

INTERPRETATION ASPECTS OF FRANZ SCHUBERT'S IMPROMPTU NO. 3, OP. 90

IMPROMPTU NR. 3, OP. 90 DE FRANZ SCHUBERT: ASPECTE INTERPRETATIVE

VICTORIA TCACENCO¹,

doctor în studiul artelor, profesor universitar,
Academia de Muzică, Teatru și Arte Plastice

MIRA ZANTOUT²,

doctorandă,
Academia de Muzică, Teatru și Arte Plastice

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Does the music work remain the sole property of the composer? What could have sensitized the performer to the point that he improvises his own short introduction before starting the piece, and changes the authentic nuances in some bars? Is the definition of „impromptu” giving freedom to reflect the true feeling inspiration of the performance moment?

The article includes an introduction on F. Schubert, famous Austrian composer and pianist, the study of the impromptu genre definition and historical context. The authors have chosen interpretative versions on F. Schubert's Impromptu no. 3, op.90 offered by V. Horowitz, S.Richter, D.Lipatti, M.J. Pires, D. Fray, K. Buniatishvili. Besides a short description of their pianistic abilities, the authors tried to reveal the individual approach of each performer. It is important to mention an unusual treatment of this genre by D. Lipatti who added his own two bars improvised on Schubert's text.

Keywords: Franz Schubert, impromptu, piano, performance

Opera muzicală rămâne proprietatea exclusivă a compozitorului? Ce l-ar fi putut sensibiliza pe interpret până la punctul în care își improvizează propria scurtă introducere înainte de a începe piesa și schimbă nuanțele autentice în unele măsuri? Definiția „impromptu” oferă libertate pentru a reflecta adevărata inspirație sentimentală a momentului de interpretare?

Articolul include o introducere despre F. Schubert, faimosul compozitor și pianist austriac, studiul definiției și contextului istoric al genului „impromptu”, studierea și descrierea acestuia în manuale și dicționare. Autorii au ales versiuni interpretative ale Impromptu nr. 3, op. 90 de F. Schubert, oferite de V. Horowitz, S. Richter, D. Lipatti, M.J. Pires, D. Fray, K. Buniatishvili. Pe lângă o scurtă descriere a abilităților lor pianistice, autorii au încercat să dezvăluie abordarea individuală a fiecărui interpret. Este important să menționăm o tratare neobișnuită a genului de Dinu Lipatti, care a adăugat la textul lui Schubert două măsuri proprii improvizate.

Cuvinte-cheie: Franz Schubert, impromptu, pian, interpretare

Introduction

Schubert is the most immediately moving of any composers for piano... he pushed the piano beyond the limits of a percussive instrument to that of a full orchestra. Schubert's large piano works surpassed the possibilities of the instruments of his time. They are very often orchestral in conception. Schubert used musical forms in an entirely personal way [1].

This quotation written by the Master pianist Alfred Brendel, could be regarded as a native portrait of the intuitive composer Franz Schubert (31 January 1797 – 19 November 1828), of natural talent, and how the piano was a very personal instrument to express his inner feelings, which explains the large amount of his works that were devoted to this instrument. Schubert's piano solo works numbered 610 (some pieces are lost, and some sonatas unfinished). His piano pieces join the classical sonata form with a developed subjective melody. Schubert's piano compositions are rich in character, in details

1 E-mail: amtap2003@yahoo.com

2 E-mail: miraznt@yahoo.com

like sudden enigmatic shifts that create dramatic music and sometimes require an advanced technical level. His piano works may hold features of unexpected chromatic passage that causes unsuitable fingerings, and his piano pieces are wealthy in expansiveness using harmony, they are pieces which require imaginative performance.

Schubert's music displays the attitude of human nostalgia, happiness, pain, sorrow and so on. Schubert's piano works are not pieces for fingers, but a piano language, poetic ideal that combines with human emotional states and gradual psychological levels. They are an art mirror of every human's personal reminiscence, joy or pain, of life that is no longer.

As his piano works have astonishing charm, Schubert was a distinguished performer, his friends Albert Stadler (1794-1888) and Leopold von Sonnleithner (1797-1873) mentioned that Schubert had a beautiful touch, „quiet hands” (this notion of quiet hands means to avert unnecessary movement in order to fulfill a seamless line) and clear playing, full of soul expression, and that he was a good accompanist who kept a strict time [2 p. 276].

