gilbert (the European premiere will follow in March with the Berlin Philharmonic and Sir Simon Rattle). His ongoing relationship with the Boston Symphony this season includes visits with them to Carnegie Hall, Montreal, and Toronto; with the Cleveland Orchestra Ax appeared as the featured artist for their gala opening concert of the season. As a regular visitor he also returns to the orchestras of Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Cincinnati, Toronto, Seattle, Milwaukee, and Detroit.

Ax has been a Sony Classical exclusive recording artist since 1987, and recent releases include Mendelssohn trios with Yo-Yo Ma and Itzhak Perlman, Strauss' *Enoch Arden* narrated by Patrick Stewart, and discs of two-piano music by Brahms and Rachmaninoff with Yefim

Bronfman. In 2015 Deutsche Grammophon released a duo recording with Perlman of sonatas by Fauré and Strauss, which the two artists presented on tour during the 2015–16 season. Ax has received Grammy Awards for the second and third volumes of his cycle of Haydn's piano sonatas. He has also made a series of Grammy-winning recordings with cellist Yo-Yo Ma of the Beethoven and Brahms sonatas for cello and piano. His other recordings include the concertos of Liszt and Schoenberg, three solo Brahms albums, an album of tangos by Astor Piazzolla, and the premiere recording of John Adams' *Century Rolls* with the Cleveland Orchestra for Nonesuch. During the 2004–05 season, Ax also contributed to an International Emmy Award-winning BBC documentary commemorating the Holocaust that aired on the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. In 2013, Ax's recording *Variations* received the Echo Klassik Award for Solo Recording of the Year (19th-century music/piano).

A frequent and committed partner for chamber music, he has worked regularly with such artists as Young Uck Kim, Cho-Liang Lin, Ma, Edgar Meyer, Peter Serkin, Jaime Laredo, and the late Isaac Stern.

Ax resides in New York City with his wife, pianist Yoko Nozaki. They have two children together, Joseph and Sarah. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and holds honorary doctorates of music from Yale and Columbia universities. For more information about his career, please visit www.EmanuelAx.com.

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