

TONAL LOGIC IN FRANZ SCHUBERT'S *IMPROMPTUS* (D 899)

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SUMMARY. The present study approach the genre of *Impromptu*, making a brief introduction into the history of the genre. It describes the specific nature of this type of piano pieces, and made a tonal, analytical incursion in the *Impromptus* (D899) by Franz Schubert. By using some summary tables this study provides an overview of the pieces, regarding the tonal, tempo, metric, and extension. Separately, the table of the shapes provides a synthetic image of the architecture of the pieces. Then it follows a brief description of each piece.

Keywords: Franz Schubert, *Impromptu*, D 899, form, tonality.

About the *Impromptu* in general

The etymology of the word shows a Latin origin: „*promptus = arranged, ready, willing*” „*in promptu esse = to be on standby*”.²

The *Impromptu* is an informal, improvisation-like, short instrumental musical piece creating the impression of having been made up at the spur of the moment, as the French name of the genre also refers to: *impromptu* = improvised.

Jan Václav Hugo Voříšek (1791-1825) Czech composer, pianist and organ player published in 1822 as op. 7 a volume of musical pieces for piano that contained *impromptus*. Jan Václav Hugo Voříšek was one of Schubert's close friends; therefore it is presumable that he influenced Schubert in this respect.

In 1827, two years before his death, Franz Schubert makes an original improvement of the genre with his 8 *Impromptus* for piano (D 899 and D 935)³, creating a new, pianistic, improvisation-like style⁴.

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² Denizeau, Gérard, *A zenei műfajok képes enciklopédiája. Újszerű zenei történet (An Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Musical Genres. A Modern History of Music)*, Translated by Péter Aradi and Béla Reviczky, Rózsavölgyi kiadó, Budapest, 2009, pp. 214-215.

³ *Impromptu*, in: *Dicționar de termeni muzicali (Dictionary of Musical Terms)*, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1984, p. 236.

According to Marianne Pándi ⁵, the first 4 piano pieces composed during the autumn and winter of 1827 (of which the 3rd and the 4th were published only in 1855), were given such a title by publisher Haslinger. Her opinion is that the businessman chose the French title to make an impression among the young ladies studying the piano, e.g. for economic purposes. She considers the title is misleading, since the musical pieces are governed by a strict structural principle. A few weeks after the first 4 piano pieces, as a continuation Schubert composed the second series of 4 piano pieces (D935) and he kept the term *Impromptu* in their title.

The genre of the *Impromptu* had a short era at the beginning of the 19th century. Having a sentimental, lyric, sensitive character it expresses romantic feeling and a sense of graceful elegance, but at the same time it took as much virtuosity to play it well as playing well the harp.⁶ Besides Franz Schubert other composers who have written memorable *Impromptus* are: Frédéric Chopin (1810 – 1849), he composed 4 *Impromptus* for piano, op. 29, 36, 51, 66 in the third creative period of his life and Gabriel Fauré (1845 – 1924) 6 *Impromptus* for piano, op. 25, 31, 34, 91, 102, 86b, which were composed in the period 1881 – 1913 and were originally composed for harp. Among the more famous composers Robert Schumann (1810 – 1856) needs to be mentioned. He also composed in this genre: *Impromptus über ein Thema von Clara Wieck* for piano, op. 5 (1832), and also Franz Liszt (1811-1886) who composed the *Impromptu brillant* in 1824.⁷

Schubert wrote his *Impromptus* in 1827 after composing more than two dozens of piano sonatas between 1815 - 1819 and 1823 - 1826.⁸ The specialized literature analyzing his music for the piano considers almost without exception only his piano sonatas. Therefore by analyzing the tonality and harmony of the *Impromptus* one attempts to unveil the style of the composer at his maturity. In his lifetime of merely 31 years Schubert managed to compose an impressive number of musical pieces. Composers with such a short life span are impressively good at concentrating time and energy. In fact they compress in time a « normal» lifetime (70-80-90 years). This time game is an interesting phenomenon. Let me quote from one of Ede Terényi's micro essays⁹: *How long did it take...? We often ask.*

⁴ Fábrián, László, *Franz Schubert életének krónikája. Napról napra... (A Chronicle of Franz Schubert's Life. Day by Day...)*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1975, p. 185.

⁵ Pándi, Marianne, *Hangversenykalauz, IV. Zongoraművek (Concert Guide, IV. Piano Music)*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1980, pp.185-187.

⁶ Idem.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ *Schubert kalauz (A Guide to Schubert)*, Edited by Ágnes Gádor, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1981.

⁹ Terényi, Ede, *Időjáték – játék az idővel (Timegame - Playing with Time)*, in: Terényi, Ede, *Paramuzikológia. Esszék (Paramusicology – Essays)*, Gloria Nyomda, Kolozsvár, 2001, p. 44.

Sometimes we get a definite answer, but most of the time it is just a blur. From case to case we react differently to the passing of time. Sometimes we observe the time only if our attention is drawn upon it by someone's questions. It is hardly probable that we give each passing moment our full attention while listening to a beautiful musical piece. Yet when there is no piece of information to process even seconds seem to crawl.

