

presents...

# JONATHAN BISS | Piano

*Echoes of Schubert: Schubert and Sorey*

Thursday, May 2, 2024 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

**SCHUBERT**      **Impromptu in B-flat Major, D. 935, No. 3**

**TYSHAWN SOREY**      **For Anthony Braxton**

INTERMISSION

**SCHUBERT**      **Sonata in B-flat Major, D. 960**  
*Molto moderato*  
*Andante sostenuto*  
*Scherzo. Allegro vivace con delicatezza—Trio*  
*Allegro ma non troppo*

**Jonathan Biss** is represented by Opus 3 Artists  
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## ARTIST PROFILE

San Francisco Performances presents Jonathan Biss for the fifteenth time. He first appeared in March 2007. He also performed as part of our Frontline Online Concert series in Spring 2021.

Praised as “a superb pianist and also an eloquent and insightful music writer” (*The Boston Globe*) with “impeccable taste and a formidable technique” (*The New Yorker*), **Jonathan Biss** is a world-renowned educator and critically-acclaimed author, and has appeared internationally as a soloist with the Los Angeles and New York Philharmonics, the Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco Symphonies, and the Cleveland and Philadelphia Orchestras as well as the London Philharmonic, the Royal Concertgebouw, the Philharmonia, and Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, among many other ensembles. Biss is also Co-Artistic Director alongside Mitsuko Uchida at the Marlboro Music Festival, where he has spent 15 summers.

In the 2023–24 season, Biss returns to perform with the Saint Louis Symphony and Stéphane Denève, the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and Ramón Tebar, and the Philadelphia Orchestra and Yannick Nézet-Séguin at Carnegie Hall. Throughout the season, Biss will present a new project that pairs solo piano works by Schubert with new compositions by Alvin Singleton, Tyson Gholston Davis, and Tyshawn Sorey at San Francisco Performances, Boston’s Isabella Stewart Gardner museum, among many others. Biss continues his collaboration with Mitsuko Uchida featuring Schubert’s music for piano four-hands at Carnegie Hall and more. He will also appear with the Brentano Quartet at Cham-

ber Music Detroit, the Royal Conservatory of Toronto, and more.

European engagements this season include performances with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and Karina Canelakis and the BBC National Orchestra and Ryan Bancroft. Biss reunites with the Elias String Quartet at the Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, Cockermouth Music Society, and Wigmore Hall. In the new year, Biss will perform works by György Kurtág and Schubert at the Sala Verdi in Milan. He concludes his European season with the Orchestre de chambre de Paris and conductor Pekka Kuusisto and Timo Andres’s *The Blind Banister*, part of his ongoing Beethoven/5 commissioning project.

## PROGRAM NOTES

### Four Impromptus, D. 935

**FRANZ SCHUBERT**  
(1797–1828)

Schubert’s genius was equally well suited to the epic scale and to the miniature. In piano sonatas and chamber music works of 40 minutes or longer, he takes existing forms and expands them, testing their natural limits and turning digression into a sublime art; in hundreds of lieder, each no more than a few minutes long, he pierces and, in some case, shatters your heart with a single change of harmony or turn of phrase.

The *Four Impromptus, D. 935* occupy a middle ground. Already deeply moving when heard individually, they become something greater when experienced in their entirety. Written exactly a year before Schubert’s death at the age of 31 (con-

sider it: 935 pieces of music written by the age of 30), the successive tonalities, forms, and moods of these four freestanding pieces suggest a grand sonata in F minor.

However, freed from the strictures of the word “sonata” and the long shadow it—and Beethoven’s 32 towering examples of the form—casts, Schubert’s imagination becomes even more uninhibited, the results even more wondrous. The first Impromptu is not a sonata form; it has no development. Instead, its expected two themes—the first tragic, the second consoling but still so full of sorrow—are supplemented by an unexpected third. Marked *pianissimo appassionato*, it is many seemingly contradictory things at once: fervent, mysterious, urgent, halting, haunting. Its effect is transformative: when it is followed by the return of the Impromptu’s opening idea, it has moved away from defiance and towards resignation. Acceptance is still a long way off, but the fight has been revealed to be futile.

The second piece, an Allegretto, is quintessential Schubert: evocative of a Viennese dance, perhaps a *ländler*, in an A flat major that is somehow more deeply sad than the F minor music that preceded it, and so simple on its surface that any attempt to explain how profoundly moving it is would be doomed to failure. If the first Impromptu is discursive, taking the listener down a wandering and unpredictable path, this one takes a very different route to the sublime, using an unadorned A-B-A form, the simplest in all of music. Not one of its motivic or harmonic events is jarring; few of them are unexpected. In spite or because of this sense of inevitability, the music finds the core of Schubert’s vulnerability, and ours.

