



Extemporize

Schubert *Impromptus & Fugues*
Shuann Chai *Fortepiano*



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Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Four Impromptus D 899, op. 90 (1827)

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|---|-------|
| 1. No. 1 in C minor: Allegro molto moderato | 10:45 |
| 2. No. 2 in E-flat major: Allegro | 5:13 |
| 3. No. 3 in G-flat major: Andante | 6:44 |
| 4. No. 4 in A-flat major: Allegretto | 8:55 |
| 5. Fugue in D minor D 24c (1812) | 3:33 |
| 6. Fugue in C major D 24a (1812) | 5:42 |

Four Impromptus D 935, op. 142 (1827)

- | | |
|---|-------|
| 7. No. 1 in F minor: Allegro moderato | 11:25 |
| 8. No. 2 in A-flat major: Allegretto | 7:43 |
| 9. No. 3 in B-flat major: Theme (Andante) with variations | 14:51 |
| 10. No. 4 in F minor: Allegro scherzando | 7:40 |

Total timing 82:37 min.

Allo. molto moder.

Op. I.

Impromptu.

No. 1. in C. moll.

Op. Schuberl.

Pianoforte

(4091.)

Extemporizing Schubert

We use the word 'impromptu' to describe something spontaneous or unplanned, often with an element of irreverence. As a musical term it excites the imagination, suggesting multiple possibilities. Schubert was almost surely introduced to this new genre by his friend and colleague Jan Václav Voříšek, the Czech pianist and composer who published his collection of *Six Impromptus* (opus 7) in 1822 to great commercial success. In stark contrast, both sets of Schubert's *Impromptus* (opus 90 and opus 142) were relegated to fringe status almost immediately after they were composed in the second half of 1827; only the first two pieces of opus 90 were ever published during Schubert's lifetime. Opus 142 was roundly rejected for being too difficult and was only published in 1839, eleven years after the composer's death.

Times have changed, and the Impromptus are now firmly ensconced as cornerstones of the repertoire. However, they are not without their quirks and curiosities, and I used this recording as an opportunity to delve deeper into them. In doing so I was also introduced to the two delightful fugues that accompany the impromptus on this CD, and learned just enough about their context in Schubert's short life to realize how little we know about this elusive genius. During the recording sessions I sat down for an interview with musicologist Marloes Biermans; what follows is a redaction of our impromptu conversation (there, I said it).

MB: You once mentioned that Schubert's Impromptus drew you in because they were full of contradictions. Why is that?

SC: Right away, I think the title plays with your expectations. An 'impromptu' suggests a piece that's light in character, not too dramatic, not very long - the opposite of, say, a sonata in four movements. While these Impromptus are musically very approachable, they are also powerful, often quite dark, deep, and pianistically challenging. Also, the suggested element of improvisation is interwoven with a feeling of narrative. There are certainly

moments of capriciousness or surprising modulations throughout, but the pieces themselves are very formally organized - much more prescribed than what one would expect, say, in a 'fantasy'. What intrigues me is this tension between spontaneity and structure, a paradox which Schubert exploits and expands to great dramatic effect.

MB: How are Schubert's two sets of Impromptus related? It's interesting that he composed them so soon after each other.

SC: Yes, the two sets are only separated by a few weeks, but I find them very different from each other, stylistically. I've wondered if this is partly because he started composing opus 90 while still immersed in his work on *Die Winterreise* (D 911). The atmosphere of opus 90 no. 1 in particular seems very much a part of that world. It's even in the same key (C minor) as the first song, *Gute Nacht*: a feeling of winter, of the cold, of resistance while trying to move forward. When he composed the opus 142, on the other hand, its companions were the *Piano Trio in E-flat* (D 929) and the *Fantasia in C* (D 934) for violin and piano. These are large-scale instrumental works of brilliant virtuosity with which Schubert undoubtedly wished to claim the spotlight, and I think some of that shine found its way into the opus 142 as well.

MB: And how did you choose the two Fugues, D 24a and D 24c, to be included in this recording?

SC: I have to thank Ernst (Coutinho, the recording producer) for bringing Schubert's early fugues to my attention. They were written as exercises when Schubert was about 15 years old, and he probably never meant for them to see the light of day. Each fugue begins rather academically, with a strict introduction of the theme in one voice and then another, but before you know it, it's spinning towards its most extreme incarnation! It takes some mind-bending modulations to wrangle these fugues into a traditional cadential sequence at the end. Perhaps it's the fearlessness of youth, but you can see that Schubert was already pushing boundaries and flouting the rules. The first time I played through these pieces at the piano, I couldn't stop smiling.

