

On hearing Schubert's Duo Sonata for Violin and Piano (D. 574)

On a miserable, cold and clammy November afternoon, my wife and I attended a chamber music concert in a series to which we regularly subscribe. The program was varied and ranged from Bach to Bloch. With the exception of a Bach partita for solo violin, the music was performed by two young artists, Natalie Zhu on piano and violinist, Hilary Hahn. The sound created by them was remarkable for its sensitivity and assurance. Often, young and promising musicians tend to show off their technical skills, while playing all the fortés as fortissimos and speeding up the tempi. However, that afternoon their entire performance was free of any of these excesses. Had a screen concealed the two musicians, one would have guessed they were experienced, first-rate players between the ages of 40 and 55.

What moved me particularly was the Schubert Duo Sonata, D. 574, a beautiful piece, rich with musical ideas. There is a considerable repertoire of sonatas for piano and another instrument, but in his 32 "Duo" sonatas, Schubert treated the two instruments as coequal. When I got home, I looked up the Schubert oeuvre in my musical encyclopedia and was flabbergasted by how much Schubert wrote in his short life and how little of it I knew. The "D" of D. 574 stands for the musicologist and compiler, O.E. Deutsch, whose Schubert catalogue includes 998 works! Even when one takes into account that some of these numbers are single songs, it is astonishing that someone who lived from 1797 to 1828 and who did not hit his stride until after the age of eighteen could be so prolific. While the program did not identify the date of the sonata, I suspect that it was created during the last nine years of his life when he no longer taught school but made a precarious living as a composer. In the concert hall it suddenly occurred to me that the music was a direct link between 2002 and the people who had listened to these very notes in Schubert's company. Another link, of a personal nature, was that I spent my early childhood within a half an hour's walk from the very apartment in which the composer entertained his friends and patrons by presenting his music or having them play it. Since Schubert and his circle heard the same notes as we do, I began to wonder what kind of world they lived in during the 1820s.

For all informed people of that period, the American Revolution (1776-1783) and the French Revolution (which started in 1789) with their call for equality and democracy, still resonated. In France the monarchy had been restored, but events in the United States barely touched the consciousness of Europe. Even less familiar to them were the struggles for independence by the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in Central and South America. These uprisings led by Simon Bolivar in Central America and San Martin and others in the south, which took place over a number of years, were substantially successful well before Schubert's death. Closer to home, the Napoleonic wars (1805-1820) very much affected the Austrian monarchy which at one time lost most of its territories. However, thanks to the First Treaty of Paris in 1814, all the lands were restored. For most of his life, Schubert lived under the rule of Francis 1, a conservative Hapsburg emperor, and an autocratic govern-

ment based on land ownership. Persons related by birth to the throne and others who were considered of "noble blood" had privileges denied ordinary folk, but it would be incorrect to suppose that the system, which boasted a large bureaucracy, was considered oppressive by most of the emperor's German-speaking subjects. Even two years after Schubert's death, the "Bourgeois Revolution" of 1830, which shook many countries of the continent, bypassed the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The industrial revolution was in its infancy and there definitely were no railroads leading to or from Vienna. The passenger-carrying railway, a single track affair, was inaugurated in England in 1828 and had to use horses to help the carriages over a hill prior to 1833. If one wanted to get somewhere in the Austrian capital, one walked or, if one could afford it, used a one-horse fiacre, the precursor of taxis.

Most families were large, but not necessarily as large as Schubert's: he was the 12th child born to a country schoolteacher father and a mother who was a cook. Many Viennese just got by and were considered poor even by the standards of that time. But there was none of the starvation and homelessness found in some of today's less developed countries. Being a domestic was not considered shameful and provided food and lodging for many. The same was true of those who enlisted in the army. Medicine was at an interesting stage. Much was known about anatomy, physiology and illness, but there were very few effective drugs or other cures. Appendicitis routinely killed the patients afflicted by it, and other infections which today would respond almost immediately to antibiotics were often equally fatal. Ignaz Semmelweiss (1818-1865) was a Viennese physician, a forerunner of Pasteur, who was convinced that germs were responsible for the deaths of many mothers after giving birth in his hospital. Unfortunately his time had not come, and his theory was not put to the test. He died without being recognized. However, when it came to music, literature and science the 1820s blossomed. Haydn died when Schubert was twelve years old, Beethoven was a contemporary while Schumann's and Mendelssohn's lives overlapped with Schubert's by a few years. Jane Austen, Honoré Balzac, J.W. Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, Walter Scott and "Stendhal," among many others, were writing during the 1820s, and scientists such as Ampère, Davy, Faraday, Gauss, Humboldt, Jenner, Lamarck and Volta were much in evidence. But that was then...

Now it's time for me to look for more Schubert Duo Sonatas.

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