The **third Impromptu** has another kind of deceptive simplicity, its lilting B flat major theme falling and then rising in perfect symmetry: a child’s poem. But over the course of five wide-ranging variations, it develops into something different. Even the variations which merely embellish the theme somehow deepen it in the process; Schubert is constitutionally incapable of writing meaningless music, and every *appoggiatura*, every neighbor tone, shades and complicates the music’s narrative. That narrative is further complicated by the journey two of the variations take away from the B flat major home, first to B flat minor, then to G flat major. The former is often dark and always suffused with *Sehnsucht*—longing. (*Sehnsucht* is the central fact of Schubert’s existence. A line from *Die Taubenpost*, his final song—“Sie heißt

die Sehnsucht" ["She is called longing"]—could be considered his motto.) The latter tries to be light-hearted, doesn't quite manage, and in the process only grows more sehnsuchtsvoll: a Schubert signature. Almost every bar features a series of large upward leaps, a gesture that would be carefree in any other pair of hands. But even when Schubert yodels, he does so mit Sehnsucht.

The end of the last variation is not the end of the Impromptu; there is a partial reprise of the theme, in a lower octave and at a slower tempo. It now bears the weight of its history—a history it did not have when we first heard it, only ten minutes earlier. It has lost its innocence and grown even more beautiful.

The final Impromptu returns to F minor and is another study in surface lightness that is not, in fact, light. Marked *Allegro Scherzando*, its predominant characteristic is not playfulness. Eely in its misterioso middle section, featuring pianissimo scales slithering up and down the keyboard, it is otherwise steely, staring fate in the eye and showing no remorse. If the first Impromptu ended with resignation but not acceptance, the last exhibits neither: it ends with a *fortississimo* downward scale, spanning the entire piano and landing on a single, terrible, low F. Schubert's extraordinary gift for lyricism and consolation is matched—balanced is not the word—by the intensity with which he confronted the pain of life and the horror of death. In these Impromptus, both qualities are given magnificent expression. But it is the horror that gets the last word.

## For Anthony Braxton

**TYSHAWN SOREY**  
(B. 1980)

Jonathan Biss will speak about this composition from the stage.

## Sonata in B-Flat Major, D. 960

**FRANZ SCHUBERT**

It was the beginning of September, 1828, and Schubert was seriously unwell. 31 years old and in the throes of the tertiary stage of syphilis, he left the discomfort of urban Vienna for the discomfort of a tiny, damp and poorly heated room in his brother's house.

He died in that miserable room just two months later. But first, he had one of the

most stunning bursts of creative activity in human history. Before his health deteriorated to the point that composition became impossible, he completed a string of the greatest works he or anyone ever produced. This list likely includes the *String Quintet in C Major*, *Schwanengesang*, and the final three piano sonatas. The qualifier of "likely" is necessary because of the paucity of reliable information about Schubert's working life in 1828. He worked feverishly, in all senses; he lived in poverty and obscurity. None of these works were published until long after he died; many of them were entirely unknown for years.

The gulf between these wretched circumstances and the power of the music that emerged from them is impossible to overstate. More than five years removed from his first bout with syphilis, Schubert had to have known—or, at the very least, strongly suspected—that he had little time left to live. But as his life contracted, his music *expanded*, in length and, more so, in vision. The proportions of these last works are immense; their harmonic language is daring, sometimes even frightening. He is constantly grappling with fate; he is deeply, eternally lonely.

Each of these works is miraculous and endlessly interesting. But even in this staggering company, the *Sonata in B-flat Major, D. 960* stands out. It cannot be compared to the other music Schubert wrote in the last months of his life or, indeed, to any other music. The difference is not a question of quality: It is perfectly possible to prefer the *String Quintet*, or one of the other piano sonatas, or the *Winterreise* of 1827, or one of Bach's, or Beethoven's, or Mozart's assorted miracles. That is a matter of taste. But Schubert's B-flat Sonata is unique because it is the ultimate musical farewell. There are moments of terror in this work, and moments of play. But its subject is leaving the world behind: the profound sadness of knowing you will never again see those you love.

To listen to Schubert's *Sonata in B-flat Major* is to be transported: it occupies the liminal space between life and death, and as you listen, you feel that you do as well. From the first notes, all the artifacts of the everyday are left behind; all that exists is this music. The sonata does not begin so much as emerge out of the silence that precedes it. A melody of absolute simplicity—it rises and then falls so gently, rhyming like a child's poem—is underpinned by constant eighth notes, no fewer than 40 of them, moving with total regularity, evoking the eternal.

This is Schubert, though; for him, things are rarely as simple or as unencumbered as they first seem to be. The eighth note

motion does eventually stop, and when it does, it is not at a cadence—a point of rest—but on a dominant chord. This chord is a question mark; the silence the eighth notes leave in their wake is a void, full of mystery and uncertainty.

