Schubert: The Musical Poet Sonata D 959 And Its Pianistic Challenges

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SCHUBERT: THE MUSICAL POET
SONATA D 959 AND ITS PIANISTIC CHALLENGES

A Thesis
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by
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ABSTRACT

Schubert composed the last three piano sonatas in September of 1828, and these works represent the peak of the composer’s achievement in the sonata genre. Schubert’s distinctive style lies in his compositional voice, which originated in his lieder, but projected equally well to the medium of piano and other instrumental works.

Some research on pianistic challenges and my own experience playing the sonata have been applied to better understand and experience the depth of Schubert’s music on a fuller scale. I have found that the particular challenge of the A Major Sonata in D 959 is the extended length of the sonata (40 minutes long) - which Schubert achieved by introducing new harmonic and thematic material, creative accompaniments, rich orchestral textures, and expressive musical devices. To address these challenges, I implemented specific practice and learning approaches, including detailed technique exercises, analysis of the score, thoughtful practice and active listening. The journey of playing and studying Schubert’s music has been a deeply rewarding experience, which I will apply towards my piano teaching career.
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Franz Schubert (1797-1828) in his instrumental writing utilized the forms developed by the great Viennese masters - Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. His piano sonatas were often compared to those of Beethoven. However, although Schubert drew ideas from Beethoven’s works in his late compositions, he composed using his own distinctive voice.¹ Schubert’s musical genius made him the master of the German Lieder that flourished in the late eighteenth century. The lied is a German word for song, a musical setting of a romantic or lyrical poem for solo voice and piano, which main characteristic features were piano accompaniment, poetry, and mood.² Schubert incorporated the elements of his songs into instrumental compositions. Because of this, his instrumental works reflect the whole scope of human emotions - lyrical sentiment, lighthearted joyousness, and dramatic fury of passion.

Some pianistic and interpretational challenges arise for the pianist to fully realize Schubert’s compositional ideas successfully. Some research on pianistic challenges and my own experience playing the sonata D 959 will be applied to better understand


perform, and teach Schubert’s music. In my thesis I will explore the specific pianistic and interpretational challenges of Sonata D 959, as well as the ways that Schubert pushed the classical boundaries into the romantic period with his infusion of emotional profundity and volcanic outbursts in his compositions. He was the true bridge from the classical into the romantic period.

The Origins of the Sonata

I will explore the origins of the sonata and the composers who contributed to the development of the sonata genre. Like other musical terms, the word sonata originated from the Italian language. The Italian language has two verbs for ‘play’: sonare for sound, and toccare for ‘touching’ a keyboard. In Italy, the term toccata was used for a piece played on the keyboard instrument, while the term sonata was used for a piece for strings and winds. In 1607 Banchieri, an Olivetan monk, described an Italian title that differentiated between pieces that were played, ‘sonare,’ versus pieces that were sung, ‘cantare,’ or the idea of instrumental versus vocal performance. The term ‘canzon da sonar’ (known since 1572) belongs to the rare sonatas that used voices. These sonatas were mentioned by Gabrieli, Monteverdi, and Kindermann and represent a small token in the main historical trend. There are a numerous other terms that described the sonata such

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as ‘sonetta,’ ‘sonnetto, ‘sonatella,’ ‘sonatille,’ diminutive ‘sonatina,’ and ‘sonatino.’

During the 17th century the term ‘sonata’ was used synonymously with ‘canzona,’ ‘sinfonia,’ and ‘concerto.’ In Italy ‘sonata da camera’ was a suite of dances, although France and England experienced the intermixture between ‘suite’ and ‘sonata.’ Among the majority of the keyboard composers who contributed to the development of sonata, there are only a few names, who left their mark in the sonata history.

Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757) stands alone in this period as the Italian composer for the keyboard. He wrote over 550 works for Princess Maria Barbara known as sonatas. Scarlatti used the binary form, where each part was marked to be repeated. Scarlatti’s sonatas remain popular in the pianist’s repertoire due to his use of idiomatic and virtuoso writing in spite of the fact that the sonatas were written for harpsichord.

Johann Kuhlau (1660-1722). He was one of the prominent composers in the development of the early keyboard sonata. The composer is known by the set of seven sonatas “Frisch Fluchte” (1696) and seven “Bible” Sonatas (1700) where the form and order of the movements are determined by the Bible stories. John Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) was Kuhlau’s successor as cantor of St. Thomas School in Leipzig. According to Philip Spitta in his Life of Bach, when Bach was writing Capriccio on the Departure of a Beloved Brother, he was especially influenced by the last of the “Bible” Sonatas.


In Johann Sebastian Bach’s (1685-1750) music, ‘sonata’ became the term that designated the continuing church type, and other terms such as ‘suite’ and ‘partita’ were applied to the court type. The original ‘suite’ consisted of several dance movements all in the same key: Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, and Gigue. As found occasionally in suites, a Fugue or Fugetta, or Aria or Adagio – one of the dance movements formed the sonata since C.P.E. Bach.⁸

Carl Phillip Emanuel Bach (1714-1788) was the most influential of Bach’s sons. C.P.E. Bach is associated with a movement Empfindsamkeit in Germany that valued emotional sensitivity in art. The term refers to expressiveness - thus in music, each phrase, each element was to represent a different emotion. The scores are marked with wide range of dynamics calling for expressiveness and sensitivity. C.P.E. Bach wrote 180 sonatas and his compositional input forms a link between the gallant style of Italy and the Classicism of Haydn and Mozart.⁹

