FRANZ SCHUBERT

DANCES FOR PIANO

Volume I

THIRTY-SIX ORIGINALTÄNZE (Waltzes), Opus 9 (D. 365)

TWELVE WALTZES, SEVENTEEN LÄNDLER

NINE ECOSSAISES, Opus 18 (D. 145)

JACQUES ABRAM, Piano
Dances for the piano occupied Schubert throughout his compositional life; they are to be found among his earliest as well as his most mature works. Although he regarded these dances as functional music — and also as a means of earning some money through publication — they served at the same time as a sort of musical diary, reflecting varying moods and providing a chance to try out in miniature ideas which later found their way into his more extended compositions.

The diaries and letters of Schubert’s friends are full of references to these dances, which the Schubert Society has preserved at the piano for dancing at informal gatherings. Later, at his leisure, he would write them down, making changes and improvements as he felt necessary. One waltz, in fact, was preserved through oral tradition for over a hundred years in one family. Maurice J. E. Brown, in his biography of Schubert, tells the story: during World War II, Richard Strauss met the great-granddaughter of one of Schubert’s friends, a Frau Mautner-Markhof. She played for Strauss the melody of a waltz which Schubert had improvised at her great-grandparents’ wedding, a tune which pleased the bride so much that she had taught it to her three sons, who in turn had taught it to their children. It was not until this meeting, in 1943, when Strauss wrote out the melody as it was played for him, that this little waltz by Schubert was finally preserved on paper.

There is a great deal of confusion surrounding the chronology of Schubert’s dances for piano. Frequently they appear singly in the manuscripts; just as frequently they appear in groups of as many as six. Sometimes they are dated, sometimes not. The manuscripts themselves do not necessarily reflect the order of composition, since the dances often were copied, dedicated, and dated several years after they had first been composed. The confusion is compounded by Schubert’s casual nomenclature; the same dance, appearing in more than one manuscript version, will be called at one time a Ländler, at another a Deutzer, and at another a waltz. Schubert’s publishers, after his death, were equally casual, often selecting individual dances from, for example, a set of Deutzers, and publishing them as Ländler or waltzes. Even the arrangement of the dances in sets, for publication, is haphazard; one suspects that the publishers simply chose individual dances arbitrarily, with no particular regard to melodic or tonal relationships, publishing them as sets for their own convenience.

Schubert’s first published waltzes were the set of Thirty-Six Original Dances, Opus 9. The first edition, published by Cappi and Diabelli, was issued in 1821; this was followed, in 1822, by a version for violin and piano. The set can be divided into groups, according to key and rhythm relationships. Waltzes 1-13 are all in the key of A-flat; waltzes 14 and 15 are in D-flat. Waltzes 16 and 17 are in A major, while waltzes 18-21 are in G, contrasting not only in key but also in mood and style to the preceding dances. According to Schubert’s manuscripts, there are four incomplete dances in the key of A major which were intended to replace the present Nos. 18-21.

Nos. 22-24, starting a new group, heralded by the notable minor-major chords of No. 22, are set in B major. No. 24 closes the little group on a cheerful note, with its reminiscence of Alpine schmankerl. With No. 28, in the key of A major, we are reminded of No. 17, while No. 29 is rhythmically related to Nos. 1, 2, 6 and 9 of the opening group. The final five dances, Nos. 32-36 are in F major, modulating to either A-flat or D-flat in the second strain. They contrast with their immediate predecessors, No. 31, in that they are lacking the opening upbeat.

Special mention should be made of No. 14, prophetic of the harmonic practice of Prokofiev some hundred years later: opening in D-flat, it modulates to A for its middle section before returning to the original D-flat, a long harmonic journey in Schubert’s time. No. 34 is also prophetic, anticipating in its second strain the harmonic and melodic idiom of the waltzes of Johann Strauss.

Waltz No. 2, known as the “Trauerwalzer,” has a long and involved history. Although the exact date of composition is not known, four manuscript copies are extant. On one of these Schubert wrote a dedication to his friend Anselm Hüttenbrenner:

Written down for my coffee, wine and punch brother Anselm Hüttenbrenner, world famous composer, Vienna, on 14th March in the year 1818, in his very own most exalted diggings of 50 florins V.C. [Viennese currency]

The waltz was so popular that, even before it was published in the Opus 9, it had served as the subject for two sets of variations, one by Czerny (his Opus 12). No one knows who first used the title “Trauerwalzer” (“Mournful Waltz”) or “Mourning Waltz.” Although Cappi and Diabelli have been suggested. In England it was known as the “Vienna Waltz.” In 1825, the dance was attributed to Beethoven — an attribution which took seventy-five years to straighten out. According to Hüttenbrenner, Beethoven is said to have protested against this misuse of his name. Schubert’s feelings about the matter have not been recorded. And what did Schubert himself think of the name “Trauerwalzer”? When he was informed of the title, his comment was: “What ass would compose a ‘mournful’ waltz!”

Waltz No. 3, and a still-unpublished Ecossaise, were dedicated to an unidentified friend of Schubert’s:

Ecosse: “Hops and skip you with this Ecosse Through weal and woe for all your days. Your best friend, Franz Schubert.”

Waltz: “Take this waltz to have a got at, Be Muscovite or Croat. The above friend.”

The Twelve Waltzes, Seventeen Ländler, and Nine Ecossaises, Opus 18, were composed between 1815 and 1821. They were advertised in 1823 by Schubert’s publisher as being the “most recent works by the ingenious tone-poet, who excels eminently by originality and delightful ideas. [They] will not fail to be an agreeable novelty for his numerous admirers.” The waltzes of this set seem to have less motivic and melodic similarity to one another than do those of the Opus 9, while they exhibit a greater variety of keys. Seldom do two successive dances appear in the same key. Their phrase structure, frequently longer than that of the Opus 9 waltzes, exhibits greater melodic variety. In contrast to the pattern of eight-bar phrases repeated, used so often in the Opus 9, these waltzes are apt to open with a sixteen-bar phrase, followed by a twelve- or sixteen-bar phrase which is repeated. The first waltz, for example, consists of two sixteen-bar phrases, each of which is repeated. A quiet, flowing section offers welcome contrast to the almost fanfare-like opening measures of each of the two principal phrases. Nos. 5 and 6 are noteworthy for their suggestion of the poetic quality found in Chopin’s Waltzes and Mazurkas.

The Opus 18 Ländler exhibit a more consistent pattern of key relationships, and almost without exception they are only sixteen bars long: two eight-bar phrases, each repeated. All of them explore the entire upper range of the keyboard, and exhibit, within the tiny scope of only sixteen bars, an astonishing musical variety.

For the Ecosaises no date of composition can be ascertained, although it is possible that No. 1 was written in 1815. The name Ecossaise has given rise to some scholarly dispute, opinions having been forwarded that the Ecossaise is the same as the Schottisch, the difference in name merely reflecting German or French terminology. There is even scholarly question about the authentically Scotch origin of the dance. Majority opinion seems to hold that the Ecossaise was originally a French version of what a Scotch dance might be. It might be noted that, in the present set, Nos. 7-9 are even more concise than is usual in this dance form. Schubert has here replaced the traditional eight-bar plus eight-bar form with one of only four bars plus four bars, creating dances which, while self-contained, are indisputably miniatures.

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FRANZ SCHUBERT
Dances for Piano - Volume 1

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12 WALTZES, 17 LAENDLER
and 9 ECOSSAISES
(Op. 18) D. 145

JACQUES ABRAM, Piano
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