



ABC
Classics

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TESSA BIRNIE

SCHUBERT PIANO SONATAS

D960, D459 AND D840

WITH WORKS BY BRAHMS, CHOPIN,
FAURÉ AND DEBUSSY



ABC
Classics



CD1

FRANZ SCHUBERT 1797-1828

Piano Sonata in B flat major, D960

[41'23]

- | | | |
|---|-----------------------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | I. Molto moderato | 18'44 |
| 2 | II. Andante sostenuto | 9'55 |
| 3 | III. Scherzo – Allegro vivace con delicatezza | 3'55 |
| 4 | IV. Allegro ma non troppo | 8'49 |

Moments musicaux, D780

[28'16]

- | | | |
|----|---------------------------------|------|
| 5 | I. Moderato (C major) | 4'57 |
| 6 | II. Andantino (A flat major) | 8'00 |
| 7 | III. Allegro moderato (F minor) | 1'54 |
| 8 | IV. Moderato (C sharp minor) | 4'00 |
| 9 | V. Allegro (F minor) | 2'14 |
| 10 | VI. Allegretto (A flat major) | 7'11 |

Total Playing Time 69'45

CD2

FRANZ SCHUBERT

Piano Sonata in E major, D459

[25'46]

- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|------|
| 1 | I. Allegro moderato | 4'34 |
| 2 | II. Scherzo (Allegro) | 3'51 |
| 3 | III. Adagio | 6'21 |
| 4 | IV. Scherzo – Trio (Allegro) | 3'48 |
| 5 | V. Allegro patetico | 7'12 |

	Piano Sonata in C major, D840	[24'27]
6	I. Moderato	15'34
7	II. Andante	8'53
8	Allegretto in C minor, D915	6'07
9	Minuet and Trio in A major, D334	3'06
10	Adagio in D flat major, D505	3'41
11	Seventeen Ländler, D145	6'16
	Total Playing Time	69'30

CD3

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN 1770-1827

Piano Sonata No. 14 'quasi una fantasia' in C sharp minor, Op. 27 No. 2 'Moonlight' [16'54]

Performed in B minor

1	I. Adagio sostenuto	7'59
2	II. Allegretto – Trio	2'03
3	III. Presto agitato	6'52

JOHN FIELD 1782-1837

4	Nocturne No. 5 in B flat major	3'31
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FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN 1810-1849

5	Mazurka in A minor, Op. 68 No. 2	2'53
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JOHANNES BRAHMS 1833-1897

6	Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 21 No. 1	16'32
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ROBERT SCHUMANN 1810-1856

Kinderscenen (Scenes from Childhood), Op. 15 [18'52]

7	I. Von fremden Ländern und Menschen (Of Foreign Lands and People)	1'21
8	II. Curiose Geschichte (Curious Story)	1'00
9	III. Hasche-Mann (Blind Man's Buff)	0'27
10	IV. Bittendes Kind (Pleading Child)	0'55
11	V. Glückes genug (Perfectly Contented)	1'15
12	VI. Wichtige Begebenheit (Important Event)	0'54
13	VII. Träumerei (Reverie)	3'20
14	VIII. Am Camin (At the Fireside)	0'54
15	IX. Ritter vom Steckenpferd (Rocking Horse Knight)	0'40
16	X. Fast zu ernst (Almost Too Serious)	1'43
17	XI. Fürchtenmachen (Frightening)	1'10
18	XII. Kind im Einschlummern (Child Falling Asleep)	2'08
19	XIII. Der Dichter spricht (The Poet Speaks)	3'05

GABRIEL FAURÉ 1845-1924

20	Romance sans paroles, Op. 17 No. 1	2'42
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CLAUDE DEBUSSY 1862-1918

Three Préludes [7'15]

21	La sérénade interrompue (The Interrupted Serenade), Book 1 No. 9	2'16
22	Bruyères (Heather), Book 2 No. 5	2'43
23	General Lavine – eccentric, Book 2 No. 6	2'16

Total Playing Time 68'51

Tessa Birnie piano

In a career spanning half a century, Tessa Birnie was variously described as 'the marathon woman of the keyboard' – unique in her genre – and the world's leading authority on Schubert.