Muzio Clementi (1752-1832) built his career in London as a keyboard performer, teacher, conductor, composer, and businessman. His style reflects the tendencies of the gallant style that gradually developed towards displaying virtuoso elements, strong dynamic contracts, and contrapuntal textures. His sonatas are well known as pedagogical repertoire, especially the set of Sonatinas Op.36.¹⁰

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John Shedlock in his book *The Pianoforte Sonata* states, Haydn and Mozart represent an important stage in sonata history: they stand between C.P.E.Bach and Beethoven. Haydn and Mozart made various kinds of modifications in their sonatas by altering, expanding and restructuring the compositional material. The slow movements and finales became more refined and the sonata-allegro form became the main compositional structure. The exposition section of the sonata got expanded making movements to grow in proportion. The subject of the sonata became more important and different in character.\(^{11}\)

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) contributed most significantly to all sonata history. Beethoven’s thirty-two piano sonatas, more than any other category of his music, present a full scope of his styles and forms throughout his three creative periods. The composer explored the following directions through sonatas: structure, key relationship, emotional content, and sonority. Beethoven’s innovations in the sonata genre:

- Four movement sonata pattern, previously used for symphony or quartet
- Altered Sonata-Allegro form
- Expanded expositions
- Added thematic material
- Contrast between thematic units
- Dramatic development sections, modulation
- Codas

\(^{11}\) Shedlock, *The Pianoforte Sonata*, 126.
- Slow introduction throughout sonata-allegro structure
- Slow movements as composer’s expressive device
- *Scherzo* in the sonata structure
- Rondo and sonata-allegro form
- Variations and Fugue as movements
- Extended final movements
- Cyclicism as a unifying device

Beethoven served as a touchstone for Schubert and left a legacy of expectations with regard to the form and content of sonatas. After Schubert’s last encounter with Beethoven at the funeral of the Viennese master in March 29, of 1827, he became frustrated and intimidated by the thoughts of his own mortality. According to Gibbs, Schubert participated as a torchbearer in Beethoven’s funeral. The orator Franz Grillparzer read this tribute to Schubert’s musical hero: “He was an artist. Who shall stand beside him?” As Schubert friend Spaun recalls, “Schubert’s participation in the funeral had a profound impression on him, especially in view of his own debilitating illness.” We can only speculate why Schubert’s late works carry new seriousness, subjectivity, and self-examination that were not typical during his early years and during his participation in ‘Schubertiads.’

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12 Shedlock, *The Pianoforte Sonata*, 144-147.

Schubertiads’ became increasingly popular at the beginning of the eighteenth-century Vienna – social gatherings of Vienna’s intellectual avant-garde to celebrate Schubert’s music. The circle of the composer’s admirers comprised of Schubert’s friends, musicians, poets, artists, and cultural influential devotees.\textsuperscript{14} The composer no longer composed to please the publishers, to entertain the public and friends, or provide for a living. Schubert composed for himself and for the future.\textsuperscript{15}

Schubert contributed to the development of the sonata genre by creating uniquely lyrical themes, which rivaled the type of the melody used in his songs. One of the most noted contributions in the last sonatas was the extension of the development section by adding more thematic and transitional material using progressive modulations. As John Reed noted in his book \textit{Schubert The Final Years}, “Schubert’s intentions in the later works to achieve his effect over the broadest time scale. The sketches to the instrumental works of these last years show that his second thoughts were in the direction of expansion, not concentration.”\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{15} Gibbs, \textit{The Life of Schubert}, 156.

In addition, the composer added new technical challenges, ingenious accompaniments, unusual sonorities and rich textures.\textsuperscript{17} By applying these innovations to the last three sonatas, Schubert pushed the boundaries of the form to its limits to serve his goal to be recognized as one of the Viennese masters of the sonata genre.

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) completed three major piano sonatas in September of 1828, two months before his death. These three piano sonatas represent the peak of Schubert’s achievement in the sonata genre. According to Christopher Gibbs, the composer dated three sonatas “September” labeling them as a set, and he had planned to dedicate the three sonatas to the renowned composer and pianist Jan Nepomuk Hummel (1778-1837). The three sonatas were written in a short space of time, about four weeks, and were not published until 1838. By the time of publication, Hummel had died, and the publisher made the dedication to Robert Schumann (1810-1856).18 Schubert labeled the sonatas as a group, and they display similar patterns of emotions through each of them. The first sonata in C minor is the most Beethovenian, as it is somber and stormy; the second sonata in A major, represents a variety of moods and colors; and the third sonata in B flat major is sublime and serene. Each sonata is in four movements, with standard sonata-allegro first movement, slow movement (ABA or ABACA form), a scherzo-trio-scherzo third movement, and a rondo as fourth movement.

The A major Sonata D 959, is the second sonata of the “September” set, whose content paints the most comprehensive picture of Schubert’s musical personality. The sonata draws on sources outside of itself. Beethoven’s Sonata Op.31, No.1 provided a structural model for its last movement. The Beethoven model - the last movement of

18 Gibbs, The Life of Schubert, 162.
Op.31, No.1 – is initially marked Allegretto. It later includes a coda in which tempi alternate as follows: Adagio, Tempo I, Adagio, Presto.

