Music of a lesser genre? Schubert's development and transformation of the piano duet medium

Barbara Strahan

Prelude

Schubert's gift for transforming smaller genres into greater ones is not unique to his Lieder: the formal, stylistic and aesthetic innovations in Schubert's piano duets reveal an authentic development of this genre. Schubert's four-hand piano repertoire enjoyed the same performance setting as his songs, but in reception history have not enjoyed the same level of popularity. This chapter therefore seeks to examine why the duets have been misrepresented in scholarship and criticism, and also how Schubert's contribution differed radically to that of his predecessors. Firstly, the significance of the social milieu of the early nineteenth century in cultivating the duets shall be considered as also the many negative associations accompanying this musical setting. Key issues of reception history, which have contributed to the neglect of Schubert's piano duets within Schubert scholarship, will also be addressed. Following an exploration as to why these works have been neglected within scholarship, the history of the duet genre will be considered in order to place Schubert's contribution in a broader context. Finally, Schubert's own contribution will be assessed, alongside how traditional musicological approaches to the duets have begun to be overturned.

Cultural contexts: the Viennese salon

In her discussion on Viennese salon music during the nineteenth century, Alice Hanson acknowledges how musical activity during this era moved away from the support of aristocratic patrons to the salons of the affluent middle classes.¹ These prosperous middle class families played an intrinsic role in this salon culture as they purchased pianos which in turn supported both instrument makers and music

It was in this private sphere that musical performances co-existed alongside literary readings, entertainment and receptions, where the Viennese salon was the prime venue for a larger cultural phenomenon of which music was only one part. However, was the salon merely a venue for light entertainment or did this setting conceal a more profound function? Firstly, in terms of the musical output, it is important to emphasize that different musical levels existed in the bourgeois salon culture. A dichotomy of style also existed within Schubert’s own four-hand piano works revealing how he engaged with both the entertaining and serious within this one context. In fact, Christopher Gibbs acknowledges that it can be difficult to classify Schubert both musically and functionally even within a single genre. In line with this, David Gramit recognizes how during a Schubertiade both Schubert’s close friends and society at large ‘shared culture through conversation and dancing, as well as through a serious interest in music.’ This ‘serious interest in music’ included Schubert’s Lieder and many of his piano duets, which were both frequently practiced musical genres at such musical gatherings.

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3 Hanson, *Musical Life*, p. 119.


6 A pivotal article in this regard is Otto Biba’s ‘Schubert’s Position in Viennese Musical Life’, *19th Century Music*, 3/2 (1979), 106–13, which reveals Schubert’s wealth of activity as a composer, being widely published and performed during his lifetime. An insightful article regarding Schubert’s reception in Victorian England argues how perceptions are influenced by stereotypes based on society’s ideals of what are considered masculine and feminine activities. David Gramit, ‘Constructing a Victorian Schubert: Music, Biography, and Cultural

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of society as well as musicians at a typical Schubertiade evening are supported by the table below.