New Zealand-born, where she studied piano with Paul Schramm, she received the bulk of her musical training in Europe with Yvonne Lefébure in Paris and Karl-Ulrich Schnabel in Italy. Among the highlights of her career were several major European concert tours, including to the Soviet Union, recitals for the Salzburg Festival, and various series of complete keyboard works. Between tours she established her headquarters in Sydney, where she founded the Australian Society for Keyboard Music, initiated the music journal *Key Vibe*, assisted many artists in their careers, and conducted and toured with her own chamber orchestra, the Sydney Camerata. Her awards included an Order of Australia Medal (OAM) and the German Government's Beethoven Medallion.

Her mammoth recital projects included performing the 450 solo piano works of Schubert, as well as all 50 Schubert four-hand piano duets in partnership with other pianists. She also performed the complete keyboard works of Joseph Haydn, including all 54 sonatas. Her Concert Conspectus covered 65 composers and every major development in Western keyboard music since 1320.

Her musicological bent led to her discovery and performance of many important solo works and

chamber concertos from the 17th to the 19th centuries.

Primarily, though, it was as a concert pianist of rare distinction that she took her place on the world stage, her reputation based largely on her interpretations of the great piano masterpieces, and in particular those of Schubert. She also made several ground-breaking recordings, including Beethoven's 'Moonlight' Sonata transposed to the lower pitch of the composer's day and performed with Beethoven's original pedal directions.

Tessa Birnie was the author of numerous articles on keyboard music, and her autobiography *I'm Going to Be a Pianist* and her instructive and humorous book *Music in My Hands* have attracted readers in many countries.

Tessa Birnie passed away in Sydney while this 3CD set of some of her finest performances was in production.

FRANZ SCHUBERT

Sonata in B flat major, D960

The sonatas for piano span Schubert's entire lifetime as a composer, from the first such full-length work at 19 years of age to the three epic sonatas completed within three weeks of his death.

They are his great achievement in pianoforte music, a monumental tribute to the instrument he

loved and played so sensitively all his life. In these 12 sonatas are to be found not only the pleasures of Schubert's spontaneous lyricism, but poetic subtleties and grandeur, deep pathos and joy, and timeless moments of transcendent beauty.

The greatest of them all, the Sonata in B flat major, D960, was completed in September 1828, just seven weeks before the composer's death. The contrast between it and Schubert's life at the time is severe. The sonata wanders blissfully in the Elysian field of heavenly harmony and melody while Schubert endured increasing ill-health, dangerous and cramped living conditions and constant financial worries.

Schubert drafted and re-drafted the opening theme of the first movement, as extant sketches show, until he arrived at its final form, and it is indeed a summation of a lifetime's feeling and philosophy. The movement is extremely long – equal to many a Beethoven sonata in duration – and is, like the remaining movements, largely conceived within the extraordinary dynamics of piano to extreme pianissimo.

The second movement, *Andante sostenuto*, features music of utter loneliness of spirit, a loneliness leading into a growing exaltation which becomes rapt and visionary in the final bars. Two contrasting elements, juxtaposed, create great poignancy – a sustained falling melody against a rhythmic pattern of slurs, silence and staccato.

The third movement is unusually delicate and piquant, with a trio in the minor, while the fourth movement is an *Allegro* introducing a mood of deceptive simplicity, a peace later disturbed by agitated passages which give way to blissful interludes.

Tessa Birnie wrote:

The circumstances surrounding the recording are rather unusual.

For almost four days I had been recording my 'Youthful Genius' and two Haydn discs, and it was obvious that we were a day ahead of schedule. The hall, the piano, the recording engineer and all the equipment would still be available the next day. Should I – could I – make another disc?

I felt that I could not pass up the opportunity. At the back of my mind was the knowledge that my B flat Schubert Sonata (I call it mine, for it has been the most personal, to me, of all the music I have ever played) was still unrecorded. This is not quite accurate. I had already recorded it in England but a manufacturing fault put finis to the production.

It was, I realised, two years since I had last played (and therefore restudied) my beloved B flat. I would be coming to it anew, in a sense; my fingers must find their way from memory, not from practice; but I would also be coming to the work with that fresh viewpoint and

spontaneity which one hopes for, but cannot inevitably achieve, in every concert performance.

For me, it proved a memorable renewal of joy. I hope to share it with you.