Schubert uses his own melody from an earlier piece, the slow movement in E major, Allegretto quasi Andantino, of the Sonata in A minor D 537, which was composed in 1817. It is not clear if Schubert intended to reuse the theme from the earlier sonata in A major D 959 as self-referencing, however this earlier sonata was not published until 1850.19

To understand and appreciate the last sonatas, the performer has to familiarize herself/himself with Schubert’s piano works. Through the piano sonata genre we can trace Schubert’s development as a composer. During the period between 1815 and 1828 he wrote twenty-one piano sonatas and completed eleven works. Just like Beethoven, Schubert’s works also fall into three periods: early, middle, and late.20 The late three piano sonatas represent the apotheosis of the composer’s musical thinking. These works written in the last months preceding his death are full of the depth of Schubert’s soul that autobiographically reflects the imprints of his death upon them. As such, in the words of pianist Steven Mayer, very considerable challenges exist on the part of performers willing to take them on.21

19 Gibbs, The Life of Schubert, 163.


21 Steven Mayer, Personal remarks, (March 5, 2016).
Schubert the Musical Poet

David Schroeder in his book “Our Schubert: His Enduring Legacy” cites Schubert as musical poet. He composed around six hundred and thirty songs set to poems by German poets such as F. Schiller, J.W. von Goethe, F. von Matthisson, L.H.C. Holty, W. Muller, M. von Collin, Mayrhofer, and Schober. Schubert’s lieder became an art form of its own, shaping a new path in the culture of the eighteenth century. His songs served as mediums of expressing human emotions and drama: fear, love and betrayal, loneliness and despair, sexuality and fantasy. The composer elevated the use of the poetry in songs into a musical art form that was unique in its own way, giving the songs new life through lyrical melodies and expressive piano accompaniment. Schubert’s masterful use of harmonies is reflected in the dramatic coloring of his music. Although Schubert did not invent the art song, he brought the essence to it that changed it forever.  

Schubert’s compositional style emerges from these songs and also transfers to his instrumental works. The principles established in the songs for voice and piano accompaniment are applied for the piano solo repertoire as well. Voice always was at the heart of Schubert’s music making; however, the piano was the driving force reflecting some of Schubert’s deepest musical ideas. Schubert’s expressive markings in songs are identical for piano accompaniment as well. The dynamic, phrasing and articulation

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22 David Schroeder, Our Schubert: His Enduring Legacy (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 25.
markings such as hairpins, wedges, and slurs directed pianists “to sing” the song’s accompaniments: therefore, pianist and singer should function as a duo.²³

The Performance of the Sonata

The performance of the A major Sonata requires the pianist to produce an endless range of colors, and the ability to play *legato* and *cantabile.*²⁴ Schubert wasn’t an overtly virtuoso player like Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, or Liszt. His piano playing was the opposite of virtuosic bravura; although still complex, it focused on lyrical, melodic, and expressive playing. In contrast to the Romantic tendency toward the bravura style, Schubert’s piano works reflected a special kind of lyricism, melancholy, and simplicity.

The pianist doesn’t require large and powerful hands to play Schubert’s music, and his sonorities are transparent and lucid, compared to Beethoven’s own full and rich sonorities. According to the concert pianist András Schiff, in his article, “Schubert’s Piano Sonatas: Thoughts About Interpretation And Performance,” the pianist must voice each chord, making careful judgments regarding to right balance.²⁵

It is necessary for the performer to analyze the stylistic features and nuances of Schubert’s piano solos. Schubert’s orchestral style of writing presents the pianist with technical problems such as voicing, density of texture, and chordal passages with difficult

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²⁵ Schiff, “Schubert’s Piano Sonatas: Thoughts About Interpretation And Performance,” 204.
skips. Certain pianistic passages make the pianist’s fingers feel awkward or out of reach, which makes it even harder for the pianist to voice the chords or skip three to four octaves while playing up to tempo. Schubert treated the piano as an orchestral instrument that he was able to play musically, according to his contemporaries, but not virtuosically. Schubert himself, as pianist, was more focused on musical expressiveness in terms of voicing and phrasing, versus flashy technical challenges. To create an orchestral effect in his piano compositions, the composer used the obvious powers of the keyboard, such as chords, arpeggios, scale passages, octaves, and triplets and traditional variation formulae, while thinking musically rather than in an idiomatic piano style. As Arthur Hutchings states, as a result of Schubert’s orchestral writing, the most significant of the solo sonatas is the least adequately served by the keyboard. The pianist, who lacks previous experience with Schubert’s earlier piano works, such Impromptus D 899, D 935 and Moments Musicaux D 780, March in E major D 606 can experience frustration and technical difficulties with his sonata in A major D 959. However, once these pianistic challenges are overcome, the final result will be musically and intellectually rewarding.

I am now going to explore the A major Sonata D 959 in detail to examine the compositional elements of each of the four movements and the pianistic challenges that I faced in understanding and performing the work. The proper interpretation of this sonata unfolds the composer’s idea, thus creating the most satisfying musical experience.

PART II: COMPOSITIONAL ELEMENTS OF A MAJOR SONATA D 959

Movement I. Allegro

The first movement opens with a motivic gesture as a downbeat-upbeat. The six-bar sentence sets a spacious atmosphere that creates the overtone resonance as a compositional element. The staccato in the left hand intensifies the sustained chord in the right hand. It also creates an overtone effect with the right hand silently depressing the keys. Schubert’s resonance produces a special acoustic effect when played with a damper pedal throughout.27 The opening theme will conclude the sonata as the unifying gesture in the fourth movement’s coda. See Example 1, 2.