**Table 1. Schubertiade guests at the home of Josef Spaun**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Government Officials</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eduard Bauernfeld</td>
<td>Official in the Lottery Administration; writer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ignaz Castelli</td>
<td>Librarian &amp; secretary to: the Lower Austrian County Council; writer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anton Dobhlhoff</td>
<td>Austrian minister</td>
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<tr>
<td>Karl Enderes</td>
<td>Conveyancer for Ministry of Finance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Josef Gahy</td>
<td>Secretary of Court Chamber; pianist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Franz Grillparzer</td>
<td>Director of Court Chamber archives; writer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Josef Gross</td>
<td>Secretary to Court Exchequer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Josef Kenner</td>
<td>Magistracy official in Linz; poet</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anton Ottenwalt</td>
<td>Assistant to Chamber procurator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Johann Mayerhofer</td>
<td>Austrian censor; poet</td>
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<tr>
<td>Martin Perfetta</td>
<td>Official in Court War Accountancy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Karl Schönstein</td>
<td>Counsellor in Ministry of Finance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michael Rueskäfer</td>
<td>Examiner of excise affairs (custom official)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Josef Spaun</td>
<td>Official in Lottery Administration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Josef Witticzek (&amp; wife)</td>
<td>Conveyancer to Privy State Chancellory</td>
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<th><strong>Army</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Ferdinand Mayerhofer</td>
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<td>Johann Senn</td>
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<th><strong>Professional/self-employed</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Karl Enk</td>
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<td>Ernst Feuchtersleben</td>
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<td>Karl Pinterics</td>
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<td>Franz Schober</td>
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<td>Romeo F. Seligmann</td>
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<td>Johann Steiger von Amstein</td>
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<td>Ferdinand Walcher</td>
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<th><strong>Musicians</strong></th>
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<td>Franz Lachner</td>
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<td>Ignaz Lachner</td>
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<td>Benedict Randhartinger</td>
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<tr>
<td>Franz Schubert</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michael Vogel (&amp; wife)</td>
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7 Alice Hanson: *Musical Life*, pp. 205–06.
Gramit’s mention of ‘Schubert’s close friends and society at large’ reveals a communicative element (and leads us to an additional possible meaning within these musical gatherings) which is addressed by another eminent Schubert scholar, Leon Botstein, in his article: ‘Realism transformed: Franz Schubert and Vienna.’ In his discussion Botstein identifies three functions of music in Vienna during Schubert’s time: that music acted as a private communication for individuals; that musical gatherings, such as the Schubertiades, provided a safe means of communication in a supposedly politically neutral event; and finally that these events were an aspect of domestic living between family and close friends.

The varying communicative elements, which are at the core of Botstein’s theory, can be directly applied to Schubert’s works from the four-hand repertoire: his proposal, for example, that music functioned as an escape from the negative aspects of Viennese political and social life tie in with the struggle between the inner and outer Schubert as has been suggested by William Kinderman in his discussion of the F minor Fantasy (D940). In his critique of this work, Kinderman asserts how the inner (unrealistic) self, full of optimism, is broken by the harsh realities of the external world – both aspects of the man being represented by thematic, modal and tonal contrasts. What Botstein’s argument proposes is that beneath these frivolous soirees existed meaningful musical activity amidst many codes of communication.

Although the salon was the primary forum for musical activity during Schubert’s time, changes in how music functioned in society and the negative connotations of the salon resulted in the decline of the popularity of the piano duet. As music making in Vienna moved from

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9 Botstein, ‘Realism Transformed’, pp. 31–32.


11 Kinderman, ‘Schubert’s piano music’, p. 171.
the salon and into the public sphere, the once popular duets gradually faded into the memories of a drawing room culture. Public concerts became more prevalent and the rise of the solo virtuoso overshadowed music for two performers at one piano. Other aspects of the drawing room culture, such as it being a venue for women – something long construed as a negative element – had a direct consequence on the reception of Schubert. The negative associations of women and the salon are discussed by Marcia Citron in her book, *Gender and the Musical Canon.*\(^{12}\) Citron highlights how the reputation of female composers and musicians at the beginning of the nineteenth century, although popular at that time, were damaged because of their association with the salon.\(^{13}\) Schubert’s association with the salon has, in older musicology, been viewed in a similarly negative way, which encouraged perceptions of Schubert as a composer of feminine and therefore lesser genres.\(^{14}\)

A further aspect of the salon culture during the nineteenth century, the popularity of transcriptions, has also had negative repercussions for Schubert’s four-hand repertoire. In fact, when discussing the music culture of the bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century, Dahlhaus observes how piano transcriptions of chamber and symphonic music were a ‘cornerstone of bourgeois music culture.’\(^{15}\) Although this cannot be disputed, the close connection transcriptions had with domestic musical activity has to some extent, influenced


\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 108.


perceptions that four hands at one piano merely provided a utilitarian function. However, in his seminal work on Schubert and his four-hand music, Brian Newbould differentiates between the utilitarian character of so much duet music in the nineteenth century and Schubert's realisation of the 'intrinsic values of the four-hand ensemble.'

