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Jan Václav Voříšek

Impromptu

Schubert: Piano music

CROSSING THE EDGE

Chapter: CHAPTER 2 The Music Trance

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To encompass a legacy as enormous and as important as Schubert's within the confines of a narrative like this requires strategy. The nature of Schubert's career, as just narrated, suggests that we begin with music published during his lifetime, which had some circulation among his historical contemporaries, and only afterward branch out into posthumous terrain. Thus we will be proceeding from the intimate domestic genres in which Schubert's unique construction of musical subjectivity was formed, into larger genres that through Schubert (quite unbeknownst to his contemporaries) became infected with the esthetic of intimacy.

We can pick up the stylistic and analytical thread exactly where we left it with Tomášek and Field, by starting with a character piece for piano. Schubert knew the works of Tomášek, and was personally friendly with one of Tomášek's pupils, Jan Václav Voříšek (1791–1825), a transplanted Bohemian who was Schubert's near contemporary, and who appeared as pianist at many of the same salons and *Abendunterhaltungen* as Schubert before his own almost equally untimely death. In addition to eclogues and rhapsodies, genres pioneered by his teacher, Voříšek also composed some impetuous character pieces to which he gave the name Impromptu (French for “offhand,” or “on the spur of the moment”). They were supposed to give the effect, prized by salon romantics and their audiences, of sudden, untamed inspiration.

Like other types of character piece that we have seen, Voříšek's Impromptus were usually cast in a simple there-and-back (“ternary” or “aba”) form. Schubert gave the name to eight similarly structured pieces, all written in 1827, of which two were published that same year. The second of these will remind us of Tomášek and Field in the way it “crosses the edge” from the tonic to the quintessentially romantic region of the flat submediant. But Schubert's handling of the by-now familiar maneuver is an especially bold one that links the flat-sixth technique with another tonally destabilizing technique, that of “modal mixture,” the infiltration within a major key of harmonies drawn from its parallel minor (or, more rarely, the other way round).

The sudden “impromptu” modulation in m. 83 that articulates the form of the piece—E ♭ major to B minor—looks (and sounds) very remote indeed. But, as always, what strikes the naive ear as impromptu is actually the result of a crafty strategy, consisting in this case of a double mixture. The many digressions into the parallel minor during the first section—one of them (mm. 25–32) going through a complete circle of fifths that touches on D ♭, G ♭, and C ♭ in addition to the signature flats—prepare the listener for the wildly accented G ♭ in m. 81 that brings the first section to its precipitous close. There is even a precedent (in the circle of fifths progression) for interpreting the G ♭-major chord that follows as a dominant, furnishing a quick transition to the middle section. But when the new dominant makes its resolution to C ♭ (the amply foreshadowed flat submediant key), the expected major is replaced wholesale by its parallel minor, spelled enharmonically as B minor to avoid an inundation of double flats (Ex. 2-5a).

This key, the parallel minor of the flat submediant, is sustained as an alternate home tonality much longer than its counterparts in Tomášek and Field. It is decorated with some fairly remote auxiliaries of its own—secondary dominants, Neapolitan sixths—that serve to promote its status as a stable region to the point where we can easily forget the instability of its traditional relationship to the original tonic. It is even given its own flat submediant, albeit in a context (m. 100) that temporarily identifies the harmony as the “Neapolitan to the dominant of the original flat submediant.” A mouthful like that is the equivalent of “third cousin on the mother's side twice removed.”

ex. 2-5a Franz Schubert, Impromptu in E-flat, Op. 90, no. 2, mm. 77-106

The relationship can be traced logically, and is therefore intelligible, but its distance, not the logic of its description, is what registers. The logic, while demonstrable, is beside the point. To insist on demonstrating it works against the intended effect.

So stable does the remote secondary tonality come to seem that its return “home,” signaled by the descent of the bass B to B \flat (the original dominant) in measure 159, comes not as the normal resolution of \flat VI to V, but as another jolt administered “impromptu” (Ex. 2-5b). The whole process is replayed in compressed and intensified form in the coda, where with really diabolical cleverness Schubert juxtaposes i–V progressions in B minor against V–i progressions in E \flat minor, so that the ear scarcely knows which to choose as its point of orientation. The tonic has been thoroughly destabilized in very novel fashion, and when it is finally reasserted it remains colored by its antagonist, with G \flat (the dominant of B minor) in place of G natural in the tonic triad. Another way of saying this, of course, is to say that the piece ends in the parallel minor.

The image shows a musical score for Franz Schubert's Impromptu in E-flat, Op. 90, no. 2, measures 155-170. The score is in E-flat major and 3/4 time. It features a piano accompaniment with a treble and bass staff. The music includes dynamic markings such as 'f', 'cresc.', 'dimin.', 'fz', 'p', and 'decresc.'. The bass line has several long, sustained notes in measures 161-166 and 167-170, which are circled in red in the original image.

ex. 2-5b Franz Schubert, Impromptu in E-flat, Op. 90, no. 2, mm. 155-70

Yet another way of saying it, one that suggests the full innovative potential of Schubert's harmonic and tonal freedom, is to say that the concept of “the key of E \flat ” now encompasses both major and minor, with all the constituent harmonies of either mode available at all times for arbitrary, “impromptu” (read: affective) substitutions. And what goes for the tonic goes for all the secondary tonalities as well, even the “key of \flat VI,” which can be interchangeably expressed as C \flat > major or as B minor. The range of harmonic navigation has been augmented exponentially.