Example 1. Schubert Piano Sonata in A, D 959, First movement, mm. 1-11

Maurice Brown noted in his book *Essays On Schubert*, the existing sketches of the sonata indicate that Schubert must have completed the Finale of the sonata before the first movement was finished. The sketches prove that Schubert applied the unifying device to the sonata structure known as cyclicism, when the thematic material from one movement appears at another place in the sonata. Beethoven also used cyclicism as an unifying device in a few of his sonatas. See Example 2.

Example 2. Fourth movement, mm. 377-384

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The opening six-bar section, downbeat-upbeat gesture, is followed by an arpeggiated triplet-eighth-note passage that serves as an extended upbeat to the main motive. This melodic and rhythmic idea is separated by two important articulated gestures. See Example 3.

Example 3. First movement, mm.7-10

Schubert clearly indicated that this two-note articulated gesture is to be separated either by staccato or by an eighth note. It is important that the performer observes these gestures because they represent two separated sound events. This articulated rhythmic motives occurs throughout the first movement.

András Schiff in the essay “Schubert’s Piano Sonatas: Thoughts About Interpretation And Performance” said, “the silence is the beginning and the end of music.” In common with Beethoven’s sonatas, Schubert’s sonatas are full of rests and longer pauses (fermatas). Pianists have to observe them, otherwise, the music loses its meaning and the composer’s intention can become lost. The first movement is a good example when Schubert uses expressive silences that serve as transition to the new sections of the sonata: Example 4a (mm.111-116), as well as in the finale Example 4b

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30 Schiff, “Schubert’s Piano Sonatas: Thoughts About Interpretation And Performance,” 204.
(mm. 329-337) to reintroduce the opening section. The final statement of the sonata creates a special atmosphere with final motivic gestures Example 4c (mm. 352-357). See Examples 4a, b, c.

Example 4a, mm.111-116. Pause as a transition

Example 4b, mm. 329-337. *Fermata* as transition

Example 4c, mm. 352-357. *Fermata* as silence
Movement II. *Andantino*

The second movement, *Andantino* in F sharp minor, is in ABA form and is representative of Schubert’s emotional profundity. Following Beethoven’s lead, slow movements of sonatas became a progressive arena for new musical ideas. In 1822 at the age of 25 Schubert was infected with syphilis that resulted in his premature death at the age of 31. The illness made the composer confront his own mortality and placed him into loneliness, isolation, and social alienation.\(^{31}\) After reading Schubert’s diary, I believe that the second movement is autobiographical, a musical story reflected in the B section.

Schubert wrote in his diary in 1823:

> I have always needed two worlds; it is probably that way for everyone anyway. For me there were the world in which I lived with my friends, and the other world into which I fled. With my illness my world of refuge has become exile, for I can no longer voluntarily flee. I am a refugee. In my soul there is a tear that can no longer be mended.\(^{32}\)

The second movement opens as a barcarole with a simple plaintive melody. Simplicity is one of Schubert’s greatest virtues, and interpretation of the second movement has to reflect this. As Schiff said, “one must be extremely expressive and colorful but the music must flow naturally and be left alone. Schubert’s world is never too sentimental or too sweet.”\(^{33}\) The pitch “A” that melodically closes the first movement

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also opens the second movement in F # minor key. In spite of the fact that F# minor is a relative key to A Major, as Charles Fisk noted in the book *Returning Cycles*, “the new theme sounds merely poignant but desolate, as if sung in exile from the wondrous and mysterious but ultimately innocent world of that movement.” The second movement appears to be inspired by a string quartet in its four-part writing. The whole passage is repeated with the melody an octave higher, that gives a sense of response, which makes events in the B section even more surprising. See Example 5.

Example 5, mm.1-21. The opening of the II movement

The second movement is unique because of its middle section. The short recitative-like passage leads to the B section, which is more cadenza-like. The recitative takes the listener to unexpected chromatic harmonies, descending scales punctuated with Sforzando chords and tremolos. A re-transition of thirty-eight measures of improvisatory

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frenzy shifts from C minor, through remote minor and major keys, to C# minor, and ultimately comes to a recitative-like passage. See example 6.

Example 6, mm.69-72. Recitative-like passage

The dramatic contrast of this slow movement is so intense that it is difficult to think of anything else similar in the early Romantic piano literature. David Montgomery says in his book *Franz Schubert’s Music In Performance: Compositional Ideals, Notational Intent, Historical Realities, Pedagogical Foundations*, that German Romanticism represented the idea of making something larger-than-life out of something merely life-size or “life limited.” This idea drove musicians, poets, and artists to find the entrance to a secret, mystical world that was invisible to the eye, undetectable by the ear, and incomprehensible to the brain. These transcendenttal aspirations were expressed through specific techniques.\(^{35}\) Schubert’s second movement wanders into regions that were unexplored by any of his contemporaries. He applied the following techniques to reflect the departure from the barcarole-like A section into the realm of frustration and

despair in the B section: chromaticism, tremolos, punctuated chords, thrills, recitative-like passages and scales. See Example 7.

Example 7, mm.105-113. Volcanic outburst

![Volcanic outburst](image)

When a violent section comes to its end, the listener hears unexpected, recitative-like, interrupted passages. According to Schroeder, “Schubert’s biography undoubtedly plays a role in the second movement’s wanders.”