Among Schubert's piano pieces, there are the two sets of *Impromptus, opus 90, and opus 142*, composed in 1827, a very productive year of Schubert's creation despite his being in very poor health, and having a few months before his death. We consider these musical works as the mirror of his life, seen by Schubert himself, and as if he anticipated that his life would end before long. We have chosen Schubert's *Impromptu no. 3, op. 90* for analysis, after playing the four *Impromptus, op. 90* as a coherent cycle pieces, even if Schubert had agreed and allowed the publisher Tobias Haslinger (who gave the title *Impromptus* for the first two pieces of opus 90) to publish only the *Impromptus, op. 90, no.1 and no.2*, in 1827, it does not mean that Schubert intended to separate the four movements as individual pieces according to some research debates, but we think that what made Schubert accept the condition offered by the publisher to print only the *Impromptus no.1 and no.2*, and bring them out, is that Schubert suffered from lack of income during his last years of illness. This is evident in the letter to his friend, the Austrian dramatist, Edward Von Bauernfeld (1802-1890), dated Vienna, July 10, 1826. Franz Schubert wrote: „I can't probably get to Gmunden or anywhere else, I have no money at all, and I feel very badly at all” [3]. 4-1850), and Johann Hugo Worzischeck (1791-1825) who had composed *Impromptu* melodic style pieces in 1822. Schubert mastered the *Impromptu* genre and surpassed the composers who had created the first *Impromptus*.

Historical review of the term *impromptu*

Historically the term *impromptu* was a manner of performance, rather than a piano music genre. As for the origin of the word *impromptu*, the *Online Etymology Dictionary* shows that *Impromptu* is a French word (the 1660s) where it meant „extemporaneously” and French speakers picked it up from the Latin phrase (1650s) *Impromptu* meaning „in readiness” without preparation. In the late 18th and early 19th century, social gatherings started organizing artistic musical theatrical evenings, the words and music were the initial part of *improvise or to compose and sing*, improvisation by the spirit of the moment; therefore there appears the name *Impromptu*, but it was never used as a title term of a musical piece work until the early 19th century, and then the term could be indicated to two different *impromptu* musical kinds: first, as a kind of large improvisational fantasy on a popular theme; and second as a simple lyrical piano piece of medium length. So, the title *Impromptu*, as its name shows, means improvised music. Most *Impromptu* structures were in the form A-B-A, and some *Impromptus* had the features of other forms, like theme and variations (ex., Schubert B-flat *Impromptu, opus 142*).

Schubert's *Impromptu no. 3, opus 90*

Schubert was profoundly alone, we were convinced about this, after we had played his third *Impromptu no.3, opus 90*, this profound feeling render the lyrical theme somehow imbued with the

loneliness that suffuses his music *Impromptu*. We do see like if Schubert with this specific free music, was drawing his personal life memories, a kind of systematic nostalgia toward a past gone and it would never come back. For what is no longer, is the most forcing in the Romanticism worldview; from this point of view we believe that Schubert's *Impromptus* became the model of Romanticism music. His third *Impromptu*, *op.90*, is specifically Schubertien, in G-flat major. The piece structure uses three complex parts form ABA. Section A starts by a distinguished long lyrical melody line flying over to contrast rhythmical arpeggio soft flowing accompaniment. Section B begins at 25 mm in the relative tonality E-flat minor, modulates to C-flat major in 33 mm: here we feel dramatic emotions expressed by major tonality; it leads to a new modulation at 48 mm to E-flat major, while harmony changes indicate a typically Romantic spirit. Section A comes back at 55 mm: the same lyrical melody is enriched with some echoes from section B, finishing with meditative chords. This accompaniment should not be treated as simple *arpeggios* but it is demanding texture aspect in the rendition toward fermata G-flat major chords.

Impromptu no. 3, opus 90: interpretation analyses

In the present article, we will focus on a comparative view of Schubert's *Impromptu no. 3, op.90*, performed by six outstanding pianists from different historical periods, different national schools, different generations: Vladimir Horowitz, Sviatoslav Richter, Dinu Lipatti, Maria Joao Pires, David Fray, Khatia Buniatishvili.

Vladimir Horowitz (Oct. 1, 1903 – Nov. 5, 1989) Berdichev, Russian Empire (now Ukraine). He had an unusual palm hand position below the level of the surface key, his fingers were straight when playing chords. He was celebrated for his flawless technique, an almost orchestral quality of tone. The Horowitz style considerably includes dynamic contrasts with massive fortissimos followed by immediate delicate pianissimos. He is famous for his precise octave, extraordinary quickly passage technique.

