

Some Thoughts On The Performance Of A Schubert Duet

BY RICHARD AND JOHN CONTIGUGLIA



The Tisch Center for the Arts at New York's 92nd Street Y is devoting its 1993 Schubertiade to the topic "Schubert And The Piano," and the duo piano team of Richard and John Contiguglia will be presenting a lecture-recital there on Schubert's duets this March 21. The Contiguglias studied in London with the legendary pianist Dame Myra Hess. Their recording of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony transcribed by Liszt (on Philips of Japan) was awarded a "Grand Prix" by the Liszt Society of Budapest. In 1986, during the 100th anniversary of Liszt's death, they performed a world premiere by Liszt in Chicago and New York.

When two pianists prepare a Schubert duet for performance, their most important realization ought to be that they are studying a piece of chamber music. While any definition of chamber music is somewhat arbitrary (is it the number of executants that matters or the suitability of the music for a "chamber" or small hall?), one of the most useful descriptions is music that aspires to the style of the string quartet — "the purest

and highest revelation of chamber music and perhaps of all music," according to British musicologist Donald Tovey — or of its near relative, the string quintet. The Schubert duets, in texture, range and contrapuntal style, are much more like his string quartets and string quintet than they are like his piano solos.

Appreciating this resemblance is no mere academic exercise; it is often fundamental to performing the duets properly. The opening theme of Schubert's great Fantasy in f minor Op. 103, D940 would not be played as carelessly as it usually is if performers had as their paradigm the opening of the slow movement of the *String Quintet* in C Major Op. 163, D956. The texture of these measures bears a striking resemblance to that of the opening measures of the Fantasy: punctuating bass notes, middle voices that carry the harmonic progression, and an expressive obbligato above that echoes the Fantasy's opening rhythmic-melodic figure, with its dotted rhythm, grace note and ascending and descending fourths.

Fantasy:

Allegro molto moderato

Quintet:

Adagio

No string players worth their rosin would ignore details of notation in the *Quintet*, as pianists routinely ignore similar details in the *Fantasy*. For example, pianists often play the rhythm

as

or

and they often sustain the bass notes and final notes of each melodic fragment as half notes and quarter notes, respectively, instead of as quarter notes and eighth notes, because of inappropriate, "Chopinesque" pedaling. One is not being pedantic to insist on proper durations. In subsequent transformations of the opening theme, Schubert varies the length of the final notes of some of the melodic fragments, using quarter notes, half notes, a dotted quarter note, as well as eighth notes. Only a boorish chamber musician would argue that such differences do not matter. (See measures 43, 73, 559 and 560 of the *Fantasy*.)

(measures 41-43)

(measure 73)

(measures 557-560)

Pedaling for piano duets almost always involves a measure of frustration; pedaling that suits one part doesn't necessarily suit the other. Sometimes, to avoid "dryness," performers can adopt a kind of pedaling with the fingers, holding notes beyond their written durations. "Finger pedaling" enables one to sustain harmonies while changing the pedal or while abstaining from pedaling, altogether, in order to preserve the integrity of contrapuntal lines and the details of articulation. At the opening of the *Fantasy*, "finger pedaling" by the right hand of the *secondo* player can avoid tonal dryness and can emulate the effect of sustained strings. In Schubert duets pedaling, perforce, often involves the fingers as well as the feet.

Chamber music thrives when there is what Donald Tovey calls an "equivalent capacity" among the instruments, the ability of each participating instrument to create effects equal in value to the others. In the case of the piano duet, equivalent capacity becomes virtually identical capacity. While the piano solo can sometimes suggest "quartet" texture, the desire for such texture seems to be the very provenance of Schubert's piano duets.

In a "chamber music" frame of mind let us now discuss one of Schubert's short duets, his Polonaise in F Major Op. 75, No. 4, D599 (on page 16 of this issue). While the longer duets, such as the *Fantasy*, give a far more vivid picture of Schubert's chamber-music duet-style, with their complex contrapuntal textures, including fugal and canonic passages, and 2-, 3-, and 4-part invertible counterpoint, and with their more active and important *secondo* parts, limitations of space compel us here to examine a duet of modest dimensions.

Schubert's manuscript for the Polonaise in F is lost. Our present text, based on the Henle Edition, contains some inconsistencies and, we think, 2 wrong notes. Where inconsistencies of phrase marks and touch (in measures 9-12 of the *primo*), and of accentuation (in measures 41-47 of the *primo*), exist, the performers must decide for themselves whether the inconsistencies have any merit. It seems to us that the accents on the 3rd beats of the *primo* in the "Trio" reinforce the harmonic tensions of the accompaniment in a way that those on the first beats (in measures 43-47) do not. In the left hand of the *primo* in measure 38 we recommend playing A and C instead of C and E, respectively. Thereby, the leading tone G# from the previous measure resolves, and the heavenly 10ths between the two upper parts continue.

The quartet-like texture of the Polonaise can only be revealed if the two players are respectful of the score's detailed articulations. However, not all of the articulations necessary for a musical performance are notated (for example, the *secondo* player may want to use a staccato touch in the right hand in measures 33-36 and on the eighth note upbeats in measures 37 and 38), and some articulations that are notated, as we have already seen, are probably incorrect. Pedaling must not obliterate the staccato notes of the melodic lines in the *primo* or the durations of the bass and accompanying harmonies underneath, of which the *primo* player's left hand notes are sometimes a part. Measures 9 and 11 demand 4 different kinds of touch in a single measure:

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Master Class *continued*

"tenuto" and "portamento" in the *secondo* and "staccato" and "legato" in the *primo*!

In the "Trio" the two upper voices acquire a new independence, singing a duet whose contrapuntal style is a veritable hallmark of Schubert's writing for piano, 4-hands. Imitative, sometimes canonic, the two parts alternately lead and follow or proceed felicitously, arm-in-arm, in 3rds, 6ths or 10ths. How apt seems Schumann's description of the Polonaises as "romantic rainbows over a sublimely slumbering universe"! The "slumbering universe" in this instance is the harmonic accompaniment of the *secondo*. Since any but short pedals would obscure the slurs, portamenti and durations of the contrapuntal lines above, the *secondo* player is advised to use

"finger-pedaling" in measures 25-31 and in measures 41-47 to enrich the harmonic ground of Schubert's celestial duet. Schubert indicates no tempo directions for his 10 Polonaises. Their stately character suggests a moderate tempo, although some can surely be played faster than others. The delicate details of the Polonaise in F militate against haste.

These suggestions for performing the Polonaise in F are offered as a prelude to the more subtle study that must take place by two pianists who aspire to a good performance of this work. Ultimately, no one can teach someone else how to play a piece of music; the indescribable nuances of rhythm, tone and touch, necessary for any good performance, must be discovered by the performers themselves.

While the Polonaise in F certainly

reflects the quality of intimacy one associates with chamber music, one must look elsewhere among Schubert's more than 54 piano duets for the compensatory "bigness" which, according to Tovey, "the classical idea of chamber music implies." Among Schubert's duets are his longest piano sonata, *The Grand Duo* Op.140, D812, his greatest set of variations, *Variations on an Original Theme* Op.35, D813, his longest non-symphonic "sonata-allegro" movement, *Allegro* Op.144, D947 and his most formally innovative cyclic composition, *Fantasy in F minor* Op.103, D940.

We hope that the larger public for chamber music will give these neglected masterpieces a hearing that is almost 175 years overdue.

See the F Major Polonaise piano duet on page 16. ■