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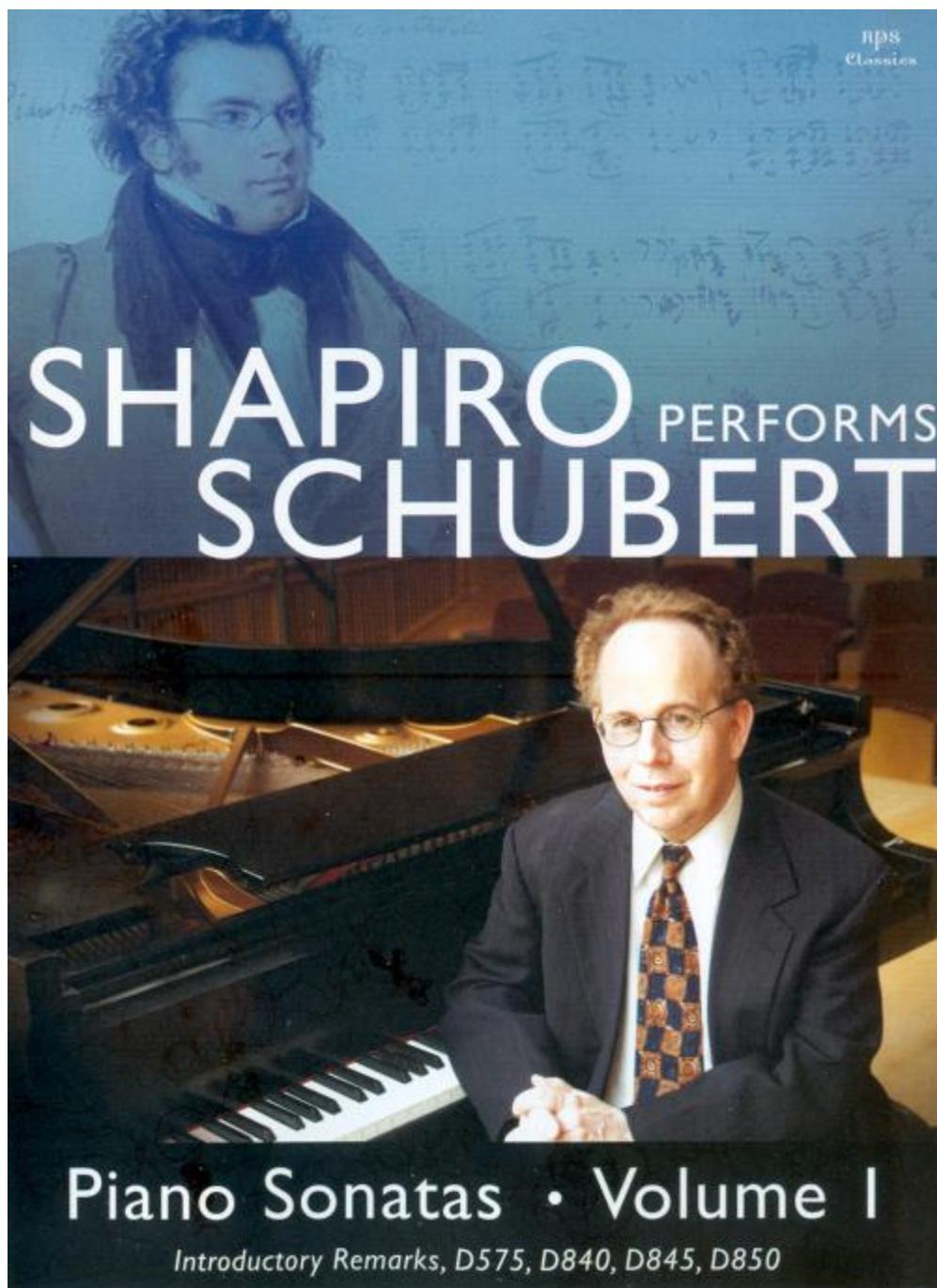
THE ART MUSIC LOUNGE