Sviatoslav Richter (March 20, 1915 – August 1, 1997) Russia. An exceptional genius talent, he was largely self-taught. Richter had huge hands, easily spanning a twelfth; he had thickly padded fingers that gave him the physical capacity to create exquisite textures [4]. Richter stated that the interpreter should not dominate the music but should dissolve into it. „In the exhilaration of hysterically virtuoso pieces, his fingers seemed to push back the limits of the possible, in the extreme slowness of adagios he could impart a sense of complete immobility, like almost no one else. Richter was capable of varying colors, alternating the most volcanic *pianissimo* and the most volcanic *fortissimo* with complete ease” [5], he could work ten to twelve hours a day. Richter said about his technique: „I always study at the piano and never just from score. When learning something, to constantly sense the function of movements... You can only experience this by practicing” [Ibidem]. Dinu Lipatti (1 April 1917 – 2 December 1950), Bucharest, Romania. „A second Horowitz”, Alfred Cortot declared about Lipatti, after hearing him in 1933 in the Vienna Competition and stated that there was nothing to teach him, and Cortot added „One could only learn from him” [6]. His pianism is characterized by crystalline clarity, purity of tone, precision of articulation, accentuation without distortion of the melody line, steadiness of rhythmic pulse, clarity and subtlety timing of pedaling. Due to his ability to vary the attack used by different fingers even of the same hand, all the thoroughly voiced lines and the inner voices do not distract the main theme, each line becomes an individual voice with its own timbre.

Maria Joao Pires (July 23, 1944) Lisbon, Portugal. Maria is known for her small hands. At the age 5 she played Mozart's piano concerto. She was awarded the first prize at the Beethoven International Bicentennial Competition, Brussels in 1970 [7]. „Without the body being used well, there is then no sound. We must use our voice to say something, we should not hide ourselves. With this in mind, there is much more to a pianist than technique. A score (the written musical text) provides five per

cent of what the music is about. The remaining 95 per cent include feelings that we experience through the sound, exploration of the phrasing and the freedom we experience when we play with only what is left by the composer's inspirations, rather than judging ourselves based on technical limits. All, that is useful to an aspiring artist is his observation" [8]. In 1999, in a concert in Amsterdam with Riccardo Chailly conducting, one of the most amazing moments that has gone in the history of classical music, is when Maria learned the wrong Mozart piano concerto, and when the orchestra began playing, she immediately knew what had happened, she was shocked; But like a perfect genius, miracle happened when she went on to play the right Mozart concerto from memory without making a single mistake.

David Fray (born 24 May, 1981), France. He has been compared to Glenn Gould. With passion for Bach's and Schubert's music, in his interview at pianobleu.com Fray assigns: „Bach is certainly the composer that I need as a musician, but Schubert is the one closest to my feeling“ [9]. Fray, unlike most of the pianists who give clarity to the right hand, is known for his hazier coloring and gentle fluidity at a slightly slower tempo than is common [10]. In an interview Fray describes his piano performance: „I tend to maintain close contact with the piano, playing with minimal finger action while mobilizing my arms. I try to vary my sonority. The technique is not limited to speed, it's an infinite palette of shades and colors, several varieties of *p* and *pp*, several attacks contained in the chord with one hand, a *legato cantabile*... here is the real technique" [11].

Khatia Buniatishvili (21 June 1987), Georgia. She discovered the piano at the early age of 3, and gave her first concert at the age of 6. She was awarded the 3rd prize at the Arthur Rubinstein Competition in 2008. She is known for her rich palette of sounds. Critical media wrote comments that some of her repertoires are „virile" [12]. Khatia answered in an interview about her piano performances: „...the most important thing is to be perfect and very correct to the text, but it's your interpretation and your spirit in the piece and your mood, your thoughts, and your own individuality which actually makes the piece come alive because if we don't give ourselves to the piece then the piece is dead, it is like an untouchable room and art is not like that" [13].

In the present examination, we are looking for specific points of performing Schubert's *Impromptu no. 3, op. 90* in comparison with the interpretation of the chosen Master pianists in this article. These points are: Tempo, Color of „toucher", Additional individual arpeggios, Texture sound of triplet middle voice, the change of the original nuances. We examine records, CD, videos and video recitals. V. Horowitz's performance of Schubert's *Impromptu no. 3, op. 90* (6'43", from a video recital in Vienna in 1987) is closer to S. Richter's (6'4", Moscow recital in Oct. 1978). V. Horowitz starts the first bar [Figure 1] of the piece little accentuated on *si bemol* by the right hand in order to give the melody a declamation quality;

Figure 1:



While D. Lipatti (5'22", Besancon Music Festival, 16 Sep. 1950) starts with some arpeggios [Figure 2] (that does not exist in Schubert's score) at the beginning as introduction before starting playing the piece, we don't know for what reason D. Lipatti did this.