See Example 8. The composer wrote to his friend Leopold Kupelwieser in April of 1824:

In a word, I feel that I am the most miserable, the most unhappy man in the world. Imagine the person who knows that he will never regain his health, imagine the person who knows that for him the happiness of love no longer exists, imagine the person for whom, because of that, enthusiasm of beauty declines more and more,

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who now only wants to withdraw into darkness. ‘My peace is gone, my heart is heavy, I’ll never find it again at all’ - that is valid for me.\textsuperscript{37}

Example 8, mm.124-146, Recitative-like passage

Once the recitative section with punctuated chords settles in, the original melody returns with a steady sixteenth notes accompaniment in the left hand. The right hand’s simple melody is altered with expressive ornamentations. The final bars conclude with five rolled chords in the bass clef, all played on a low F#. After the rolled chords reach the level of Pianissimo (\textit{ppp}), the movement ends on two open F# octaves. As Roger

\textsuperscript{37}Kaiser, \textit{Franz Schubert 1797-1828 A Literary Biography}, 166.
Neighbour in his essay “The Doppenlgänger Revealed?” says: “when we listen to Schubert at his best, we can plumb the soul’s absolute depths and come up again.” See Example 9.

Example 9, mm.195-202, Rolled chords

![Rolled chords]

The last seven measures are lacking a traditional harmonic resolution or even a hint of one. Schubert utilized rolled chords played in F# with both hands in the bass clef to close the second movement, leaving the listener with a sense of inconclusiveness and gloom. The dramatic character of the second movement is filled with sighs and the sense of devastation, which makes it even more striking compared to the first movement’s openness and freedom.

Movement III. Scherzo: Allegro vivace - Trio Un poco più lento

The third movement, Scherzo: Allegro vivace, is a dance with a Trio Un poco più lento. The tempi markings Allegro vivace (in Italian) means very fast, and tempi for Trio Un poco più lento means a little slower. Schubert was also a composer of dance music, easily improvising dances. His waltzes, minuets, and ländler exist as small separate pieces, but are often used as thematic material in the context of his larger works.39 The mood of the Scherzo is cheerful and has a lively spirit. It opens with arpeggiated and accented chords played by the right hand in a higher register, and echoes through two lower octaves. Schubert also uses dactyl rhythm (long-short-short) in the third movement, however, the tempo Allegro vivace brings a brilliant mood that deeply contrasts with the melancholy of the second movement. See Example 10.

Example 10, mm. 1-16. The opening of the Third movement

39 Schroeder, Our Schubert: His Enduring Legacy, 52.
The Trio has overtone effects that are achieved by the left hand crossing over the right hand. The Trio section uses a wide range of dynamic markings in Movement III that requires pianist a great effort in polishing the details, successfully projecting the inner voices, and articulating the “call-and-response” passages. See Example 11.

Example 11. Trio *Un poco più lento*, mm.77-113.
Movement IV, Rondo *Allegretto*

The fourth movement is Rondo *Allegretto*. As was discussed earlier, the schematic frame of fourth movement’s Rondo is based on the fourth movement of Beethoven’s sonata Op. 31, No.1. The frame of Beethoven’s sonata: Rondo *Allegretto*, concludes with coda with different tempi variations: *Adagio, Tempo I, Adagio, Presto*.

Schubert also applied Beethoven’s compositional elements such as pauses and silences as expressive gestures from the coda of Op.31, No.1. Schubert borrowed and adapted theme from the slow movement of an earlier A minor Sonata D 537. See Examples 12, 13.

Example 12, Sonata D537, II movement, mm. 1-16
Example 13, Sonata D 959, IV movement, mm. 1-10

Schubert used the rests and pauses with a certain intention: to create an ambiguity, as a transition, or to create a magical moment. The finale of the fourth movement recapitulates through a number of variations of the opening theme, which is played in the different keys separated with silences. This compositional element creates an unforgettable effect. See Example 14.

Example 14, mm. 333-348
Schubert’s piano compositions do not require virtuosic playing, rather, the playing should be balanced, melodic, lyrical, and expressive. The fourth movement has all of these qualities. Despite Schubert’s technical limitations, his playing moves his listeners by making the instrument sing his divine melodies, thus creating the most satisfying musical experience.

As Schubert’s friend Stadler remarks:

To see him play his own pianoforte compositions was a real pleasure. A beautiful touch, a quiet hand, clear, neat playing, full of insight and feeling. He still belonged to the old school of good pianoforte players, whose fingers had not yet begun to attack the keys like birds of prey.40

A proper stylistic interpretation also makes large musical demands on the pianist. Schubert spent his life writing for voice, and we, as pianists tend to forget this fact. Even if the music is purely instrumental, the melody has to have natural phrasing. Singing is the most natural form of music making. I found that applying it to my playing has helped me tremendously.

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40 Schroeder, Our Schubert: His Enduring Legacy, 51.
PART III: THE PIANISTIC CHALLENGES FOR THE PERFORMER OF THE SONATA IN A MAJOR D 959

The Pianistic challenges in learning the First Movement are as follows:

- Rhythm
- Downbeat-upbeat
- Arpeggiated eighth-note-triplets
- Wrist rotation and voicing
- Portato technique
- Articulation
- Pedal
- Dynamic markings
- Orchestral writing
- Double triplets

**Rhythm**

I found the driving rhythm of the first movement to be one of the most challenging obstacles in learning to play the A major Sonata. The time signature of the first movement *Allegro* is 4/4. The stress comes on the first beat followed by three weak beats. The pace has to be fluid and melodic while avoiding etude-like playing.
I learned that the rhythm or a steady pulse has to be experienced internally by the conscious act of physically counting aloud. By experimenting with the metronome and counting aloud, I came to the conclusion that having a physical pulse works better in terms of staying with the beat.