An Online Journal of Jazz and Classical Music

Monthly Archives: April 2016

Shapiro's Schubert a Labor of Love

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SHAPIRO PERFORMS SCHUBERT, Vol. 1 / Talks regarding Schubert's accompaniments, horn sounds, aspects of performance and notation. Sonata in B, D. 575. Sonata in C, D. 840, "La Reliquie." Sonata in a minor, D. 845. Sonata in D, D. 850. / Daniel Shapiro, piano / RPS Classics 0010241 (DVD)

SHAPIRO PERFORMS SCHUBERT, Vol. 2 / Sonata in A, D. 664. Sonata in a minor, D. 537. Sonata in G, D. 894. Sonata in c minor, D. 958. Hungarian Melody in b minor, D. 817 / Daniel Shapiro, piano / RPS Classics 0010242 (DVD)

SHAPIRO PERFORMS SCHUBERT, Vol. 3 / Sonata in a minor, D. 784. Sonata in A, D. 959. Sonata in B-flat, D. 960. Moment Musicaux No. 2 in A-flat, D. 780 / Daniel Shapiro, piano / RPS Classics 0010243 (DVD) All three DVDs available at Amazon.com and from the artist's website (www.danielshapiropianist.com)

Also available on 5 conventional CDs from the artist's website for \$15 per disc, distributed as follows:

Vol. 1 – Sonatas in B (D. 575), A (D. 664) & c minor (D. 958), *Moment Musicaux No. 2*

Vol. 2 – Sonatas in a minor (D. 537) & D (D. 850)

Vol. 3 – Sonatas in a minor (D. 845) & G (D. 894)

Vol. 4 – Sonatas in C (D. 840) & A (D. 959)

Vol. 5 – Sonatas in a minor (D. 784) & B-flat Major (D. 960)

Daniel Shapiro is a pianist who specializes in music of the Romantic Era, specifically that of Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann and Brahms, and also teaches at the Cleveland Institute of Music. As a chamber musician, he has performed regularly with members of the Cleveland Orchestra, Chicago Symphony and L.A. Philharmonic as well as with the Cavani, Mirò and Linden String Quartets, and has performed as piano soloist with the National Symphony, São Paulo State Symphony, Academy of London, Knoxville Symphony and Los Angeles Debut Orchestra. He was the top prize winner of a William Kapell competition as well as winner of the American Pianists' Association Beethoven Fellowship Award.

This three-DVD/five-CD set includes 11 of Schubert's 15 piano sonatas, and I believe that Shapiro was wise to eliminate the earliest ones on musical grounds. The first two sonatas are youthful works and in many ways truncated (like Beethoven's minuscule Op. 49 sonatas) or, in the case of the D. 279, unfinished, as are the sonatas D. 557 (it has never been proven that the third movement published with this sonata, in E flat, is really the finale of the work) and 566. Since Schubert was moving towards an entirely new concept of the piano sonata, very different from Beethoven's, hearing these early pieces, in my view, is more of a hindrance than a help. The earliest work presented here is the Sonata in a minor, D. 537, written in 1817 when Schubert was 20 years old.

His set of the Schubert sonatas, like his set of the 32 Beethoven sonatas, is quite obviously a labor of love. You can access his complete series of the Beethoven works for free on YouTube, but he has packaged and is selling the Schubert series. It's a wise move for two reasons: 1) There simply aren't that many extensive series of the Schubert sonatas out there, and 2) the DVDs include wonderful talks by Shapiro on the shape and sound of Schubert's sonatas as well as aspects of the composer's notation. Some of his examples are not from the sonatas: he also plays, for instance, the famous cello theme in the first movement of the String Quintet in C, the opening song of *Winterreise* as well as other works, to illustrate how Schubert seemed to be "receiving" music rather than "composing" it. One thing that strikes the listener immediately (it certainly struck me) is Shapiro's remarkable sense of touch. In his hands, the piano seems less of a percussion instrument than one of softness and richness of sound; it almost strikes the ear as if the piano is playing itself. This is not,

however, to imply that Shapiro cannot play with strength when called upon, simply that when he does play with strength, it sounds like his softer playing simply increased in volume. (I know this is a difficult concept to convey in words, but when you hear him play you'll know what I mean.)