Moments musicaux, D780

Schubert wrote the six *Moments musicaux* (Musical Moments) over a period of several years. The best-known today, No. 3, was the first to be published. Appearing in 1823 under the popular title *Air russe* (Russian Air), it was followed in 1824 by No. 6, entitled *Plaintes d'un troubadour* (A Troubadour's Laments). The other four pieces were composed in 1827, all six then being published as *Momens musicaux*. This shaky French is generally presumed to be Schubert's, whereas it would be more logical to blame the slipshod editor who produced two incorrect versions of the title in the first few pages of the first edition – 'Momens musicaux' on the cover and 'Momens musicales' on the page heading inside. Flowery French titles were in any case the prerogative of the commercially orientated publishers – not poor Austrian composers.

The original manuscript has been lost but the title lives on, either fully corrected or with 'momens' corrected to 'moments'. As a title it scarcely indicates the real stature of the six pieces. They are not impulsive whimsies but outstanding examples of Schubert's capacity for

concentrated and profound musical thought. Every bar is taut with meaning, the form is admirable, the musical ideas terse and compact.

- I. This is a 'hunting' piece with typical horn and echo effects.
- II. A hauntingly lovely work with gently rising and falling inflections and amazing modulations. The mood is one of shining serenity, of quiet spiritual exaltation.
- III. A serenade which combines memorable melody with incisive rhythm.
- IV. Hidden or half-suggested melodies seethe within the quickly flowing semiquavers of the first and last sections. Staccato left-hand notes add quiet, decisive character and rhythmic lilt, later changing to smooth, intense phrasing.
- V. Crisp accentuation, square rhythms and dynamic contrasts give special impetus to this piece in the minor, which progresses through an infinite series of modulations to end triumphantly in the major.
- VI. By contrast this final work begins in the major and ends in the minor. It is thoughtful, songful and deeply introspective.

Piano Sonata in E major, D459

This sonata, the first actually completed in spite of earlier attempts, was written in August 1816. In five movements, including two scherzos, it

was published posthumously in 1843 by C.A. Klemm under the more popular title *Five Pianoforte Pieces*. As such it is still generally known, although in 1930 the discovery of a portion of the manuscript proved that the work had been entitled 'Sonata'.

The beautifully written first movement foreshadows in style and mood Schubert's only essay in the piano concerto style, his *Adagio and Rondo Concertante*, D487, composed two months later. The slow tempo of the *Adagio* for the third movement occurs only once more in a sonata (the C minor, D958) and the term 'patetico' added to the *Allegro* fifth movement is without parallel in this music. It should not be taken too literally, but regarded instead as a rather youthful gesture to a movement full of imaginative feeling and fascinating contrasts.

Piano Sonata in C major, D840

Of the many unfinished sonatas left by Schubert, the C major, dated April 1828, is the last and finest. In 1839 the manuscript was given by his brother Ferdinand to Schumann, who subsequently printed the second movement in his journal, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. In 1861 the Sonata was finally published, with the added title of 'Reliquie' (Relics).

Schubert completed only the first two movements and both are of major proportions.

The first movement is clearly allied to the opening of the A minor Sonata, D845, written three years earlier, and the second movement is of profound intensity.

Allegretto in C minor, D915

On 5 May 1827, Schubert's friend Ferdinand Walcher, who often sang Schubert's songs, left Vienna for Venice where he was employed in the Austrian navy. Ten days before he left, Schubert wrote this intellectually and emotionally charged *Allegretto*, inscribed 'To his dear friend Walcher for remembrance'.

Minuet and Trio in A major, D334

Schubert received his first piano lessons from his brother, Ignaz, 12 years his senior. After a few months of this, Franz announced that he had no further use for his brother's teaching and would be quite able to get on by himself! Ignaz, astonished, had to finally admit that Franz was quite right – an experience familiar to Schubert's later 'teachers'. At 11, Schubert left home for Vienna's Royal College where he had been accepted into the Court Chapel Choir (ancestor of today's Vienna Boys' Choir) and in return would be given a general and musical education. Once there, he composed incessantly, ruling lines on blank paper if necessary.

Between 13 and 15 his compositions included such major items as string quartets and a 32-page piano duet but at 16 he was informed

that 'singing and music are but a subsidiary matter while good morals and diligence in study are of prime importance.' Within a matter of months he was to resign from the College and write some of his greatest works.

The A major Minuet and Trio is perhaps the most beautiful of Schubert's numerous minuets. It was composed around 1815, when he was in his late teens.

Adagio in D flat major, D505

Due recognition could have been given to this *Adagio* long ago, had editors not published a truncated version in the wrong key. Restored to its original form, the work emerges as a mature, reflective and dramatic statement. It seems that Schubert intended it to be the slow movement of a new sonata.