**Downbeat-upbeat**

The “downbeat-upbeat section” opens the first movement and serves as the main compositional element throughout the whole movement. The pianist must have a strong sense of pulse and direction to create a momentum that will drive the movement forward. The pedaling on the downbeat and upbeat has to be very limited and precise. This element has to be observed by the pianist because the upbeat is marked with *marcato* (played with emphasis) and the downbeat marked with *fz*. Any use of over pedaling in this section will distort and misinterpret the composer’s idea. See example 15a,b.

Example 15a, mm.1-2
These are some of the practice steps that I found essential for successful learning of this work:

- Counting aloud
- Metronome practice
- Differentiating between marcato and fz
- Practice with playing just the upbeat-downbeat
- Playing with flat fingers to avoid a harsh sound
- Playing with pedal and without pedal

**Arpeggiated Eighth-note-triplets**

To quote my studio professor, Steven Mayer: “The triplet passage has to sound like the pearls. The execution of arpegiated eighth-note-triplets has to be articulated and refined.”\(^{41}\) The span of the arpeggiated eighth-note-triplets is two to four octaves. The pianist has to experience and play with a steady pulse using a refined arpeggio technique. See Example 16.

\(^{41}\) Steven Mayer Personal remarks (April 6, 2016).
Example 16, mm.7-12

These are some of the practice steps I used to learn the arpeggiated passages:

- Play an exercise made of the arpeggiated passages
- Play the passage with the accent on each beat
- Play with alternated rhythmical patterns
- Alternate accents on the each beat, second beat, dotted rhythm

**Wrist Rotation and Voicing**

When first learning these passages with the right hand’s triplets, when played up to tempo, they were technically challenging. The triplets tended to sound heavy and rhythmically uneven. The passage (mm.45-48) with the accents on the third beat in both hands has the melody brought out in the bass clef’s lower octave.
After numerous experimentations, I found that the use of wrist rotation helped tremendously to play the triplets without tension. See Example 17.

Example 17, mm.43-48

![Sheet Music]

Portato Technique

Portato (portamento) touch is defined as “carried” non-legato that is not as detached as staccato. Staccato notes played by both hands in mm. 51-52 require the Portato technique. Finding the right balance of the use of the hand’s weight using a touch with flat fingers helps to achieve an uninterrupted melodic line. The key for this technique is that the pianist has to constantly listen and adjust the touch to produce the desired tone. In addition, the damper or soft pedal should be utilized with great sensitivity. See Example 18.

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Example 18, mm.113-116

Articulation

The transition to the development section in mm. 99-110 is especially challenging technically. The pianist must observe the myriad expressive markings *ff, p, ppp, cresc* combined with *fz* and accents. I made it a practice to listen and analyze the various recordings of the A major Sonata played by Alfred Brendel,\(^\text{43}\) Artur Schnabel,\(^\text{44}\) and Maurizio Pollini,\(^\text{45}\) while following along with the score. The performance is an active musical process and pianists should not perform on autopilot. See Example 19.


\(^{44}\) Arthur Schnabel “Schubert Sonata D959 in A major” (Youtube video), October 12, 2009, accessed May 1, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyZg1RTS51Y&list=PLCDF6DFE9361C6743.

Some of the practice steps that I applied are as follows:

- Challenging myself by setting higher goals
- Recording my own playing
- Critically listening to my recording while studying the score
- Practicing each hand separately
- Memorizing each hand’s part
- Making it a standard practice to memorize each hand separately
- Making exercises out of the right hand’s arpeggio passages
- Play the exercises as warm ups
- Play hands together or separately
Pedal

Schubert rarely wrote pedal markings into his scores for piano, or involving piano. However, none of these markings appear to have been made for musical reasons such as indication to the pianist to make a smooth *legato* line or to create an effect in the concert halls. Schubert’s pedaling, like Beethoven’s, is marked to achieve specific atmospheric or rhetorical effects. The majority of music scores have editorial markings that don’t belong to Schubert; therefore it should be a common rule for pianists to chose *Urtext* scores that provide an undistorted, reliable and authoritative musical text. Choosing *Urtext* editions helps musicians to avoid excessive editorial markings and promotes study of the score for the composer’s most accurate intentions.

Dynamic Markings

According to Montgomery, pianists can accomplish most of Schubert’s dynamics by using the basic music principle of the Viennese classic-romantic era: melodies and counter melodies are more important than accompaniment textures. See Example 20.

---


Another one of the most common dynamic markings is the simple accent [\textgreater]. The accent sign mostly serves Schubert’s grammatical purposes, and it doesn’t represent the traditional accent as we have come to understand it. It should be interpreted as only a slight emphasis. Dynamically, it can be interpreted as only one level above the sound level in which it is written. Most importantly, the accent indicates phrase shaping instead of actual accentuation. It also appears where the general dynamic is “soft” (\textit{pp} or \textit{ppp}) or “medium” (\textit{mp}), where it serves as a purely expressive device.\footnote{Gordon, \textit{The History of Keyboard Literature}, 139.} See Example 21.