This has been a mild example. For a richer, more radical and suggestive taste we can sample one of the *Moments musicaux*. The six pieces that make up the set, while all of them vaguely ternary in format, were not conceived as a unit. They accumulated over several years, and a couple of them were published individually in “almanacs” (albums of miscellaneous pieces assembled by publishers for holiday sale) before the set as a whole was issued. The second of them (in F minor), which retains its independent popularity and is often used as a teaching piece, was originally printed in a Vienna publisher's almanac for 1823 as “Air russe” (“Russian tune”), a banal title Schubert had nothing to do with. The sixth *Moment musical*, in A \flat major (Ex. 2-6), was also given a picturesque name by the publishers when it appeared in an album called *Guirlandes* (“Garlands”) in 1825. They called it “Plaintes d'un Troubadour” (“The laments of a troubadour”), evidently pitching it to an unsophisticated public that held fast to the older, pre-Romantic idea of music as imitation of outer reality (objects, “real things”) rather than a representation of inwardness or an expression of the inexpressible.

Allegretto

The musical score is presented in six systems, each with a piano (right) and bass (left) staff. The tempo is marked 'Allegretto'. The key signature is D minor (two flats). The score includes various dynamic markings: *p* (piano), *fp* (fortissimo piano), *f* (forte), *pp* (pianissimo), *mf* (mezzo-forte), and *cresc.* (crescendo). There are also articulation marks such as slurs, accents, and triplet markings (indicated by a '3' over a group of notes).

ex. 2-6a Franz Schubert, *Moment musical no. 6* (D. 780)

ex. 2-6b

The idea of a weeping troubadour was surely prompted by the droopy suspensions in the opening phrases, the kind of thing that had been called a *Seufzer* (sigh) since the days of Heinrich Schütz in the seventeenth century, if not earlier. That much is a cliché. What makes this piece so rare an experience has nothing to do with that, and everything to do with the idea of a “musical moment,” whether the title was Schubert’s idea or the publisher’s. The *moment* (in German, *Augenblick*—“the twinkling of an eye”) had a special meaning for romantics, as we have seen. It was the thing Faust was cautioned not to give himself up to—a stopping of time’s forward march, a subjective reverie. A piece of instrumental music called an *Augenblick* was a piece in “aria time,” or time-out-of-time. A piece that stops time is a piece that represents (or induces) the music trance.

And indeed, one can actually hear time stop (and resume) in this music, when the harmony slips out of the circle of fifths into uncannily prolonged submediant regions that interrupt and suspend its customary progressions—and then slips back again. These marvelous effects are projected against the old minuet or scherzo-and-trio form (or perhaps more to the point by now, Tomašek’s “eclogue” form) in which two “binaries” make up a “ternary.” The first sixteen-bar period encapsulates a “normal” binary procedure: eight bars out (I-V) and eight bars back (V-I). The return trip makes its customary stop along the way at a FOP,

namely III, expressed as C major in keeping with Schubert's expanded version of tonal functions that admits modal mixture on every level.

What gives the C major chord its uncustomary stability, so that it does not immediately register as the dominant of *vi* (which never materializes), is the way it has been introduced: by way of its own dominant seventh (in position), its constituent intervals chromatically “altered” so that the chord contains an augmented sixth—two leading tones, B and D \flat , both of them seeking resolution, in contrary motion, to C. This “altered” version of the dominant (christened “French sixth” sometime during the nineteenth century) was a favorite chord of Schubert's because of its power to change the course of harmony so unexpectedly and yet decisively. Both chromatic alterations—the use of the augmented sixth as a dominant-intensifier and the use of the modal mixture to transform a single secondary function—are fleeting harbingers of more radical harmonic transformations to come.

The second or complementary period, beginning at the pickup to m. 17, is way out of proportion with respect to the first: sixty-one measures vs. sixteen! It is the “uncannily prolonged” mediant excursions—interruptions in the normal flow of time—that so bloat its length. The period begins right off on the flat submediant (F \flat), with a chord informally called the “German sixth,” a major triad to which an augmented sixth has been added in order to mandate, through the sixth's implied resolution, another harmonic change of course. When the augmented sixth has achieved its goal (movement by contrary half steps outward to the octave), the chord produced (in m. 18) is the minor form of the tonic—and indeed, the whole eight-bar phrase thus introduced is cast in the parallel minor—the kind of shift we are learning to expect from Schubert.

