

presents...

JONATHAN BISS | Piano

Echoes of Schubert: Schubert and Singleton

Thursday, March 14, 2024 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

SCHUBERT **Impromptu in A-Flat Major, D. 935, No. 2**

ALVIN SINGLETON **Bed-Stuy Sonata**

INTERMISSION

SCHUBERT **Sonata in A Major, D. 959**

Allegro

Adagio

Menuetto: Allegro

Allegro

This concert is dedicated to the memory of Robert G. Lopez.

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The Bernard Osher Foundation.**

**This program is made possible in part by the generous support of
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Jonathan Biss is represented by Opus 3 Artists
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Steinway Model D, Pro Piano, San Francisco



ARTIST PROFILE

San Francisco Performances presents Jonathan Biss for the fourteenth time. He first appeared in March 2007. He also performed as part of our Frontline Online Concert series in Spring 2021.

Praised as “a superb pianist and also an eloquent and insightful music writer” (*The Boston Globe*) with “impeccable taste and a formidable technique” (*The New Yorker*), **Jonathan Biss** is a world-renowned educator and critically-acclaimed author, and has appeared internationally as a soloist with the Los Angeles and New York Philharmonics, the Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco Symphonies, and the Cleveland and Philadelphia Orchestras as well as the London Philharmonic, the Royal Concertgebouw, the Philharmonia, and Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, among many other ensembles. Biss is also Co-Artistic Director alongside Mitsuko Uchida at the Marlboro Music Festival, where he has spent 15 summers.

In the 2023–24 season, Biss returns to perform with the Saint Louis Symphony and Stéphane Denève, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and Ramón Tebar, and the Philadelphia Orchestra and Yannick Nézet-Séguin at Carnegie Hall. Throughout the season, Biss will present a new project that pairs solo piano works by Schubert with new compositions by Alvin Singleton, Tyson Gholston Davis, and Tyshawn Sorey at San Francisco Performances, Boston’s Isabella Stewart Gardner museum, among many others. Biss continues his collaboration with Mitsuko Uchida featuring Schubert’s music for piano four-hands at Carnegie Hall and more. He will also appear with the Brentano Quartet at Cham-

ber Music Detroit, the Royal Conservatory of Toronto, and more.

European engagements this season include performances with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and Karina Canelakis and the BBC National Orchestra and Ryan Bancroft. Biss reunites with the Elias String Quartet at the Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, Cockermouth Music Society, and Wigmore Hall. In the new year, Biss will perform works by György Kurtág and Schubert at the Sala Verdi in Milan. He concludes his European season with the Orchestre de chambre de Paris and conductor Pekka Kuusisto and Timo Andres’s *The Blind Banister*, part of his ongoing Beethoven/5 commissioning project.

PROGRAM NOTES

Four Impromptus, D. 935

FRANZ SCHUBERT
(1797–1828)

Schubert’s genius was equally well suited to the epic scale and to the miniature. In piano sonatas and chamber music works of 40 minutes or longer, he takes existing forms and expands them, testing their natural limits and turning digression into a sublime art; in hundreds of lieder, each no more than a few minutes long, he pierces and, in some case, shatters your heart with a single change of harmony or turn of phrase.

The *Four Impromptus, D. 935* occupy a middle ground. Already deeply moving when heard individually, they become something greater when experienced in their entirety. Written exactly a year before Schubert’s death at the age of 31 (con-

sider it: 935 pieces of music written by the age of 30), the successive tonalities, forms, and moods of these four freestanding pieces suggest a grand sonata in F minor.

However, freed from the strictures of the word “sonata” and the long shadow it—and Beethoven’s 32 towering examples of the form—casts, Schubert’s imagination becomes even more uninhibited, the results even more wondrous. The first Impromptu is not a sonata form; it has no development. Instead, its expected two themes—the first tragic, the second consoling but still so full of sorrow—are supplemented by an unexpected third. Marked *pianissimo appassionato*, it is many seemingly contradictory things at once: fervent, mysterious, urgent, halting, haunting. Its effect is transformative: when it is followed by the return of the Impromptu’s opening idea, it has moved away from defiance and towards resignation. Acceptance is still a long way off, but the fight has been revealed to be futile.