Figure 2:



M.J. Pires (5'50", CD) starts with marked toucher *mp*; we hear D. Fray (6'16", CD) and K. Buniatishvili (6'18", video Sony Classical) starting with padded toucher *pp*. All our chosen Master pianists play with completely three different voices by priority the melody line, the rhythmical contrast *arpeggios* and the bass chords. V. Horowitz like M.J.Pires with impeccable toucher, the melody sounds like under a pillow, not cold, the contrast *arpeggios* voices non-mechanical fluid in the background. As for D. Fray and K. Buniatishvili the distance between the different voices is vaster, the melody is hazy and the lower voices whisper. S. Richter is similar to V. Horowitz but with triplet *arpeggios* sounded not so far. D. Lipatti is notably the fastest in playing triplets with clear voice. M.J. Pires's tempo is near to that of D. Lipatti's, hovering freely within palpitating emotions; while the other pianists' tempo is obviously tranquil. All our chosen Master pianists play the bass quite elegantly, and taking it out in limits where the piece needs specifically trill passages of the left hand and the following bars (25mm-29mm, 35-38mm, 40-41, 43-45, 47, 51-54mm). Horowitz and Richter use a significant *mf* on the 25th bar [Figure 3] to underline the beginning of the second part. B.D. Lipatti is unique in entering the second part by increasing tempo, while Maria Pires with some flexibility, freedom tempo to escape from strictness of rhythm caused by the dynamic emotions and modulation to E-flat minor.

Figure 3:



We can hear D. Fray and K. Buniatishvili with little *ritardando* and considerable *pianissimo* on the 23rd bar [Figure 4] preparing to come out expressively not harshly with the second part in minor key with little rubato but in straightforward tempo.

Figure 4:



V. Horowitz, S. Richter play a captivating *pp* on the 33rd [Figure 5], 49th measure [Figure 6], but their 48th measure [Figure 7] is played with slight *mf* while Schubert in marked *pp*. We noticed D.Fray and K. Buniatishvili in some similar way with fascinated *pianissimo* underline the details texture of 33, 35-39, 48, 49 bars to highlight Schubert's significant emotion.

Figure 5:



Figure 6:



Figure 7:



Lipatti, contrary to the *ppp* written by Schubert on the 35th bar [Figure 8], plays it almost *mf*. On the 54th bar [Figure 9], all the chosen pianists gave *ritardando* time to specify the end of part B and its autonomy. The 55th bar [Figure 10] of part A again, is played so differently by the six chosen pianists; S. Richter executed it quasi *mf* with keeping strict the first tempo, D. Lipatti with slight accent *mf* and always fast tempo; M.J. Pires and V. Horowitz with gentle *mp* and silent tempo; D. Fray, an exception, whispered *pp* calm tempo, K. Buniatishvili with sparkle *p* and serenity tempo. At the end of the piece, our chosen pianists applied a straightforward *ritardando* in order to suggest an improvisation *fermata*, the liveliness sound belongs to D. Lipatti's recording, and the hazy color is of D. Fray.

Figure 8:



Figure 9:



Figure 10:



Conclusions

As a conclusion, we realize that the same piece was performed with some different tempos, Horowitz and Richter had a similar tranquil tempo; the fast one is D. Lipatti's tempo and that of Maria Pires is a little slower than Lipatti's; D. Fray and K. Buniatishvili had approximately the same calm tempo. The records and the videos had allowed us to hear the padded toucher of V. Horowitz, S. Richter, M.J. Pires and K. Buniatishvili. D. Lipatti had an excited toucher, sometimes a little harsh. D. Fray had an imaginative hazy toucher. As we have heard and discovered how the performers' emotions and the spirit of the moment can interact with their interpretation, which is proved in D. Lipatti's *arpeggios* improvisation, we can explain in some way that it could refer to his understanding of the history meaning of the title *impromptu* as an improvisation at the moment of interpretation, then, these *arpeggios* improvised at that recital moment were born. We have also noticed a change of the authentic nuances in some bars, some exaggerated changing in the 35th bar from the original *ppp* [Figure 8] to *mf* by D. Lipatti, and in the 48th measure indicated *pp* by Schubert while played *mf* by V. Horowitz and S. Richter. Regarding the texture of triplets, it was sounded a little mechanical in D. Lipatti's playing, and voiced *leggero* like a feather in V. Horowitz's, S. Richter's, M.J. Pires's and K. Buniatishvili's but a mutter dark color in D. Fray's performance.

After seeing the results of our examination, especially regarding the improvised *arpeggios* by Lipatti, that do not exist in Schubert's authentic score, and the extreme changing of nuances, we can answer our first question presented in the abstract of this article (*Does the music work remain the sole property of the composer?*), the answer is obvious: the music work does not remain the sole property of the composer. The meaning of the musical piece *Impromptu* = improvisation, with the performer's emotions and the spirit of the playing moment, influences and inspires the interpreter, who is not only dissolving into the piece, but in some way – although the necessity of respecting the authentic content of the musical work – the soloist/interpreter is recomposing it, resurrecting it to life. There is not only the efficient performance, but the tempo, the feeling to the *Impromptu* meaning, and the structure of the so-called *toucher* with the spirit of the moment are elements that influence the interpretation.

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