This concert is part of IdeaFest 2014, a UVic event celebrating research and creativity.

Saturday, March 8, 2014 at 8:00 p.m.
Pre-concert talk at 7:30 p.m.
Phillip T. Young Recital Hall
MacLaurin Building, University of Victoria
Adults: $17.50 / Students & seniors: $13.50

PROGRAM

Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

Sonata No. 13 in A Major, D. 664, Op. 120 (1819)

i. Allegro moderato
ii. Andante
iii. Allegro

Four Impromptus D. 899, Op. 90 (1827)

i. Allegro molto moderato: C minor
ii. Allegro: E-flat Major
iii. Andante: G-flat Major
iv. Allegretto: A-flat Major

Intermission
(Beverages and snacks available at the concession located in the lounge)

from Moments Musicaux, D. 780, Op. 94 (c.1824)
No. 6: Allegretto in A-flat Major

Sonata No. 16 in A minor, D. 845, Op. 42 (1825)

i. Moderato
ii. Andante poco moto (theme and variations)
iii. Scherzo: Allegro vivace
iv. Rondo: Allegro vivace
“Schubert’s tonality is as wonderful as star clusters, and a verbal description of it is as dull as a volume of astronomical tables.” (D. F. Tovey)

“I’ve discovered something which you may perhaps find valuable. I find myself using quite spontaneously too, a means of expression which I think is quite unusual: namely silence. Now don’t laugh! It is perhaps the only way to give the emotion of a phrase its full power.” (Claude Debussy in a letter to the composer Ernest Chausson)

“The art of Music has here entombed a rich treasure but yet much fairer hopes.” Those are the words inscribed on Schubert’s tombstone. And certainly we can think with regret of the many works that he surely would have created had he had something like a normal life span.

Schubert, at the time of his death, was well known only to his own circle of friends and even they knew him mostly as a song composer. His achievement as a composer of instrumental music was not at all understood. How could it be, when most of his instrumental works were not yet published? Many of them would not be heard for decades. His 8 symphonies, 15 string quartets, many other chamber works, 21 piano sonatas, masses, other choral works and much, much more – these were almost all unknown. When these works were finally being heard and pondered over, they were too often patronized as formally flawed. Even fifty years ago it was not uncommon to hear many of Schubert’s instrumental works described as undisciplined works. There were a few champions of note. Liszt and Brahms both recognized the greatness of Schubert as an instrumental composer. And in 1894, Antonín Dvořák wrote these words: “[He] is never at fault in his means of expression, while mastery of form came to him spontaneously… Schubert’s musical individuality is unmistakable…”

The stature of Schubert’s piano sonatas took a particularly long time to be recognized. It was long thought that it was only in shorter works – such as the Impromptus and Moments Musicaux – that Schubert’s genius for instrumental writing could thrive. His sonatas were seen as diffuse and overly repetitive. It was not until the 1920s, especially with the advocacy of the pianist Artur Schnabel, that some of the sonatas began to be established in the repertoire. And it is only in the last few decades that competent editions of his sonatas have appeared. 21 sonatas have survived in some form, 13 of them complete. In his lifetime only three sonatas were published and yet at least 10 of the 21 sonatas are major works.

The Sonata in A Major, D. 664 is Schubert’s first masterpiece in the genre (through there are at least three earlier sonatas which very much deserve to be in the active repertoire). It was almost certainly composed in 1819 but was not published until 1839 – eleven years after the composer’s death. The autograph was promptly lost and so the first edition is all that we have. Fortunately it appears to be fairly accurate.

Impromptus and Moments Musicaux were the kind of shorter “domestic” works which publishers could sell. And yet it is typical of Schubert that though these works are simpler in form – ternary in structure – they are also works of variety and great originality. The Four Impromptus D. 899 were composed in 1827. Only the first two were published in Schubert’s lifetime.

Schubert wrote dozens of works for chorus and some of them are major works. The Impromptu in C minor begins as a kind of ballade with a solo singer answered antiphonally by a mixed chorus. However the main body of the work develops as a kind of variation-fantasy before an echo of the antiphonal solo-chorus opening returns in the distance. The Impromptu in E-flat Major exuberantly explores the visceral joy of scalar patterns, with a middle section à l’Hongroise. The Impromptu in G-flat Major is essentially a “Song Without Words”, a miracle of vocal evocation. When it finally was published 29 years after Schubert’s death, the G-flat key was changed to G Major and the time signature simplified. As well it suffered a banal change in one of its most beautiful harmonic progressions. This is all too typical of the disrespectful way Schubert’s instrumental works were treated for so long. The Impromptu in A-flat Major can be linked to the flowing “watery” accompaniments of many of his songs. The song “Auf dem Wasser zu Singen (To be sung on the water) is in the same key, oscillates in a similar fashion between the tonic minor and major and has a similar rippling effect. However the tragic middle section of this Impromptu finds no reflection in the song.

The Six Moments Musicaux were published in 1828. However, the Moment Musical in A-flat had already been published in 1824 and given a fanciful title by the publisher: “Les Plaintes d’un Troubadour”. Indeed it is a kind
of lament, but surely more suitably seen as one of the many laments of wanderers and other outcasts to be found in so many of Schubert’s songs.

“My best greetings to [brother] Ferdinand...I am certain that he has been ill 77 times again, and fancied himself 9 times at least on the point of death – as though dying were the worst evil we mortals had to face. If only he could see these marvellous mountains and lakes, whose aspect threatens to crush us or swallow us up, he would become less enamoured of the tiny span of human life, and would be ready joyfully to give his body to the earth, to be quickened by its incomprehensible forces into new life.” [Schubert, in a letter to his father, 1824]

The Sonata in A minor D. 845 was published in 1825 as opus 42 and was the first of Schubert’s sonatas to be published. In fact it is one of his only large-scale instrumental works published in his lifetime. The sad fact was that publishers were only somewhat willing to publish Schubert’s instrumental works and then only his occasional or domestic works – dances and other shorter piano solo and piano duets, rather than his more ambitious, large-scale creations. (Of course some of these seemingly lighter works are also works of genius).

Once again, our only source for this sonata is the original edition. The autograph and any sketches are lost. It is a more serious problem in this case, because not only is this original publication filled with obvious errors but there are four measures missing! The copyist must simply have skipped a line of the autograph – this occurs in the first variation of the 2nd movement. Yet it took the music world more than 130 years to notice the gaping hole in this work (Paul Badura-Skoda pointed it out in an article published in 1958!)

Few of Schubert’s letters have survived but a letter to his father refers to his own performance for some friends of the Andante movement of this sonata. It tells us a great deal about what he valued in performance, in sound-making:

“What pleased me especially were the variations in my new sonata...which I performed alone and not without merit, since several people assured me that the keys become singing voices under my hands, which, if true, pleases me greatly, since I cannot endure the accursed chopping in which even distinguished pianists indulge, and which delights neither the ear nor the mind.”

Program notes by Bruce Vogt