The second piece, an Allegretto, is quintessential Schubert: evocative of a Viennese dance, perhaps a *ländler*, in an A flat major that is somehow more deeply sad than the F minor music that preceded it, and so simple on its surface that any attempt to explain how profoundly moving it is would be doomed to failure. If the first Impromptu is discursive, taking the listener down a wandering and unpredictable path, this one takes a very different route to the sublime, using an unadorned A-B-A form, the simplest in all of music. Not one of its motivic or harmonic events is jarring; few of them are unexpected. In spite or because of this sense of inevitability, the music finds the core of Schubert’s vulnerability, and ours.

The third Impromptu has another kind of deceptive simplicity, its lilting B flat major theme falling and then rising in perfect symmetry: a child’s poem. But over the course of five wide-ranging variations, it develops into something different. Even the variations which merely embellish the theme somehow deepen it in the process; Schubert is constitutionally incapable of writing meaningless music, and every *appoggiatura*, every neighbor tone, shades and complicates the music’s narrative. That narrative is further complicated by the journey two of the variations take away from the B flat major home, first to B flat minor, then to G flat major. The former is often dark and always suffused with *Sehnsucht*—longing. (*Sehnsucht* is the central fact of Schubert’s existence. A line from

Die Taubenpost, his final song—“Sie heißt die Sehnsucht” [“She is called longing”]—could be considered his motto.) The latter tries to be light-hearted, doesn’t quite manage, and in the process only grows more *sehnsuchtsvoll*: a Schubert signature. Almost every bar features a series of large upward leaps, a gesture that would be carefree in any other pair of hands. But even when Schubert yodels, he does so with *Sehnsucht*.

The end of the last variation is not the end of the *Impromptu*; there is a partial reprise of the theme, in a lower octave and at a slower tempo. It now bears the weight of its history—a history it did not have when we first heard it, only ten minutes earlier. It has lost its innocence and grown even more beautiful.

The final *Impromptu* returns to F minor and is another study in surface lightness that is not, in fact, light. Marked *Allegro Scherzando*, its predominant characteristic is not playfulness. Eery in its mysterious middle section, featuring *pianissimo* scales slithering up and down the keyboard, it is otherwise steely, staring fate in the eye and showing no remorse. If the first *Impromptu* ended with resignation but not acceptance, the last exhibits neither: it ends with a *fortississimo* downward scale, spanning the entire piano and landing on a single, terrible, low F. Schubert’s extraordinary gift for lyricism and consolation is matched—balanced is not the word—by the intensity with which he confronted the pain of life and the horror of death. In these *Impromptus*, both qualities are given magnificent expression. But it is the horror that gets the last word.

Bed-Stuy Sonata

ALVIN SINGLETON
(B. 1940)

Jonathan Biss will speak about this composition from the stage.

Sonata in A Major, D. 959

What comes between anger and acceptance?

Per Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, first bargaining, then depression. But with apologies to the doctor, when grappling with that greatest of mysteries—the passage from life to death—I look not to the sciences, but to the place I most often go looking for meaning, for spirituality, for comfort. I look to music. Above all, I look to Schubert.

Between anger and acceptance comes grandeur, ambivalence, fever, heart-stopping tenderness, defiance, longing: Schubert’s *Sonata in A Major, D. 959*. A complicated, unsettling miracle of a work.

The “anger” that precedes it is the *Sonata in C Minor, D. 958*. “Anger” is an insufficient word, really: the sonata is an extended essay in incredulity. Death is coming, but it cannot be coming. Schubert has too much life to live, love to give, music to write. His fury is palpable, uncontainable, and frightening.

The “acceptance” comes in the form of the heaven-facing *Sonata in B flat Major, D. 960*, and here too, the word diminishes the work, flattening it into a becalmed thing, papering over its tragedy, the unbearable sorrow of saying goodbye. Still, however constricting these labels might be, they are not fundamentally wrong. The C Minor Sonata is an expression of anger; the B flat Major Sonata is an expression of acceptance.

Between these two towering works comes the A Major Sonata; boiling it down to a single word essence would be not just limiting but impossible. Its greatness and its power are a function of its ambiguity, which is expressed in so many ways—in its huge range of character, its structural complexity and breadth, its constant transformation of its material. The A Major Sonata is a work that tells you what the truth is, then suggests that truth itself is an illusion.