Example 21, mm. 322-328
Orchestral Writing

Schubert’s orchestral writing in his piano works requires extra effort of the pianist to perform the piano works. His keyboard music seems to lie less comfortably under the hands than the works of his contemporaries. Chordal passages often include difficult skips of a two to four octaves span, and a complex texture where the chords are made of five pitches.\textsuperscript{50} See Example 22a, b.

Example 22a, mm.188-191, Orchestral writing

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example22a.png}
\end{center}

Example 22b, mm.40-41, Orchestral writing

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example22b.png}
\end{center}

Double Thirds

Passages in double thirds are one of the highlights of the development section of the A major Sonata D 959. Written in the keys of C minor and A minor, the section brings a melancholic mood to contrast with the previously introduced cheerful section in the keys of C major and B major. These passages are quite complex when played up to

\textsuperscript{50} Gordon, \textit{The History of Keyboard Literature}, 215.
tempo, and a proper choice of fingering is a must. While different editions offer various fingering options, the pianist should choose the fingering that best fits her/his technique. The tricky part when playing double thirds is to voice the top note. The proper choice of fingering plays an important role in determining the pianist’s ability to make the melody sing or not. See Example 23.

Example 23, mm.162-168, Double thirds

These are the practice steps useful for addressing double thirds technique:

- Practice double thirds as an exercise for building the strength of the 5\textsuperscript{th}
- Play scales using double thirds (hands separately and hands together)
The Pianistic Challenges of the Second Movement

- Balance and rhythm
- Scale passages
- Chromaticism
- Rolled chords

Balance and Rhythm

The A section of the second movement imitates a string quartet in four-part writing. Familiarity with the concept of string-quartet writing, where each of the four instruments function as a whole, makes it easier to interpret the A section of the second movement. Each note matters and each note represents an individual instrument, with all parts balanced. To achieve this balance, the pianist can use the following exercise: practice by playing the left hand’s part with both hands. This will allow the pianist to experience a long pulse with the left hand and two short pulses with the right hand. Once this exercise is mastered, it will be easier to play a vital pulse with the left hand, and this will help avoid mechanical playing.

The rhythm of the A section is based on the dactyl rhythm – a long-short-short, long, short-short - representing Schubert’s signature rhythm that occurs innumerable times throughout his compositions, especially in the songs. The left hand plays the long-short-short-short pulse and has to be equally balanced. See Example 24.

---

The practice steps for balance and rhythm are as follows:

• Practice playing the left hand’s part with both hands
• Feel the pulse: long-short-short
• Record my own playing
• Listen critically

Scale Passagework

Measures 105-113 in the B section previously shown (on the page 11) to demonstrate “volcanic outbursts,” also serve to demonstrate the use of scale passagework. The B section offers carries a number of technical challenges for the pianist. One of the pianistic challenges is in mm. 107-108 where the pianist plays thirty-second notes in the E minor scale with both hands. The difficulty of this passage is in the varied amount of pitches in each beat. They vary: m.107 has 6-6-7 and m.108 has 4-4-6 pitches. See Example 25.
Example 25, mm.105-113, Unexpected “Volcanic outburst” and Scale passagework

Practice steps applied as follows:

- Playing at a slow tempo
- Practice by counting aloud
- Starting the scale at a slightly slower tempo
- Avoiding unnecessary tension in both hands
Chromaticism

This section with a chromatic passage in the left hand that was hard to master because it requires a *crescendo* in the middle of the passage while the right hand plays accented octaves. See Example 26.

Example 26, mm. 114-115, Chromaticism

I applied the following practice steps:

- Practicing at a slow tempo by playing the left hand’s chromatic passages as an exercise
- Playing chromatic scales in the key of C in three to four octaves with *crescendo* within each octave
- Playing chromatic scale with alternated rhythmical patterns

Rolled Chords

The final seven measures of the second movement look quite simple, however the rolled chords were difficult to balance with *dimin.* and *ppp* dynamics. I had difficulties voicing the left hand’s chords. The rolled chords have to be carefully voiced even if they are marked *ppp*. The rolled chords have to rumble when played properly. See Example 27.
Example 27, mm.196-202, Rolled chords

I integrated the following practice steps:

- Practice hands separately by using flat fingers and an arm weight
- Practice the chords at a slow tempo at \textit{mf}
- Listen to the tone production and make every note sound
- Once both hands are mastered, practice hands together and listen\textsuperscript{52}

\textbf{The Pianistic Challenges of the Third Movement}

- Tempo \textit{Allegro vivace}
- Arpeggio technique
- Articulation and Voicing
- Pedal
- Hands placement
- Left hand crossing

\textsuperscript{52} Steven Mayer, Personal remarks (April, 16, 2016).
The Tempo of the Third Movement

*Allegro vivace*, or “very fast” (172-176 beats per measure) requires an orchestrated articulation and flawless technique. The third movement’s Scherzo is a fast and cheerful dance that combines a complex set of technical challenges performed up to tempo such as rolled chords, arpeggios, grace notes, accents, two-note slurs, and scale passages.

The practice steps I applied:

- Map the sections: divide the Scherzo into sections of 2,3,4,5 measures
- Identify and mark the keys and modulations
- Identify and mark the chords
- Practice the groups by themselves
- Increase the tempo gradually
- Play up to tempo
Rolled Arpeggios

The rolled arpeggios have the accent [>] markings that require an articulated technique. Example 28.