**Issues of reception history**

Just as the duets faded into the memories of the drawing room culture, these works remained absent for a long time from serious consideration in Schubert scholarship and systematic musicology. The rather complex nature of Schubert’s reception history has most certainly played a role in this context. The long-standing perception of Schubert as an unknown composer during his time has been overturned in recent revisionist Schubert scholarship and Gibbs states that Schubert experienced 'coexisting fame and neglect'. The fame mentioned by Gibbs most certainly includes the duets which, as outlined earlier, were an inherent part of the salon experience. However, the discovery of a wealth of instrumental works after Schubert's death completely overshadowed his unique development of the piano duet genre. Although some of Schubert's biggest achievements in the duet genre were published and performed after his death, they were few in number in comparison to the significant number of chamber and orchestral works discovered and published posthumously.

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Table 2. Key Schubert duets published posthumously

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Year Composed</th>
<th>Year Published</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sonata in C, “Grand Duo” D812</td>
<td>1824 (June)</td>
<td>1838</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allegro in A minor, ‘Lebensstürme’ D947</td>
<td>1828 (May)</td>
<td>1840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy in F minor D940</td>
<td>1828</td>
<td>1829</td>
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In terms of musicological reception history since the twentieth century, it is only in approximately the last thirty years that approaches to the duets have begun to change. Laurence Petran’s short article (1945) again highlights how perceptions of the medium have suffered from the abundant use of arrangements of instrumental works.\(^{18}\) Although Petran does briefly acknowledge Mozart and Schubert’s exceptional contributions to the genre (one work each)\(^{20}\), he refers to duets in general as being in a ‘lowly estate.’\(^{21}\) In a much later article, however, Frank Dawes (2001) acknowledges that some interesting contributions to the genre were made prior to Schubert, but that it was he who fully utilized the possibilities of the duet medium.\(^{22}\) Another recent article by Robert Winter (from the same year) makes a similar claim that Schubert’s piano duets could be considered the composer’s most unique works for keyboard.\(^{23}\) It is, therefore, only relatively recently that these four-hand works are being viewed as a revolutionizing of a domestic genre. Consequently, such re-appraisals have encouraged further research in this area.

The social context, being so central to the duet genre, has been discussed within older musicology though frequently with negative

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\(^{20}\) Ibid., Mozart: Sonata in F Major K497 and Schubert: Andantino Varié in B Minor op.84 no.1.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 10.


implications. In Arthur Hutchings (1973) discussion of the works he referred to the duets as a 'sociable branch of music [and as] some of Schubert's best light music'.

Although Hutchings remark appears complimentary on the surface it automatically indicates that these works are 'non-serious' by referring to them as his 'best light music.' Eric Sams (1976) praises Schubert's duets as being original as well as simultaneously profound and trivial, yet comments that 'much of the music was simply designed to make and keep friends [...] [and that some of the duets] bring total expressiveness within the grasp of the home music-maker'.

Although this music was designed to 'make and keep friends', this was only one aspect of the duets and categorizing them in this way offers a limited perspective on these works. Furthermore, the implication that Schubert had to limit himself artistically in order to produce accessible music for the domestic household automatically degrades the duets as quality works.

Schubert's achievement in combining the serious and the sociable in his duets has been recently addressed by the scholar Margaret Notley, where she focuses on duets such as the A flat Variations on an original theme (D813), composed in 1824, and the Allegro in A minor (D947), composed in 1828. Notley's argument overturns traditional beliefs regarding this aspect of Schubert's music for four-hands. In past histories Einstein placed a distinct divide between the sociable Schubert, for example in his duets, and a serious Schubert as in his late sonatas and string quartets. In response to this, Notley requests that the sociable quality should not be underrated. In this context, she discusses the 'orchestral massiveness' of the Allegro in A minor and also its abrupt modulations which add an immense intensity to the piece. The sociable side, Notley argues, is revealed towards the end with its entertaining brilliance. Similarities are

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26 Margaret Notley, 'Schubert's social music', p.146.