While it does not take quite as long to play as the B flat Sonata, the A Major is in spirit the truest manifestation of what Schumann referred to as Schubert’s “heavenly length.” A look at the extensive surviving sketches for the work is fascinating and revealing: Schubert’s editing process here was not one of paring down, but rather of expansion, of opening outward. In the final version of the work, almost every thematic area is longer than it was initially. These expansions are revelatory. Often, they put the material through a distorting lens; sometimes they accommodate strangely moving (or just strange) digressions; in one extraordinary case, the music devolves into a terrifying hallucination. Meanwhile, certain ideas appear again and again, reminding us that however unpredictable the path, Schubert has never lost sight of it.

The most tenacious of these ideas is the one that opens the sonata. A two note salvo, it will recur throughout the sonata in countless guises—atypically for a work of its time, it features in each of the four movements, persisting until the very end

and dominating the work’s last phrase. In its initial appearance, it is a supporting voice, the main event being a chordal sequence which launches the piece with terrific confidence, even pride.

This confidence holds for all of six measures. What seems certain, at its outset, to be a declarative statement, ends up being a question, irregular in length and resisting an immediate answer. One entreating phrase, then another, tries and fails to provide resolution; when resolution eventually comes and the music of the opening returns, it has turned lyrical and lost its brio. A pattern has been established: nothing is precisely one thing or another, nothing is as simple as it initially seems.

A full accounting of all this movement’s twists and turns—all its complications—would be impossible, not to mention exhausting. But the breadth of character and feeling is vast, as is the amount of harmonic territory covered. No one’s mind wanders more beautifully than Schubert’s, and never did his mind wander more beautifully than in this movement.

It is when he allows himself one final wander, in the first movement’s coda, that the sonata enters a new plane altogether. In a sonata movement, a coda is in itself a kind of digression: it is not essential to the form. So, when a composer decides to include a coda, its emotional meaning is connected to its superfluity: it is not a structural necessity but an inner one. It is there because the composer is deeply attached to it being there.

This coda is dominated by the two note motive that launches and permeates the work. The notes and their rhythm are unchanged, but their *meaning* has undergone a radical transformation. Turned inward, this motive is now an expression of utter vulnerability. Its building blocks may come from the work’s past, but it presents as an anxious daydream about an unknowable future.

This sonata’s immediate future turns out to be one not of daydreams, but of nightmares; the middle of the second movement is quite possibly the most frightening, even unheeded, passage of music written in the 19th century. This movement begins where the previous one left off—literally, with the same note, but also emotionally. This is the world of song—a world Schubert so often lives in—and the sorrow it expresses is deep but contained. This vocal lament unfolds with a reassuring predictability: for 40 measures, the rhythm never changes. Bar after bar, the bass rises quickly, then

falls slowly: a gentle defiance of gravity. In the final measures, deliberation becomes stasis: first the bass line, and then melody, ceases to move. Sleep comes.

And then, all hell breaks loose. Analysis of this music is not possible: this is the expression of a terrifying and terrified id. For several minutes, the motion becomes simultaneously more aimless and more hysterical until, with a shriek, it stops.

The silences in music have tremendous power. Their character is dependent on the music that precedes them: they can question, or console, or menace. This silence is a paralysis: the stillness of a person who is desperate to escape but knows there is nowhere to escape to. It is a dream most people have had, translated into sound by perhaps the only person capable of doing so.

This movement is so shattering, logic would suggest that nothing could follow it. That the two ensuing movements not only *work*, but transform the sonata into something yet more powerful and more moving is the clearest possible demonstration of Schubert's genius. On the surface, it seems that the horror has simply been left behind: overall, these movements are exceptionally generous and open-hearted. But what Schubert has not left behind is ambivalence and complexity: those are the work's currency. There is one literal reminiscence of the slow movement, but more significant is the ever-present emotional instability. The theme of the finale has the simplicity of a song, but behind this simplicity lies a whole universe of fragility and doubt. Moments before the sonata's triumphant ending (ambivalently

triumphant—a clenched-teeth triumph) comes the moment that lingers longest in the memory—longer even than the slow movement's primal scream. The song-theme breaks down, mid-sentence, no less than four times. Each time it resumes, it is more deeply marked, even scarred, by the preceding silence. These resumptions take effort; they take courage. They represent the desire to live, and the dawning comprehension that life is nearing an end. They are what come between anger and acceptance.

—Program notes by Jonathan Biss
Visit www.jonathanbiss.com/program-notes