Each event, each person has his own measurement of time ... and his own TIMEGAME.

For we do play with TIME... MUSIC itself is A TIMEGAME."

Schubert, similar to Mozart, had no time to waste as far as composing was concerned. And he also had the same ease in composing music that Mozart had, he had the same *flow* coming to him from somewhere in space. Let me quote again Ede Terényi, this time from his essay entitled *A zöld alagút (The Green Tunnel)*¹⁰:

"Every composer knows, feels while creating when this green tunnel opens and they also sense the moment when lights turn red for them, hopefully just temporarily.

It is wonderful to be in the green tunnel while creating. Everything seems to be building itself. It definitely seems as if we were "told" from above what we are supposed to do. What word we need there, what should be the note following those that are already written down, what is the next colour our picture needs in order for that craved something extra to be created that makes our work a work of art.

*Among the composers there are many who have spent their entire life going through that wonderful green tunnel. Vivaldi, Mozart it is but natural to be mentioned here. Even Schubert, despite that **adventure with the Symphony in H minor.**"*

The style of Schubert's *Impromptus* perfectly reflects the ease with which the composer created music, the natural beauty of his tunes and their clear melodic line and simplicity.

Two years before his death (1827), when he composed the *Impromptus* he felt he did not have much to live. He had great swings in his mood, was even gloomier than usually and sometimes he was even depressed, his specific movements have lost their agility. He tried to hide this from his friends, but sometimes he acted quite unfriendly, something that has never been the case before. However his creative mood did not slacken. He started his extensive cycle *Winterreise (Winter Journey)* at the beginning of 1827 and he finished the first part in a very short time (the rest of the songs

¹⁰ Terényi, Ede, *A zöld alagút (The Green Tunnel)*, in: Terényi, Ede, *Paramuzikológia. Esszék (Paramusicology – Essays)*, Gloria Nyomda, Kolozsvár, 2001, p. 27.

of the cycle he composed during the autumn of the same year). At the beginning of this year Johann Nepomuk Hummel, Austrian pianist, composer, teacher and conductor visited Vienna and Schubert met him in Mme Laszny's parlour. He made a great impression on Schubert. This may have been partially the impulse needed for the creation of the *Impromptu*.

The synthetic table for the first 4 *Impromptu* (D 899):

1. Table

Impromptu	Basic tone	Tempo	Metre	Length counted in bars	Length expressed in time
No. 1	C minor	<i>Allegro molto moderato</i>	4/4	204	9'38"
No. 2	E flat major	<i>Allegro</i>	3/4	283	4'48"
No. 3	G flat major	<i>Andante</i>	2/2 + 2/2 = 4/2	86	5'40"
No. 4	A flat major	<i>Allegretto</i>	3/4	275	8'19"

In parallel, the synthetic table for the next 4 *Impromptu* (D935):

2. Table



Impromptu	Basic tone	Tempo	Metre	Length counted in bars	Length expressed in time
No. 1	<i>F minor</i>	<i>Allegro moderato</i>	4/4	249	11'03"
No. 2	<i>A flat major</i>	<i>Allegretto</i>	3/4	148	8'03"
No. 3	<i>B major</i>	<i>Andante</i>	2/2	128 bars	11'59"
		<i>(Coda = Più lento)</i>			
No. 4	<i>F minor</i>	<i>Allegro scherzando</i>	3/8	525	6'41"
		<i>(Coda = Più presto)</i>			

Analyzing the two tables, similarities can be noted between the two *Intermezzo* cycles. For example the 3rd piece of both cycles is slow, the tempo is *Andante*. Even metrically the two *Intermezzo* cycles are mostly the same: I/1-4 = 4/4, 3/4, 2/2+2/2, 3/4 (the third piece is composed in double bars). II/1-4 = 4/4, 3/4, 2/2, 3/8 (the fourth piece is the only one in the two cycles that is based on eight notes, the composer emphasizing also in this manner the *scherzando* in the tempo).

The placement of the tonalities in the circle of fifths shows Schubert's fondness of the low tonalities with **b** as their accidental and his oscillation between *B flat major* and *G flat major*.

3. Table

Impromptus D 899					Impromptus D 935			
	Nr. 1	Nr. 2	Nr. 3	Nr. 4	Nr. 1	Nr. 2	Nr. 3	Nr. 4
C sharp major	A sharp minor							
F sharp major	D sharp minor							
B major	G sharp minor							
E major	C sharp minor							
A major	F sharp minor							
D major	B minor							
G major	E minor							
C major	A minor							
F major	D minor							
B flat major	G minor							
E flat major	C minor							
A flat major	F minor							
D flat major	B flat minor							
G flat major	E flat minor							
C flat major	A flat minor							

NOTE:
 Major tones = 
 Minor tones = 

The paper hereby will discuss only the first 4 *Impromptus* (D899).