Seventeen Ländler, D145

Schubert wrote over 400 dances for piano, usually in groups. His publishers added descriptive titles such as Ländler, German Dances, Waltzes (of varying character), Minuets, Ecossaises, Galopps – and, in one case, Cotillon.

His earliest dances were composed at 15, the last around 26. They were mainly created for the pleasure and recreation of Schubert's friends – Schubert happily performing the music as his friends danced – but some are obviously too serious to have been used for this purpose.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Piano Sonata No. 14 in C sharp minor, Op. 27 No. 2 'Moonlight'

According to Tessa Birnie, were Beethoven with us today he would lower the key of his 'Moonlight Sonata' (so-called by his publisher). In 1976, after making this recording, she wrote:

The C sharp minor of his day is not the C sharp minor of today. This difference in today's pitch has concerned me for some time, not only with regard to Beethoven. Today's performers, imbued strongly with a 'reverence for the score' approach, are nevertheless perpetrating sounds (with their related colours and moods) never intended by the composer.

I therefore offer, by way of a start, the 'Moonlight Sonata' in B minor, not C sharp minor. The pitch has been determined by the evidence available. On a flight to a London concert I decided to experiment with a lower key, and played it by ear at the concert a couple of days later. When I recorded it, I left the sound engineers with two performances in case of last minute problems. I made one, then talked to them, then made the other. The next day they informed me that I had played one in B minor, the other in C sharp minor!

Having been accustomed to performing the work in C sharp minor, I have found it an absorbing experience to recreate it through

other sounds. I much prefer the lower key; I find it no loss to leave the rather cool and brittle sounds of our C sharp minor for the warmer and more mellow sounds of B minor which are far more sympathetic to the emotional overtones of this profound sonata.

The work is performed with Beethoven's original pedal directions – the sustaining pedal fully depressed and held unchanged throughout the entire first movement. Haydn actually used this pedal effect before Beethoven in his 'English' Sonata, No. 50, while Czerny described Beethoven's own performances at the piano as being full of 'novel, arresting, pedal effects'.

Today, though, this is a revolutionary concept of the use of the pedal, reserved for certain passages in Beethoven's music and dismissed as frankly impossible by the theorists of today. They maintain that this pedal effect is greatly exaggerated on the modern piano with its greater power, and that unpleasant blurring cannot be avoided. Practical experience has persuaded me to the contrary. The effect, whether I am playing Beethoven's piano or a modern grand, is much the same – only a gentle haziness – provided Beethoven's caution to play softly is truly observed.

Soft playing is the essence of the contract and Beethoven consistently points this out. Look, for instance, at what he says at the beginning of the 'Moonlight': 'You must play all this piece with

the utmost delicacy.' Then he writes in the first bar, 'Very soft always.'

The curious 20th-century tradition of clipping the melody's semiquavers to one-sixth of a crotchet has not been followed in this performance.

JOHN FIELD

Nocturne in B flat major

John Field's major claim to fame is as the inventor of the Nocturne – a French title he gave to some twenty songful, dreamlike pieces for piano. Slow melodies were embellished, the left hand providing a quietly moving accompaniment. Chopin was quickly attracted to this new genre and added a further twenty nocturnes.

Comparisons are inevitable but the honours are fairly evenly divided. The critic Ludwig Rellstab, who led public musical opinion of the day, came down heavily in favour of Field: 'Where Field smiles, Chopin makes a grinning grimace; where Field cries, Chopin groans; where Field puts some seasoning into his food, Chopin empties a handful of cayenne pepper.'

To Rellstab, Chopin seemed an imitator, and certainly the similarity between a Field and a Chopin nocturne is almost embarrassing: the same kind of slow and simple melody, extra melodies, impassioned middle sections and codas. But Chopin's nocturnes are more diverse; the underlying current is darker and more disturbing; the range of emotion has been

widened. Field, on the other hand, preserves the delicate fabric of each work to its conclusion.

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

Mazurka in A minor, Op. 68 No. 2

Chopin was born into a family of modest means but one determined that he should be soundly educated. His father was French, a tutor in various noble households; his mother was Polish and an educated woman.

It was soon obvious that the young Chopin was extraordinarily precocious. He was writing verse at age six and improvising at the keyboard from his earliest years. His aptitude for the piano made his piano lessons a formality rather than a necessity. These ceased when he was 12, by which time he was ready to embark on a fully fledged career as a composer.