27 Ibid., p.148.
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highlighted between his duos and his chamber music (with piano) in terms of expressiveness with some similar pianistic textures.\(^{28}\)

**The piano duet as a domestic activity**

Prior to Schubert’s engagement with the genre, the domestic nature of the duets has remained an influential element in our perception of these works. As early as the seventeenth century, the English composer Nicholas Carleton (c.1570–75–1630), credited with one of the earliest keyboard duets ever composed, indicated that his ‘Verse for two’ was to be played on one virginal or organ,\(^{29}\) which, according to Dawes, suggests a domestic context. Despite the presence of such early works as Carleton’s duet and Thomas Tomkins (1572–1640): *A Fancy for two to play*, it wasn’t until the eighteenth century that music for keyboard four hands became popular. From approximately 1760 onwards this domesticity was reinforced as the keyboard duet was frequently employed as a pedagogical tool, thus ensuring its status as a ‘lower’ genre. In Dr Charles Burney’s Preface of *Two sonatas or duets for two performers one piano-forte or harpsichord* (1777), he discusses these works in a pedagogical context referring to two students playing them in a domestic setting. A further example is Haydn’s duet composition, a theme and variations for four hands entitled: ‘Teacher and Student (1778),’\(^{30}\) which reveals a very simple compositional approach where the teacher begins a melodic idea and the student merely imitates exactly.

The domestic character of the duet and the production of pedagogical works dictated the style of the duets, and an examination of the compositional approaches of eighteenth century composers proves to be an insightful tool in ascertaining the common style of the duet shared by composers at that time. The duets produced during this period were typically light entertaining works, attractive and appealing

\(^{28}\) Here Notley argues that the “Trout” Quintet (D667), the B flat Trio (D898) and the E flat Trio (D929) use the pianistic texture of doubling a melody at the octave as is frequently practiced in both hands of the primo player of Schubert’s duets.

\(^{29}\) Dawes, ‘Piano Duets’, p. 653.

to its designated market. Such composers as Johann Christian Bach (1735–1782) and Muzio Clementi (1752–1832) were important figures in this respect.\(^{31}\) The former, also known as the London Bach, produced mainly sonatas for four hands which are generally 'elegant, refined and controlled pieces.'\(^{32}\) Clementi wrote a considerable number of duets, among them seven four-hand sonatas. Some of the chief characteristics of the duet, which Schubert later developed, are found in his works of this kind: counterpoint, orchestral styles and also the expressive possibilities of the genre.\(^{33}\) Due to the availability of four hands on one piano, counterpoint was frequently employed and Schubert exploited polyphony fully in his later duets.

Many of Mozart's early duet compositions subscribed to this light and entertaining style, as was typical of the drawing room aesthetic at that time.\(^{34}\) However, his most mature work for the piano duet, the F major sonata K.497 (1786), has been described as an 'almost uncomfortably great piece of domestic music'\(^{35}\) thereby pointing to its departure from established norms. Donald Tovey even admitted 'being tempted to arrange the sonata as a string-quartet in G with two violoncellos.'\(^{36}\) It is very likely that Schubert would have been familiar with this work, as it was both composed and published in Vienna. Schubert had studied and performed works by Mozart during his school days at the Stadtkonvikt and with the family orchestra and would have been aware of his significance as a composer. It is therefore very likely

\(^{31}\) Additional duet composers of the eighteenth century include: Muzio Clementi (1752–1832), Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778–1837), Carl Maria von Weber (1786–1826) and Carl Czerny (1791–1857).

\(^{32}\) Ibid., xi.


\(^{34}\) Mozart's duet output included six sonatas, a theme and variations, two fantasies and a fugue.


that this pivotal work had a significant impact on Schubert and alerted him to the possibilities of this genre. These possibilities are especially realised in the duets from 1824 and onwards – from Schubert’s middle to late periods – examples of which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Beethoven’s engagement with the piano duet took place early in his career and comprises merely a two-movement Sonata in D, two sets of variations and three marches. These pieces, which were intended for the middle-class market, are attractive and sometimes playful pieces, staying true to the typically light, entertaining style of the piano duet genre. His variations on a theme by Count Waldstein, for example, are incomparable to Schubert’s A flat Variations on many levels. Beethoven’s repeated use of the melody by the primo in many of the variations, undisguised, is nowhere near as sophisticated as Schubert’s development of his subject, for example in the final variation, in his A flat Variations on an original theme (D813).