Example 28, mm.70-79, Rolled arpeggios

Practice steps I applied for rolled chords:

• Prepare fingers on the keys of the chord I am about to play
• Play with strong flat fingers
• Use an arm weight to roll the chords
• Use the wrist’s rotation
Articulation and Voicing

Articulation and voicing are the main compositional elements of the third movement. To fully reflect the cheerful character of Scherzo and Trio, the articulation of the rolled arpeggios, broken chords, chords, ornamentations, accents, and staccatos has to be polished and performed effortlessly. See Example 29a, b.

Example 29a, mm.62-68, Articulation

Example 29b, mm.84-91, Voicing

The practice steps I applied:

- Practice at a slow tempo
- Map the sections
- Practice starting from different sections
- Play with flat fingers
- Use the weight of the hand
• Listen to nuances and record myself
• Isolate preparation of the left hand crossings in Trio
• Practice with a metronome and count aloud

The Pianistic Challenges of the Fourth Movement are follows:

• Balance
• Rests and silences
• Triplets
• Orchestral writing
• Memory mapping
• Coda

Balance

According to John Glofcheskie’s article, “Schubert and the ‘Gentle Fortepiano,’” Schubert played on a fortепiano, particularly the Viennese fortepianos of the late eighteenth century. The instrument was small in size with a light responsive action. This stylistic element has to be considered by pianists when playing compositions from the late eighteenth century on contemporary pianos of today. This notion applies to the Rondo of the movement, which has a number of sections that require a certain touch and balance. One of the examples is where the right hand has the melody with staccato articulation, and the left hand has the accompaniment. My goal was to find the right

53 Schroeder, Our Schubert: His Enduring Legacy, 59.
balance rhythmically and melodically. The left hand’s accompaniment should be carefully balanced, letting the simple melody in the right hand sing. See Example 30.

Example 30, mm.46-51

Rests and Silences

The melodic theme in the right hand has an eight-note rest. The pianist has to observe this important detail and not pedal through the rests. When Schubert wrote the rests and pauses, he meant them. This notion shows why Schubert was a musical poet. These rests are just like the silences at the end of lines of poetry. The poet has to breathe between the stanzas or stop to create a meaningful pause. I had to work on articulation and practice without using the pedal in order to polish the phrasing. See Example 31.
Example 31, mm.328-343, Rests and silences

Triplets

The sections with right hand triplets are one of the biggest obstacles. It has to be played flawlessly against the main melody in the left hand. The melodic pattern in the right hand serves as a soft canvas for the left hand melody, being careful not to overpower it. The pianist has to balance both hands carefully by projecting a singing melody in the left hand and a gentle accompaniment in the right hand. See Example 32.
I found that Schubert’s orchestral writing for piano is hard to play with my current technique. My fingers would feel awkward when playing and voicing certain chords. The left hand would have to use the thumb for voicing top pitches. The right hand’s octave jumps from one register to another, leaping the span of three octaves, which is also problematic. See Example 33.
Practice steps I applied:

• Practice mapping the chords
• Place the hand over the chord and then play the chord
• “Placing” helps to avoid hitting the wrong notes

Memory Mapping

As most musicians who have ever played Schubert’s music know, he was a master of modulations. I was always surprised at the directions where his modulations took me. The long recapitulation section in the fourth movement is one of the examples. In order to learn the music well, the pianist has to learn the beginning and arriving points. I had to create a harmonic map of the fourth movement in order to navigate through it when playing by memory. See Example 34.

Practice steps I applied as follows:

• Practice by starting from different sections are marked in the score
• Quiz myself
• Identify and label the key of each section
• Study the score
Example 34, mm. 255-278, Harmonic memory mapping

54 Schubert, “Piano Sonata in A major D 959,” 29.
Coda

The coda of the last movement is in tempo *Presto*. The left hand plays a dotted rhythm against arpeggios in the right hand. This section is very challenging because of a sudden change in tempo and arpeggiated passages. See Example 35.

Example 35, mm.349-355

Practice steps I applied are as follows:

- Practice arpeggios at a slow tempo
- Practice arpeggios in different rhythmical patterns
- Practice mapping the next section after two octaves leap
SUMMARY

The last three piano sonatas that Schubert composed during a short period of four weeks in September of 1828 represent the peak of the composer’s achievement in the sonata genre. Schubert’s distinctive style lies in his poetic voice, which originated in his lieder, but projected equally well to the medium of piano and other instrumental works. The Sonata in A major, D 959 demonstrates Schubert’s musical poetry in all its four movements through his use of pianistic and compositional elements that portray emotional expression.

In addition to this, I have explored the pianistic challenges contained in the Sonata in A major, D 959 that represent Schubert’s emotional profundity, interpretative complexities, a variety of rhythms and moods, and volcanic outbursts. Research of pianistic challenges and my own experience playing the sonata have been applied to better understand and experience the depth of Schubert’s music on a fuller scale. I have found that the particular challenges of A Major Sonata in D 959 are the extended length of the sonata (40 minutes long) - which Schubert achieved by introducing new thematic material, creative accompaniments, rich orchestral textures, and expressive musical devices. To address these challenges, I implemented detailed technique exercises, analysis of the score, thoughtful practice and active listening. The journey of learning this sonata has taken the whole year, but it has been a deeply rewarding experience.
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