Table of forms:

4. Table

<i>Impromptus</i> D899	Structure										
No. 1	A	B	C	Av1	D	Bv1	Cv1	Av2	Coda		
	1-40.	41-73.	74-87.	88-110.	111-124.	125-151.	152-164.	165-193.	194-204.		
	Bar 40	33	14	23	14	27	13	29	11		
No. 2	A	transition	Av1	B	transition	A	transition	Av1	Coda (= Bv1)		
	1-47.	48-51.	52-82.	83-164.	165-168.	169-215.	216-219.	220-250.	251-283.		
	Bar 47	4	31	82	4	47	4	31	33		
No. 3	A	Av1									
	1-54.	55-86.									
	Bar 54	32									
No. 4	A	transition	B (Trio)	transition	A						
	1-102.	103-106.	107-164.	165-170.	171-275.						
	Bar 102	4	57	6	105						

The first *Impromptu* of D899 has a strophic, bridge-like structure with variations and a Coda as closure. Its structure alternates longer and shorter passages. It has a melodic feature and it contains a basic rhythmical formula that appears as a “walking” motif throughout the entire musical piece, except for structural parts **C** and **D** which create a dynamic contrast (C = *pp* having *crescendo* to *forte* at the end, D = *ff* having *decrescendo* until *pp* at the end).



The basic tone is *C minor*, a typical pathetic tone. According to Hungarian musicologist Ernő Lendvai¹¹: „*C minor* is the tone of gloomy passion, exasperation, emotional revolt, the criticism of the contemporary world order” „blindfold passion, an ecstatic state of mind, fanatic vehemence, challenge, a blaze of anger” „rebellious defiance, angry feelings, obsessive and heated, untamed and fanatically determined passion” „constructive and destructive instinct” „a challenge of those in power” „denial”.

These are all states of mind that are characteristic of the composer in his last years. Already in early spring, after the funerals of Beethoven when he went to a restaurant with his friends and ordered some wine so that they would drink it for the eternal memory of Beethoven, at the refill Schubert raised his glass and said: “*And now let us drink to the one from among the three of us who will be the first to follow Beethoven.*”¹² He must have sensed even at that time that the end of his life was near.

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The second *Impromptu* of D899 combines two BAR-structures ornamenting it with four-bar transitions. In structural parts **A** and **Av1**, in the treble it unfolds as a liana, alternating between *piano* and *fortissimo*, while the lower voice provides only the harmonic support.

¹¹ Lendvai, Ernő, *Verdi és a 20. Század. A Falstaff hangzás-dramaturgiája (Verdi and the 20th Century. The Sound Dramaturgy of Falstaff)*, Akkord Zenei kiadó, Budapest, 1998, p. 406, 408, 410, 412, 413, 418.

¹² Fábrián, László, *Franz Schubert életének krónikája. Napról napra... (A Chronicle of Franz Schubert's Life. Day by Day...)*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1975, p. 138.

E.g. 2



The basic tone is *E flat major*. Ernő Lendvai describes *E flat major* as follows¹³: “altruistic understanding (the reflection not of the active, but of the contemplating life), spiritual-human dignity, spiritual wisdom, friendship.” “Spiritual harmony, goodwill and kindness, empathy (regard for other people’s problems), serving people” “lofty thoughts: love and compassion that believes in man, friendly devotion” “dignity..., human kindness” “a world revolving around man” “humane power”.

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The third *Impromptu* has a structure made up of two stanzas with a formula of **A** and **Av1**. The first structural part ends on a pedal-point in the 54th bar and the composer returns to the initial musical material in an identical form in the first 6 bars and then he variates it. The second structural part is 22 bar shorter than the first and it also ends on a pedal-point in the last bar.

E.g. 3



¹³ Lendvai, Ernő, *op.cit.*, idem.

The basic tone of *G flat major* is meant to represent the gloomy, mystical depth, the spiritual existence. Its lyrical tune unfolds in the treble sustained by low, chord-like basses. The sequences of the broken triad and tetrad of the middle voice evoke the sound of a harp in the listener.

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The fourth *Impromptu* of the first series presents a symmetrical structure **A B A** with structural parts linked by short transitions. The **B** middle structural part is supposed to form a **Trio**. In the same way that in the main structure **B** creates a kind of lyrical intermezzo, also the **A** structural parts (which are completely identical) contain each a lyrical momentum of 8 bars (with a delay of 5 bars) in the vicinity of the positive golden section (see bars 72-79):

E.g. 4

Allegretto
Bars 70-81

Structural part **B** is entirely different from structural parts **A**, having a stubborn *ostinato* chord - like accompaniment which creates a counterpoint to the tune unfolding in the soprano.

Allegretto
Bars 105-116.

The basic tone of the musical piece is *A flat major*, but it starts in *A flat minor* and it turns to *A flat major* only from bar 31. According to Ernő Lendvai the relation of the minor and major tones with identical names can be characterized as follows:

"A flat minor: fire up - by putting oneself on fire; flare-up: disturbance of the public order.

*A flat major: redemption - by self-denial; absolution."*¹⁴

Schubert was very clear on the ethos of each key and obviously he used his tones very pertinently and expressively leaving nothing to chance.

Translated from Hungarian by Zsuzsa Danel

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¹⁴ Lendvai, Ernő, *op.cit.*, idem.

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