MB: From what you've described, it seems like you intentionally combined two very different forms of music for this recording.

SC: Indeed. Fugues and Impromptus are constructed in almost diametrically opposite ways, but artistically speaking, they are two sides of the same coin. I feel that Schubert's fugues are searching for freedom within their strict contrapuntal framework, and that his Impromptus are works of imagination and great expression that are grounded by their formal architecture.

MB: The fugues and Impromptus also stand at opposite ends of Schubert's compositional career.

SC: They do. But more than that, what really resonated with me was finding a parallel between these early fugues and the last two weeks of Schubert's life. His final decline seems to have been triggered by a bout of food poisoning around the first week of November, 1828. Despite feeling unwell, he visited the well-regarded organist and theorist Simon Sechter for a lesson in counterpoint. Sechter later recalled that Schubert felt he needed tutoring to overcome a weakness in his compositional skills, and the lesson had been intended to be the first of many. Consequently, the last musical fragments that Schubert wrote were the counterpoint exercises he'd been assigned as homework! Conscientious even as his health deteriorated, Schubert sent the fragments to Sechter for correction. He died just a few days later, on the 19th of November, shocking his friends and family. The way he was striving for self-improvement until his strength ran out strongly suggests that Schubert had no idea that his illness would be mortal. Placing the early fugues into this context, I found it meaningful to think of Schubert's first steps in counterpoint as being mirrored in his last efforts- a symbolic frame for his creative life.

MB: You've chosen the word 'Extemporize' as a title for this CD. Can you explain its significance?

SC: The dictionary defines 'extemporize' as "to speak or perform without prior planning; to act in an *impromptu* manner" (italics mine), suggesting, again, improvisation and spontaneous expression. But it was a good fit for this recording because 'extemporize' comes from the Latin 'ex tempore', which means 'out of time'. Taken literally, that's what happened to Schubert: he ran out of time.

MB: Does this effect how you think of the Impromptus within the context of Schubert's late works?

SC: Both sets were composed in 1827, so they are indeed often classified as 'late Schubert'. For me, that phrase conjures up images of an august composer in their twilight years as they reflect on a lifetime of achievement. But there's no getting around the fact that he was just a young man - when he wrote this music he was only 30!

MB: But there seems to be a romantic myth that describes Schubert as a sickly Bohemian musician who was obsessed with dying young...

SC: For sure - he was so often presented this way. Even when I was a student it was rare to have any coaching on Schubert (or Mozart!) that didn't mention it. It may have started because the first biography of Schubert's life wasn't written until nearly 40 years after he died, and people didn't have much to go on beyond anecdotes and hearsay. But the astounding pace that Schubert set for himself in his last two years reflects a vigor that he's not usually given credit for. Just a partial list of what flowed from his pen in those last months - the *String Quintet* (D 956), three monumental piano sonatas (D 958, D 959, and D 960); *Die Winterreise*, the *Mass in E-flat* (D 950), the two *Piano Trios* (D 898, D 929)... the list goes on and on. He was busy planning concerts of his own music, corresponding with publishers in France and Germany, making plans for large-scale symphonic works, and he even went to hear Paganini perform (twice!). In short, he wasn't resigning himself to an early death; he was building himself up - crafting a tidal wave of masterpieces while opening the door to his own artistic and professional ambitions. It is cruelly tantalizing to think about what could have been if Schubert had just lived another year...



About the fortepiano

I have been fortunate to have this wonderful instrument on loan from the National Musical Instruments Foundation (NMF) of the Netherlands since 2011. Built by Michael Rosenberger (1766-1832) in Vienna around 1820, it was restored by Edwin Beunk for the NMF. This piano has a six-octave compass (FF-f₄) and six pedals: from left to right; una corda, bassoon pedal, sustaining pedal, moderator, half-moderator, and the 'Janissary' pedal - a novel contraption often found on Viennese pianos, rigged with a drum and bells to imitate a Turkish military band. This recording uses four of the six pedals, as the slightly nasal tone of the bassoon pedal and the party atmosphere of the drum and bells felt, unfortunately, out of place in these works.

There is an obvious beauty and atmosphere that comes with using a piano built during Schubert's lifetime in the city where he lived. Moreover, the interpretation of musical notation takes on a very different context when presented on an instrument with parallel strings and an all-wood frame, as opposed to the crossed strings and metal-wood combination frame of modern pianos. Listeners will notice that the Rosenberger offers a very different sound world from a modern grand - more transparency in the tone and a shorter resonance, as well as distinct colors and characters between every register.

