

In the air

Music to hear...

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Ever since I first discovered Schubert's music I have wondered why it moved me so deeply. Not to tears but to a sadness more desolate. Since hearing a recital of his posthumous piano sonatas at the end of last month, I have added the question: how much is in the music itself and how much depends on finding a kindred spirit to convey the meaning?

The recital took place in a tall rectangular hall with stone pillars and I sat enthralled as the young artist gave his account of two of these extraordinary pieces. The audience was totally still, a breathing listening presence: no one even coughed between movements. And at the end we rose to our feet, shaking our heads in wonderment rather than applauding. This was Schubert as you had never heard him before.

The pianist was a young Welshman called Llyr Williams and he is quite simply the most complete Schubertian I have ever heard. He does it all – the modulations that are so characteristic of the composer: he brings out every detail, the least shade of meaning, creating for each its fleeting universe of tone and tempo while always maintaining the ductus: the heart of the music keeps beating even when the pulse is faint to the point of failure.

He interprets Schubert's silences in a way that is original without seeming willful or eccentric: the music becomes a conversation in which there is a momentary lull as the participants pause to reflect. His pianissimo and rubato communicate not contrived emotionality but genuine depth of feeling.

His touch is controlled, sensitive, strong and subtle rather than brilliant.

He has studied Schubert with such a high degree of musical and emotional intelligence that elements of the music come to light – sonorities, melodic lines, harmonies, relationships – that appear in no other interpretation I have ever heard. And he conveys the melancholy, the rage, the despair that characterize Schubert's best work.

Llyr Williams is two years younger than Schubert was when he finished the three sonatas in September 1828, two months before his death. He was thirty-one years old and fully aware that he did not have much longer to live. Yet he was also aware of what he could do and, now that Beethoven was dead, the direction his music had to take.

The sonatas give us a lucid account of Schubert's complex state of mind during



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Llyr Williams, a complete Schubertian

that time of frenetic creative activity. And this young pianist, by bringing his sensitivity and imagination to bear on the texts, has managed to feel his way into the composer's intellectual and emotional universe.

He never loses sight of the robust and innovative musicality that characterizes the works, while at the same time conveying, with a self-evident simplicity, the things Schubert wanted to say about his inner being.

The things he couldn't communicate in words because he had no one to communicate them to...

Williams started with D.958, the dramatic C minor Sonata, - a thrilling version of which by Sviatoslav Richter was my *coup de foudre* for the three works, twenty-five years ago. The Adagio in particular was extraordinary, with the pianist maintaining a perfect balance between the contrasting themes, in which an apparent serenity tries to ward off a growing sense of unease, of repressed anguish. The two feelings interact and colour each other until finally the anguish breaks the bounds of self-control and runs riot. The movement ends in a stillness that is neither resignation nor reconciliation, but merely a tight-lipped continuation of the status quo...

The B-flat major sonata, D.960, starts with a reprise of this psychodrama. The peaceful melodic line of the opening theme is threatened then increasingly overwhelmed by the anguish, tinged this time with a barely-suppressed anger, the whole finally fusing into an impassioned interior dialogue – that refuge of the solitary being.

The first theme of the second movement is melancholy made music: you

stare wide-eyed into the void. Most pianists express the piercing beauty of the second theme, with its little sequence of rising notes, as the dogged act of taking a deep breath and carrying on.

Llyr Williams has seen something more heroic: the conscious defiance of a human being, pushed to his limits who refuses to be defeated. To whom continuing to play a game you cannot win is a matter of pride.

Williams' scherzo is frenetic, hysterical almost, rather than joyous, and the final movement represents the struggle for ascendance between the calm afforded by despair and the rage that comes with defiance; it ends, because the movement has to end, with the conclusion that there is no end. The struggle will continue until life ends – because life too has to end.

His vision includes, but goes beyond, that of Schubert as the lonely, alienated Wanderer, at home nowhere, intimate with no one, settled in his solitude and suffering.

His Schubert fights back, knowing that while he himself must lose, his music will survive and finally triumph. And the vision feels truthful: Schubert was ultimately confident, like Mahler, that his time would come and that his real dialogue would be with generations unborn.

Schubert is our contemporary; his experience is of our age and in Llyr Williams he has found the perfect partner to convey that experience to us.

And why does Schubert's music make us so sad? I still don't know.

Perhaps it is Franz's sheer courage, or the bleakness of his loneliness.

Perhaps it is the mirror he holds up to our age of alienation.