There are three main dance types to be found within Chopin's many mazurkas; this beautiful work belongs to the slowest and most serious.

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Variations on an Original Theme, Op. 21 No. 1

'A young eagle...called forth to give us the ideal expression of our time.' These prophetic words are Schumann's as he hails the 20-year-old Brahms and his first piano sonatas. A cluster of three had been written within a few months; there were to be no more, for Brahms was to write all future major works for piano in the

theme and variations form. The early sets of variations still remain largely unknown – distinctly a pity in the case of Op. 21 No. 1.

The beautiful opening theme gives way to eleven variations of extremely diverse texture, pattern and character. (No. 5 is a canon in contrary motion.) The great Brahmsian qualities are there in full force – sturdy and logical structure, warmth and breadth of feeling, consoling strength and even more consoling gentleness, and mellow, autumnal harmonies.

ROBERT SCHUMANN

Kinderscenen (Scenes from Childhood), Op. 15

In March 1838 Schumann wrote to his future wife Clara Wieck: 'I have discovered that nothing lends wings to the imagination so much as suspense and longing for something, as happened again in the last few days when, waiting for your letter, I composed whole volumes – strange, crazy, even cheerful stuff... Perhaps it was a kind of echo of one of your letters, where you wrote that I sometimes seemed to you to be like a child too – at any rate I felt just as though I were in short frocks again, and I wrote some 30 little droll things, from which I have chosen about twelve and called them *Scenes from Childhood*. You will enjoy them, but of course you must forget you are a virtuoso.'

GABRIEL FAURÉ

Romance sans paroles, Op. 17 No. 1

Like Chopin and Schubert, Gabriel Fauré was the son of a schoolmaster. That he was allowed to study music seriously as a child was due to the insistence of an old lady who heard him playing and improvising on the village harmonium. She prevailed upon the father to obtain further advice, and the following year, Fauré's outstanding talent recognised, he was accepted as a free boarder at the École Niedermeyer in Paris. This happy state, in which the young Fauré received not only excellent musical training but a broad general education, continued for ten years. During this period he composed his Op. 17 set of three *Romances sans paroles* (Romances without Words).

The 'Op. 17' attached to this set of three pieces is highly suspect, for according to the composer's own catalogue it is his first work. Op. 17 of course sounds far more impressive (for marketing purposes) than Op. 1. Not that there is any sense of immaturity in the music, which is already strikingly idiosyncratic and characteristically charming.

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Three Préludes

Debussy wrote twelve preludes (Book I) in 1910 and a further twelve (Book II) from 1910 to 1913. Each prelude is given a descriptive title at the end, in parenthesis and in small print. The relegation of these titles to such an inconspicuous place has puzzled many, but Debussy was anxious that nothing should detract from the importance of his main title, *Prélude*. The works were to be treated literally as preludes to more major works in the performer's program; they must never, he said, be presented in isolation or in the published sets of twelve.

Alfred Cortot describes *La sérénade interrompue*, with its Spanish rhythms, as 'a mocking nocturnal fantasy in the manner of Goya, expressing the diffident passion of a *novio* (bridegroom), singing his love songs under a closed window', and *Bruyères* as 'the intimate woodland romance of undergrowth where the deep scent of the earth mingles with the flecks of sunlight coming through the leaves'. General Lavine, whose eccentric antics are conveyed humorously in springy Cakewalk rhythm, was a well-known puppet in a Paris cabaret.

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Booklet Design Imagecorp Pty Ltd

Photos Brash, Auckland, New Zealand (front cover,
p2, p15 [right]), Thomas-Photos (p14),
Max Dupain (back cover)

Liner Notes Tessa Birnie

Additional Material Martin Buzacott

Recorded in the Australian Broadcasting
Corporation's Sydney studios, c.1962 (CD2 [1]-[7]);
Royal Festival Hall, London, c.1974 (CD1 [5]-[10], CD2
[11], CD3 [1]-[4], [6]-[19], [21]-[23]; and St Joseph's College,
Hunters Hill c.1982 (CD1 [1]-[4], CD2 [8]-[10],
CD3 [5], [20]).

ABC Classics thanks Kathleen Barry, Noel Wright,
Ben Whitten, Dallas Hallet, Alexandra Alewood and
Melissa Kennedy.

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