Whatever it is that one expects to follow this heavy, destabilizing silence, it is not the thing that actually happens: a trill in the lowest reaches of the piano, played pianissimo and suggesting the minor mode. Only a few seconds long, and no louder than a murmur, this trill changes everything—not just what is to come, but the meaning of what we have already heard. The trill comes out of silence, and it leads to silence. But these silences are not mirror images: the second, in the wake of the trill, with its suggestion of menace, is ever so much fraught than the first. This second silence is followed by the resumption of the opening theme, and it has been irrevocably altered by the trill. More precisely, it has been fully revealed: we have felt the fragility and glimpsed the horror that its serenity is obscuring, barely.

For 20 minutes, the first movement proceeds along this path. The beauty of the music is extreme and inexplicable, but it is also haunted; the specter of a terrible void is never far away. The trill returns often enough that it *should* grow less unsettling, but it does not. Schubert wants to leave the world at peace, but he remains petrified.

If the first movement is poised between acceptance and terror, the second movement has a different preoccupation: the impossible task of saying goodbye. In a distant, desolate C-sharp minor, its main theme is somehow stoic and anguished all at once. The rhythm of the accompanying left hand is implacable, moving deliberately, inexorably towards death. The melody itself unfolds as a series of sighs; the ache of it is overwhelming. Nothing else Schubert wrote—none of the hundreds of songs—so thoroughly communicates the *sehnsucht* ("longing" is as close as English comes) that was the core of his character.

A central episode in A major attempts to bring the piece back to earth: its lyricism, glorious as it is, seems to come from normal circumstances, so unlike the music that surrounds it. But its respite cannot be permanent, and inevitably, it leads back to the music of the opening, its sorrow more devastating than ever. For the first few measures, its shape is fundamentally unchanged from its first appearance. Then comes a modulation into C major so sudden and so unexpected, to listen to it is to have the blood drain from your face.

Many a music-loving agnostic has remarked that living with Schubert has made them believe in a higher power. This C major is Schubert's transfiguration. The music does find its way back to its home tonality, but the man has crossed a threshold. If Schubert ever truly belonged to this earth, as of this moment, he has left it.

A third movement is not a necessity in a piano sonata. Beethoven's final work in the genre, Opus 111, has only two movements, ending in a different sort of sublime void. Schubert himself wrote a two-movement piano sonata, either by design or on account of a loss of inspiration: the magnificent *Reliquie in C Major*. If Schubert had left the B-flat Major a two-movement work, no one would think it incomplete. These two movements guide us through life's end: what more could there be?

In fact, the *Sonata in B-flat Major* has not one but two more movements, and they are magic. Following the unfollowable, they manage to feel both inevitable and necessary. The third movement is not precisely high-spirited—it is a dance of the spirits, Schubert using the highest register of the piano as an angelic counterpoint to the trills that so destabilized the first movement.

The last movement achieves the impossible, giving true closure to a work whose subject is life's most mysterious experience. Each time this rondo's main theme appears, it is heralded by an extended, accented, g. This note is not an invitation, but a challenge, nearly a threat: it is a minor third and a whole world away from the b flat that ought to launch the movement. The confrontational nature of this introductory note keeps the theme from being jovial, which it might have seemed in its absence. Much in the same way that the foreboding trill complicated the emotional world of the first movement, this note ensures that the finale remains evenly poised between light and dark.

As the rondo theme makes its final return, one last wondrous thing happens. That g, stubbornly persistent throughout the movement, loses its footing, slipping down a step to a g flat. In doing so, it transforms from a declamation to an entreaty. Up until this point, whether the music was optimistic or sinister, this movement projected confidence. With nothing more than a shift of a half-step, Schubert has re-introduced the vulnerability that makes not just this work, but the whole of his oeuvre so

extremely moving.

With the next half-step shift, this time down to the dominant f, resolution feels imminent. And so it is: we are launched into the briefest of codas, back on the firm ground of B-flat major, *presto*, and at least on the surface, not just happy but recklessly happy. Is this Schubert storming the gates of heaven? That is for each listener to decide. All I can say with certainty is that playing this sonata has changed me. The piano literature is a treasure trove—there is more music of the highest quality than one person could ever get through in a lifetime. But Schubert's *Sonata in B-flat Major* is unique in its impact. Its beauty is itself awe-inducing, but its unflinching honesty and total vulnerability take it to a different realm. It is almost too much to bear; playing it has been the privilege of my life.

—Program notes by Jonathan Biss

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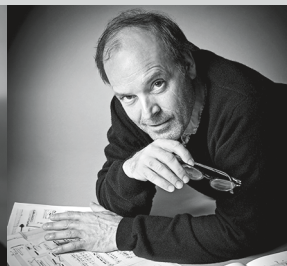


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