



**Schubert—FOUR IMPROMPTUS, Op. 90**  
(1790—1828)

**BLP 1007**

Schubert was regarded as a song-writer, and his method of working was so different from that of the other great masters that we might have expected him to approach the larger forms tentatively. On the contrary he spent himself fearlessly and without fear, never permitting conventional notions of form or key-relationships to hinder his natural and spontaneous flow of melody. Though he died in his thirty-second year his achievement was so extensive as to be comparable only with Mozart's. In some of his longer instrumental works the charm of the above characteristic is single comparison for the history was to unfold them, even when his contemplation or other turns out to be (as in the *Wanderer*) more important in another key of what has gone before. This did not prevent him from achieving architectural perfection in works like the *4th* *Impromptu*, the *String Quintet in C*, or the two movements of the *Unfinished Symphony*. But generally speaking he was the very antithesis of Beethoven, rarely allowing anything more serious than, and cherishing his absolute, when he should have been about his lack of self-criticism. It is ironic that some of his best music was written in a medium which takes seriously enough, the greatest, and much less have to succumb and share the willing music lover. The work for solo piano are equally abundant, and the solo detachable to the general acceptance of the many sonatas would appear to be their "heavenly length". This criticism can hardly be brooked at the two sets of *Impromptus*, given in a larger scale than the *Mozart* *Wanderer* but equally happy in their flow of song-like lines and their delicate treatment of the keyboard. These date from 1817 and their style, probably not original, is consistently conventional. Each set of four forms a satisfactory group, especially when Op. 90 No. 3 is played in its original key of *F* flat which leads well

with its neighborly rather than in the "simpler" key of *G* natural, which causes publishers' keys long used as a last for progressive buyers. These of the second set (Op. 102) were followed by Schubert to have been intended as movements for a Sonata in *F* minor.

All the *Impromptus* are in flat keys. The first of Opus 90, in *C* minor, is derived almost entirely from a glaucous theme based at the outset. It has all the manner of a ballad in which the theme across the phrases of the solo singer, or again to night regard it as an extended improvisation in a simple vein, which is shown in evidence through its many changes of character. During his absence, a pair of repeated eighth notes go waltzingly in the major key as typically Schubertian manner.

The *F* flat *Impromptu* is the release of the art. Encircling more progress of greater weight, beautifully phrased, it at first uncontrolled, but shallow of the minor key become more and more intense and lead automatically into a fiery middle section in *B* minor, suggestive of a dramatic setting, with regular four bar phrases underlined by

sudden treatment of tone. This in turn switches harmonically back to *F* flat minor and thence to *F* flat major for a repeat of the first part ending. The solo notes as if to repeat the middle section, but at once resolve itself into a trill before the two opposing keys: the ending in *F* flat minor (not major) appears natural and inevitable. The first two *Impromptus* were published in Schubert's lifetime. Nos. 3 and 4, however, did not appear until thirty years after his death, the former transposed into an easier key, which causes no objection when it is played as a single piece. *G* major, in place of *F* flat major, does not, however, fit happily after the *F* flat minor ending of No. 2, and the editorial substitution of Schubert's key having to be disregarded. The *G* flat *Impromptu* is a song without words its serene beauty is illustrated by an impassioned middle episode, but the middle line is more broken and the dark shadows which fall across its closing bars appear before the touching cadence phrase. One of Schubert's greatest assets as a songwriter was his gift of softening the mood of the words in the texture of the piano part, so that it was more than a mere "accompaniment"; his own playing was, we are told, clear and delicate and suggestive rather than brilliant, and the subtle patterns of notes which abound in his keyboard writing bear this out. The last of this set of *Impromptus* begins with a dancing waltz figure in the minor key, and as it develops and turns to *A* flat major we seem to be waiting for some lively candidate to take shape. When this section the following figure continues to play around it, twice it makes a climax before the music subsides into the darker patterns of song of the *Wanderer* in *C* sharp minor, which leads in its turn to a full repeat of the first part with the simple addition of two chords for the sake of finality.

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