And this, as it turns out, is absolutely perfect for Schubert. His sonatas are not music that react well to strict, powerful performances, as those of Mozart and Beethoven do. Think of his String Quintet in C as a chamber work compared to, say, any of Beethoven's string quartets or quintets. Beethoven at his most lyrical still has a strong rhythmic element (one critic said that you can often recall major Beethoven works strictly by beating out their rhythmic pattern without a melody), whereas even Schubert at his most dramatic always has a strong element of lyricism. This is particularly clear in the section where Shapiro discusses Schubert's "dark side," his premonitions of death or insanity, expressed via sharp shards of music in minor keys (perhaps the most famous examples being *Erlkönig* or the orchestral outbursts in the "Unfinished" Symphony). This fits in with what I've always read about Schubert, that he considered life a journey in which we, as wanderers, fumble about as we move from the bucolic to the violent, often without warning—a philosophy perhaps best summarized in his magnificent "Wanderer Fantasy." Because of this, Shapiro believes that one must "play Schubert's music with a sense of inevitability, and yet at the same time with a sense of imagination."

These talks, then, and the musical illustrations played within them, indicate what we are going to hear in his performances of the sonatas. Gone are the surface excitement and tensile strength one heard in the Schubert sonata performances of Artur Schnabel, Clara Haskil and Sviatoslav Richter (the latter of which, for my taste, was usually *too* strong in his approach). The quicksilver

playing of Haskil is a specific case in point. Note, here, the difference in timing between her performances of the D. 845 and D. 960 sonatas as compared to Shapiro's:

	<u>Haskil</u>	<u>Shapiro</u>
Sonata D. 845, 1	7:52	9:46
Sonata D. 845, 2	7:28	12:26
Sonata D. 845, 3	4:54	7:30
Sonata D. 845, 4	4:17	4:58
Sonata D. 960, 1	13:15	15:09
Sonata D. 960, 2	7:31	11:26
Sonata D. 960, 3	3:36	4:21
Sonata D. 960, 4	7:42	8:32

Nor is this simply a matter of playing faster. Haskil, being Rumanian, shared with other Rumanian and Hungarian pianists (and conductors, and singers) a sense of musical urgency in performance—think of Dinu Lipatti, one of her closest friends, for instance, who even played Chopin with a wide-awake, less dreamy-eyed sense of style. The architecture of the music was what mattered, and it was her duty, as she saw it, to bring that structure to the fore. (Refer to my recent post on conductor Michael Gielen who, although Austrian and not Eastern European, took a similar approach to orchestral music, even in Schubert.) There is something to be said for both approaches, but to my ears Haskil rushed the *Andante* movements a bit too much, though

her *Scherzo* and *Rondo allegros* were vivacious and wonderful. She also had a superb keyboard touch which allowed her to evoke feelings in the music even at brisker speeds.

Shapiro is more leisurely and ruminative. There is a considerable amount of “space” here and there between notes and chords; he doesn’t view these sonatas in a strictly structural manner, but more as sensory discovery. Yet in some cases it seems to me that his longer timings are due to additional repeats being observed, not just a brisker pace. Still, it is clear that he makes more of a contrast between, for instance, the opening motif of the first movement of D. 845 and its brisk main melody, and he returns to this slower pace for the transition figures. This gives an entirely different feel to the music, one that has urgency in places and a stop-and-smell-the-roses feeling in others.

The venue in which the sonatas were taped is obviously a church—one can see the huge organ pipes directly behind Shapiro’s piano—but it is not identified. Nonetheless, the sound is natural and clear with enough natural “space” around the piano to make the sustained chords sing. Watching Shapiro play, one gains the sense that he is completely immersed in the music. His body leans forward towards the soundboard of the piano, then leans back; he often shakes his head as he plays the stronger and busier figures. The camera takes in different angles but most of the time shows his hands on the keyboard, which is what most people are interested in seeing. Close-ups reveal his playing method, a from-the-top approach, sometimes raising the hands entirely off the piano but more often a deep-in-the-keys touch that gives his playing richness. (The camera seldom shows his feet, a rare exception being between 14:09 and 14:40 in the Sonata D. 575, so I could only gauge his pedaling effects by aural means.)

Ordinarily I'm not a huge fan of watching classical performers (particularly soloists) on video, but Shapiro is nearly as interesting to watch play the piano as Shura Cherkassky was, so I enjoyed the experience tremendously.