**What further ways then did Schubert add to this genre as it was at the beginning of the nineteenth century?**

Composing his first duet at thirteen years, Schubert’s three earliest attempts at this genre were all fantasies – an early indication that the composer realised new expressive possibilities within the genre. Schubert’s time in Zseliz as a tutor for the Esterhazys in 1818 produced further duets – Four Polonaises (D599), Three Marches Heroiques (D602), Sonata in B flat (D617), Deutscher and Ländler (D618), and Eight Variations on a French song (D624) – but it was Schubert’s second stay at Zseliz in 1824 that marks a genuine elevation of the piano duet with his Grand Duo Sonata in C. (D812). In fact Christopher Gibbs acknowledges 1824 (and here he includes the Grand Duo in his argument) as a period when ‘Schubert’s instrumental music [...] shifted from amateur to professional’. The elevated and symphonic style of Schubert’s Grand Duo created a debate led by Schumann and Tovey,
regarding the accepted criteria that a domestic piece of music was expected to fulfil. Both authors struggled to consider this work as a duet on the grounds that it was outside the norms of the domestic duet style. The influence of the arguments presented by such eminent critics should not be underestimated and three attempts were made to orchestrate the work including Joseph Joachim who orchestrated the work in 1855. However, his attempt to arrange the work as a symphony required tempo changes which, ironically, proved its compositional intention as an independent piano duet. In line with this, Jeffrey Kallberg observes that the mixing of genres was a common modification of style in the early nineteenth century. Therefore, the orchestral style in which Schubert composed the Sonata in C may have been unorthodox for the piano duet but not untypical of what was occurring in art music across the board. Brian Newbould also points out that when it comes to style in a work, piano, quartet and orchestral styles often overlap: an orchestral style is also found in other piano duets by Schubert, an example of which is the Allegro in A minor (D947) written in the final year of his life. Furthermore, that Schubert referred to the Sonata in C as a work for piano four-hands in his correspondences from Zseliz in 1824 to his brother Ferdinand and his friend Moritz von Schwind, seemed to be ignored by any sceptics that this was an original work for piano four hands:


40 Ferguson, *Keyboard Duets*, p. 11.


I have composed a grand sonata and variations for four hands, which latter are having a particularly great success here [in Zseliz]; but as I do not wholly trust the Hungarians taste, I leave it to you and the Viennese to decide.45

This quote not only indicates the certainty that the Duo was intended as a piece for four hands but reveals these works as serious compositions by the composer.

Liszt’s assertion that Schubert was the most poetic composer who ever lived can surely be applied to the beautifully expressive seventh variation of his A flat Variations (1824) which reveals a deliberately uncertain chromaticism as the music travels between F minor and C minor.46 This variation reveals a new depth of expression for the duet and is indicative of Jim Samson’s assertion that piano works at the beginning of the nineteenth century, influenced by vocal music and contemporary literature, subsequently encouraged an increasingly expressive aesthetic.47 It was this expressive aesthetic, which was found in Schubert’s later duets, that troubled Carl Dahlhaus in his discussions of genre where he asserted that genre was relegated a subordinate position in favour of aesthetic autonomy.48 Here, Carl Dahlhaus’ theory which states that after 1800 there was a transfer of emphasis away from the importance of ‘genre’ to the concept of an ‘individual work’ is surely applicable to this sonata, which was considered outside the norms of the duet style. That musical genres ceased to have a function in the early nineteenth century, as proposed by Dahlhaus,49 has been contested by recent scholars such as Samson and Kallberg. One of the central criticisms of Dahlhaus’ theory, when he asserts that function in music was ‘obliterated entirely or relegated to

46 Notley, ‘Schubert’s Social Music’, p. 147.
48 Carl Dahlhaus, cited in Citron, Gender, p. 126.
49 In the eighteenth century Dahlhaus highlights how a genre had a specific function such as liturgy or dance, cited in Citron, Gender, p.126.
the backstairs of music',\textsuperscript{50} is that his interpretation of function is too limited. To adopt Dahlhaus' view is to subscribe to the belief that genre was completely fixed and predictable which denies the possibility of it developing and expanding and also dismisses the importance of the expressive aesthetic in works of this period.