Every aspect of piano sound, whether historical or modern, is greatly affected by the use of the pedals. Knowing that Schubert had so many pedals at his disposal brings up an interesting question: why are there so few pedal markings in Schubert's works? In all of the Impromptus, there is but one indication: the word *pedale*, written among the lines of the left-hand stave, at the opening of opus 90 no. 3. The fact that his markings are consistently sparse across his pianistic output leads to the same question regarding the scarcity of his indications for expressive timing, such as *ritardando* or *accelerando* - local instances of slowing or speeding of the tempo.

The absence of explicit markings in pedal and tempo is clearly not reflective of the standard practices in Schubert's time. There are several sources that give us a picture of musical aesthetics in the early Romantic period, but the one closest to Schubert can be found in the comprehensive teaching method of pianist and composer Carl Czerny (1785-1853), one of Beethoven's star pupils and the most famous of Vienna's pedagogues during his lifetime. Czerny's *Pianoforte-Schule*, op. 500 (1839) contains three volumes of guidelines for piano-playing that encompass technique as well as interpretation. His notes on pedaling, for example, cover the expected default to "change with the harmony", but also encourages pianists to experiment with open pedal in passages of "softness and delicacy... to produce the soft undulating effect of very distant music." In a similar vein, Czerny's instruction for expressive timing might also raise our modern eyebrows: *crescendo*, *diminuendo*, *espressivo*, and at least ten other commonly used indications are seen as an opportunity to "retard the time most advantageously."

With an informative and authoritative volume such as Czerny's, it is for all pianists to consider the implications for our own playing, irrespective of the type or vintage of the piano in front of us. Czerny himself says no less: "The performer must take into account [their] own feelings, so as faithfully to render the character of the piece." Sounds like an invitation to jump in- with both hands, both feet, and however many pedals you might need for the journey.







About Shuann

Shuann Chai is a soloist and chamber musician who performs on a wide range of early to modern pianos, bringing the emotional content of music from the past to listeners in the present. Recognized by critics as “a graceful virtuoso”, she has been praised for performances that are “sensitive and communicative, ...full of warmth and emotion.” Recent projects include performances of the complete Beethoven *Sonatas for Violin and Piano* with Shunsk Sato; giving masterclasses at CodArts Rotterdam and the Conservatory of Maastricht; and concerts in Japan, Taiwan, and several festivals in Europe.


Engaging and creative, she is constantly searching for ways to connect music with other forms of art, collaborating with dancers, puppets, images, or texts. She was featured in OperazDay’s multimedia recording of *Die Winterreise* with baritone Martijn Cornet as well as OperazDay/National Theater’s production of *Amadeus*, which was performed in more than 70 theaters across the Netherlands. Teaching and community outreach are an important part of Shuann’s musical advocacy; on both sides of the Atlantic she has performed hundreds of concerts in senior living centers, music schools, and libraries.

Shuann earned degrees in music as well as biology from Oberlin College and completed her graduate studies at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. She also had the privilege of working with pianists such as Jack Radunsky, himself a former student of the pianist/composer Percy Grainger; Norma Fisher, Claus-Christian Schuster, Malcolm Bilson, and Anton Kuerti.

Shuann is grateful for her three inspiring musical companions: a Steinway D signed by jazz legends Herbie Hancock and Ahmad Jamal; an Érard piano (1861), and the Rosenberger fortepiano (1820) featured in this recording, generously provided on loan by the National Musical Instruments Foundation of the Netherlands (NMF).

Alongside her musical life Shuann is a jigsaw puzzle enthusiast, and also considers herself a reasonably capable cook of many cuisines. She lives in The Hague, Netherlands, with her husband and their lovely daughter.





The Recording Sessions





MICHAEL

ROSINI

Bürger in Wien



Extemporize

Shuann Chai Fortepiano (Michael Rosenberger, Vienna, ca. 1820)
on loan from the collection of the Nationaal Muziekinstrumenten Fonds

Piano tuning and maintenance: **Sara Lewensztain** and **Bart Houtgraaf**

Recording: **Mediatrack**
Producer/recording engineer: **Ernst Coutinho**

Recording location: **Westvest90, Schiedam**
Recording dates: **28, 29, 30 March 2023**

Microphones: **Brüel & Kjaer 4003**, **Neumann** modified by **Rens Heijnis**
Microphone cables, interlinks: **Acoustic Revive**

Text: **Shuann Chai**, **Marloes Biermans**
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