The next phrase, beginning with the pickup to measure 25, is the uncanny one. At m. 28, the chord previously interpreted as *i*, the minor tonic triad of A \flat , and which had previously proceeded through *ii* to *V* in A \flat minor, now suddenly veers back to \flat VI and is reinterpreted as a pivot chord (*iii*₆) to the *key* of the flat submediant. As in the Impromptu, op. 90, no. 2, the \flat VI harmony has to be enharmonically respelled (as E major) if it is to function as a tonic without a hopelessly complicated notation. But the whole passage enclosed within the new key signature (mm. 29–39) is in fact a prolongation of \flat VI, the purple color-chord of romantic introspection, now promoted to the status of a temporary tonic. It is like passing into another world, another quality of time, another state of consciousness. Nowhere does Schubert more palpably cross the edge of inwardness.

And then, just as E major is confirmed by a cadence in the eleventh measure of its reign, the key signature switches back, the enharmonic spelling is reversed, and a D-natural, insinuated (in m. 41) into what is once again spelled as an F \flat major triad, forces a re-resolution of the chord as a German sixth again, and a return from the shadow world back into the familiar surroundings of A \flat . The resumption of the original plaintive tune at the pickup to m. 54 has closure written all over it. By the time m. 61 is reached, after eight uneventful bars of recapitulation, we have confidently foreseen the end.

But instead of the anticipated perfunctory satisfaction, we are in for another sublime vagary, even more remarkably “out of time” than the first. In m. 62, Schubert introduces another modal mixture to complicate the harmony, producing a really fierce dissonance: a major seventh suspended over a minor triad. He resolves it as he did before (compare mm. 62–63 with mm. 1–2), but introduces a chromatic passing tone (C \flat) along the way that is fraught with enharmonic potential. That potential is immediately realized when the relationship between the unstable C \flat and the relatively stable B \flat (only relatively stable because the chord it belongs to, a half-diminished seventh, is so dissonant) is reversed. The B \flat moves back whence it came, but the intervening signature change, right in the middle of measure 65, recasts the C \flat as a B \natural , and reidentifies the B \flat in retrospect as an A \sharp .

In effect, both the B \flat in the “soprano” and the D \flat in the bass at the beginning of measure 65 are resolved as if they had been appoggiaturas all along rather than the root and third of a “relatively stable” supertonic in A \flat . The chord thus landed on at the end of m. 65 is enharmonically equivalent to the augmented-sixth chord last heard in m. 41, and it will once again act as the pivot for a crossing of the edge—one that will take us even further into the interior realm than the first. The voicing of the chord in question—the “ ” position, the tensest possible—immediately reidentifies the chord not as a German sixth in A \flat but as a dominant seventh in drastic need of resolution to its tonic.

Just for that reason, of course, Schubert employs the stalling tactic we have by now observed both in Beethoven and in Bellini, reiterating the chord three times before allowing the inevitable to take place. The goal of the resolution, as of any dominant seventh in the position, is to a triad in the position. The root is A, a half step above the original tonic—so very close, one might say, and yet (by normal fifth relations) so very far. Only think of it enharmonically, as B \flat \flat , and Schubert's strategy is revealed: it is the tonicized Neapolitan sixth of A \flat further disguised by its being maneuvered, through a passing at the end of m. 68, to its root position.

But immediately after touching down in measure 69, the A-major chord is revoiced once again, through the same passing , to its first inversion, allowing its perfectly normal resolution, in measure 70, as a Neapolitan to the dominant of the original key, awaiting resolution at last. Yet once again, of course, as soon as the end has heaved into view, the composer must stave it off, lingering on the far side of the edge through one more quiet spin to the tonicized Neapolitan, and one more repossession of A ♭, this time in a resigned, indeed a spent, *pianissimo*.

Quite the most remarkable thing about the final chord is that it is not a chord at all, but a hollow doubled octave. Its hollowness has an affective significance, to be sure. (It is what prompted the words “resigned” and “spent” in the previous paragraph.) But it has another aspect as well, equally important. In a piece so rife with modal mixtures and so dependent on them for its quality of feeling an unambiguously major or an unambiguously minor concluding chord might seem too partial a resolution of its tensions.

Or perhaps the word “unambiguously” is poorly chosen. It is not that the A ♭ tonality, or its quality as home, has become ambiguous. Quite the contrary. But its content, its store of possible connections and nuances, has been greatly augmented and enriched, and will no longer suffer delimitation. Expressive necessity—the need to represent new qualities of subjectivity, of inwardness—has mothered the invention of a whole range of expanded tonal relations. Any key can now be thought of as encompassing, and controlling, a double mode, and a new ambit of related keys available for “tonicization”—for setting up as alternate harmonic goals—including several that had not formerly figured among normal diatonic relations.

This little *Moment musical* has demonstrated two such—the flat submediant and the Neapolitan. In previous diatonic practice, even Beethoven's at its limits, these harmonies were always regarded and employed as “pre-dominants” or “dominant preparations”—chords “on the way” to a stable harmony rather than potentially stable harmonies in their own right. The transformation of chords that had formerly implied dynamic process and motion into potentially stable, static harmonies is what lends music that exploits the new technique the quintessentially romantic quality of timelessness or “music trance.” The implication of motion is suspended; and since (to paraphrase the Greek philosopher Zeno) time is the measure of motion and motion the measure of time, the suspension of implied motion implies the suspension of time. That is what makes “aria time” available to instrumental music, and no one ever profited more from its availability than Schubert.

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