Schubert's unique compositional approaches in his duets provide further evidence that he strove to create unique and enduring works for this genre. Schubert's sudden modulations and free handling of form, which are abundant in the duets, were initially considered a compositional weakness by such musicologists as Theodor Adorno who likened Schubert's thematic structure to musical "pot-pourri."\textsuperscript{51} This criticism proved damning in consideration of Schubert's innovative handling of form. Contrary to traditional readings of Schubert's mishandling of the patterns of modulation within the framework of sonata forms, Charles Rosen was one of the first to acknowledge that the shift of a semitone is common to duets such as the final of the Six Grande Marches (D819), composed in 1824, and furthermore is the major structural principal in the Grand Duo Sonata.\textsuperscript{52}

Schubert's complex nature as a person (especially after being hospitalised in 1823 with syphilis and the accompanying recognition

that he was terminally ill) produced increasingly profound works in and beyond this genre. That he created three duets in 1828 is significant for the genre's status: Fantasy in F minor (D940), Allegro in A minor 'Lebensstürme' (D947), and the Rondo in A (D951). The F minor duet, for example, is a profound work that has invited serious investigation within Schubert scholarship and some scholars have identified influences of previous composers on this work.\(^{53}\) The unanimous conclusion of these articles reveals how Schubert absorbed influences of his predecessors and recognizes the originality he brought to his own composition. In his article, 'Something Borrowed'\(^{54}\), which argues that Schubert's F minor Fantasy was influenced by Mozart's F minor Fantasia duet for mechanical organ (K608), Humphreys raises a valid point of difference between the two composers' treatments of the duet when concluding his article: where Schubert treats the duet as a serious genre, Mozart's style is 'archaic' in his duet due to the constraints of the mechanical organ. Furthermore, Humphreys identifies the duet as typical of 'the highly personal poetry of [Schubert's] late style'.\(^{55}\) An important revisionist article by William Kinderman discusses a deep-seated psychological symbolism in relation to the F minor Fantasy duet.\(^{56}\) In this work, Kinderman identifies a striking similarity between the Fantasy and Winterreise with both works journeying towards the same tragic destiny. In this belief Kinderman asserts that the thematic, modal and tonal contrasts with the lyrical theme represent and 'air of unreality', which are cruelly broken by the second theme.\(^{57}\)

**Postlude**

Certainly, Schubert's duets are being acknowledged in more recent scholarship as significant works in his overall output as can be seen in the following testaments. Although the seminal work of William

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54 Ibid., (a).


57 Ibid., p. 171.
Kinderman and Charles Rosen has inspired a re-questioning of traditional perceptions, their focus on one or two specific works merits a more comprehensive evaluation and interpretation, both of which would reveal further insight into Schubert’s contribution to this genre and perhaps even our understanding of Schubert himself. Current opinions in Schubert scholarship appear to support the view that Schubert brought an originality and profound expressive character to the duets and the evident popularity of the Grand Duo and the Fantasy in F actively encourages new perceptions of the duets – especially the later works. And so we are left asking: to what extent did other genres and/or musical practices of the early nineteenth century influence Schubert’s expansive style in the duets? Is it possible for the serious and the sociable to co-exist within one musical work? Can compositional features such as the abrupt modulations also found in the Allegro in A minor ‘Lebensstürme’ (D947) represent a latent psychological meaning?

Gibbs defines the ever-changing perception of Schubert’s works most aptly:

The history of Schubert’s musical reception charts not only the changing evaluations and interpretations of his individual works, but also the broader revaluations of his overall artistic stature.58

These words support the basic premise of this chapter as the journey of re-assessing Schubert’s four-hand repertoire and simultaneously raising his stature as a serious salon composer begins. Many musicologists, when discussing Schubert, often refer to his journey, whether it be the ever-changing journey of the reception of his works or the journey that occurs within his actual musical works. Exploring Schubert’s duets composed over the entire span of his life, the significance of their context, and how he developed this genre so significantly, opens up a voyage of discovery within Schubert scholarship.

Acknowledgements
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