This musical ebb-and-flow continues throughout his playing of all eleven sonatas, but to be honest, if one is emotionally engaged in the listening process, as I was, you can only take one sonata at a time. It's almost too draining to watch and listen to any of the three DVDs complete in one sitting. And although one is aware of an underlying structure in these sonatas, what one takes away from them is their symphonic aspect, and this is, I think, what many people who don't like the Schubert sonatas (including my younger self) don't fully understand. These works are simply not as tightly bound or follow a straight-line trajectory as do the Beethoven sonatas. Nowhere in them are those on-the-seat-of-your-chair moments like the juggernaut movements in Beethoven, and Shapiro's more diffuse approach to the music sometimes removes that juggernaut feeling anyway (as, for instance, in the *Scherzos*). This is not an entirely bad thing, just different. One can enjoy Karl Böhm conducting Schubert just as much as Michael Gielen.

Shapiro thus is able to give greater weight and a richer tone to such works as the somewhat brief sonatas D, 575 and 840, each roughly 20 minutes in length. Interestingly, he injects a syncopated feeling into the first movement of the latter, making it almost sound like a Latin rhythm, something I've never noticed in others' playing of this work. His deep-keys touch continues to delight one as well as add a richness to the proceedings. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that his sense of tone color is almost as great as that of the great organists like Marie-Claire Alain or

Virgil Fox. At times I almost imagined him jumping up from his Steinway and playing the sonatas on the organ behind it.

The more Shapiro moves into the later sonatas, the more his approach not only makes sense but enriches one's absorption of the music. I'm sure that he spent countless hours working out exactly what tempos and phrasing he wanted to use in every movement in each of these works, but the end result is so engaging that it almost sounds spontaneous, as if he himself is making up these sonatas, phrase by phrase, as he plays them. And to be honest, one's familiarity with later piano works of similar thematic contrast and complexity—I'm thinking, specifically, of the works of Alkan, late Scriabin and Debussy, Ives, Griffes and even Sorabji—help one absorb and appreciate what Schubert did here. As I say, his structure is always there but is often buried beneath those long phrases and contrasting themes. Think of the String Quintet and how much it sounds like a symphony...one might almost say the same thing of Brahms' Piano Quartets. One can easily conceive nearly any of these piano sonatas played by an orchestra and presented as a symphony. One cannot say the same thing of Beethoven's sonatas—they sound like sonatas and nothing but.

In the last three sonatas, I compared Shapiro's playing with that of Craig Sheppard (Roméo Records 7283-4), a modern-day pianist who also takes generally brisk tempos in Schubert. More to the point, Sheppard prefers a leaner sound profile than Shapiro—what I would characterize as a “Beethoven sound” (and Sheppard's complete Beethoven sonata cycle is one of the most interesting issued on CD). He, too, also prefers a tauter trajectory of the musical material, with less relaxation, pauses or rhetorical

phrasing than Shapiro. One thing you immediately notice if you compare Shapiro to Sheppard is the former's much greater sense of coloration: he is able to produce an almost infinite variety of shades and tones. No two of his soft chords sound alike, and neither do most of his *forte* attacks. His playing has so much variety in it that it almost sounds like a duo-piano recital, with two keyboardists of contrasting skills, somehow magically combined in one man with only ten fingers. Indeed, the more one listens to Shapiro's Schubert the more one is convinced that this is, if not the only way to play these sonatas, surely the best way. Since these sonatas tend, for the most part, to be quite long (the shortest of them are the D. 664 at 16:17 and D. 537 at 18:36; most of them are well over a half-hour in length), listeners need to come to them with a long attention span. Listening in sound bites will not do for Schubert.

I could go on and on about these videos, but don't think it would add to my overall impression. I recommend the videos over the audio CDs because the CDs omit his interesting talking points and the performance of the *Hungarian Melody in b minor*—also, the three DVDs are less expensive than the five CDs. These are remarkable performances, deeply felt and played with conviction and purpose. There is nothing in Shapiro's approach that could be called errant or uninteresting; it all reveals a unanimity of purpose that conveys a mind that has worked on and absorbed these works to the fullest.

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