

# The Study of Schubert's Piano Pieces Characteristic

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**Abstract:** Franz Schubert bequeathed a significant musical legacy during his brief life. Among his diverse body of work, piano compositions hold a prominent place within his oeuvre. This paper primarily examines Schubert's piano pieces, specifically "Moments Musicaux" (D.780, Op. 94), "Impromptus" (D.899, Op. 90), "Impromptus" (D.935, Op. 142), and the three piano pieces (D.946). By analyzing the contextual background of these compositions alongside the musical scores, this study conducts a comparative analysis of these works, highlighting the composer's distinctive musical traits and exploring their impact on subsequent Romantic music.

**Keywords:** Piano Pieces; Improvisation; Musical Moment.

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## 1. Introduction

In the early 19th century, sonatas emerged as the predominant genre within European classical music, achieving significant advancements in compositional techniques, length, and thematic depth, particularly through the works of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. Notably, Beethoven's piano sonatas have been referred to as "the New Testament for Piano," establishing a benchmark that contemporary composers find challenging to surpass, a sentiment that also applies to Schubert. Schubert composed 22 piano sonatas, including several unfinished works, which is a relatively substantial output compared to many of his contemporaries. However, his sonatas have not received the recognition they deserve in modern times, with only 11 being completed, indicating that Schubert faced numerous challenges—both subjective and objective—during his creative process.

Throughout his brief career, Schubert produced a diverse array of piano music, encompassing sonatas, individual piano pieces, and dance music. His stylistic range not only reflects the traditions of the Baroque and Classical periods but also foreshadows the musical developments that would influence subsequent composers. Among the various genres he explored, piano pieces hold a particularly significant place in Schubert's oeuvre.

Following the emergence of the Romantic movement in literature and the arts in the 1720s, Schubert shifted his compositional focus from grand symphonies and sonatas to piano pieces that convey personal emotions, thereby establishing himself as a pioneer in this genre. The repeated challenges he encountered in sonata composition prompted Schubert to explore new avenues in piano piece creation, which can be interpreted as a transformation in the composer's artistic consciousness and a reformation of the sonata's structural conventions. While the sonata may be likened to an extended discourse, the piano piece resembles a succinct poem. Furthermore, this shift represents a departure from a style that emphasizes technical virtuosity; Schubert's piano pieces prioritize the exploration of internal emotional landscapes. His works, though brief, invite listeners to engage with the ethereal, pure, and nuanced emotions embedded within the music.

This paper will focus on Schubert's piano pieces,

specifically Musical Moments (D.780, Op. 94), Improvisation (D.899, Op. 90), Improvisation (D.935, Op. 142), and the three piano pieces (D.946). Due to the lack of detailed documentation regarding the context of Schubert's piano pieces, the analysis will primarily draw upon the available musical texts and the intrinsic characteristics of the composer's style.

## 2. Creation Background

Improvisation emerged as a significant instrumental genre during the Romantic period in Europe, particularly in the nineteenth century. The term "Impromptu" is derived from Latin, and this style of music is characterized by its delicate and elegant nature, often giving the impression of spontaneity and lack of prior preparation. However, it is important to note that what is labeled as improvisation is typically a work that has undergone slight modifications following an initial improvisational phase. Although the genre of improvisation was not originally conceived by Franz Schubert, it was first introduced by the composer Yang Vrecik in the early nineteenth century. Nonetheless, it was Schubert and Chopin who significantly elevated the genre to a higher artistic standard. Schubert composed eight improvisations, while Chopin created four. The improvisations of Schubert predominantly exhibit lyrical qualities, akin to his simpler art songs. In contrast, Chopin's improvisations were produced during the later stages of his compositional career and display a greater diversity in character. While both composers employed a three-part structure, Chopin's works reflect a more varied approach, merging the freedom of musical expression with the rigor and precision of formal composition, thereby portraying a multifaceted artistic vision. Improvisation, unlike the more unrestricted form of fantasia, often adheres to established structures such as sonata form, ternary form, and variations. Nevertheless, it retains a degree of freedom, allowing for creative expression that is not strictly confined by formal constraints.

### 2.1. Moments Musicaux

Among Franz Schubert's piano compositions, "The Moments of Music" (D.780) is the briefest, representing a specific category of instrumental music, predominantly for piano. The term "Moments of Music" was first employed in

reference to Schubert's collection of piano pieces composed in 1828. These musical moments exhibit characteristics akin to other diminutive genres of the Romantic era, including improvisation, nocturne, and prelude. Typically, "Moments of Music" encapsulate a singular emotional expression, and while contrasting emotions may be present, the contrasts tend to be subtle. Aside from Schubert, instances of works titled "Moments of Music" are exceedingly rare; however, 20th-century composers have adopted the term to describe concert pieces, as exemplified by Rachmaninoff's six piano moments (Op. 16).

In comparison to "Improvisation," "Moments of Music" are characterized by a shorter and more refined structure, yet they exhibit a greater degree of improvisational quality in their content. The original manuscript of these pieces has been lost, rendering it impossible to ascertain the precise dates of their composition. Nevertheless, historical analysis suggests that they were composed at various intervals: the third piece in 1823, the sixth in 1824, and the remaining pieces between 1827 and 1828.

## 2.2. Drei Klavierstücke

Schubert's composition "Three Piano Pieces" (D.946), created in early 1828, exists solely as a draft and was not published during his lifetime. The arrangement of these three pieces was not undertaken by Schubert himself but was instead edited by subsequent generations. These works are widely regarded as an extension of the composer's improvisational style, leading to the addition of the subtitle "Improvisation" by later editors alongside the primary title.

Musically, these pieces exhibit characteristics akin to improvisation, displaying a lively and vivid musical imagery, with an internal contrast in dynamics that rivals that of true improvisational works. However, the absence of formal manuscripts has resulted in certain aspects of these compositions being inadequately documented; for instance, the middle section of the third piece lacks a tempo marking.

## 3. Feature Analysis

Schubert's smaller piano compositions predominantly consist of individual pieces that follow one another. Constrained by the limitations of sonata form, Schubert began to excel in alternative genres, including fantasia, variations, dance music, and various piano works. Among these compositions, the six "Moments Musicaux" (D.780), the second set of "Impromptus" (D.899, D.935), and the "Three Piano Pieces" (D.946) have received significant acclaim. Notably, these works exhibit an instrumental style that diverges somewhat from the characteristics of his art songs. In these compositions, Schubert eschews traditional titling, instead concentrating on the development of thematic melodies and expanding the music through thematic elaboration.

### 3.1. The Three-segment Structure

In terms of musical structure, the predominant form utilized in the majority of compositions is the ABA three-part structure, with the exception of certain works that incorporate variations or consist of two distinct pieces. For instance, the first, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth movements of "Moments of Music" are composed in the ABA or ABABA format. Similarly, the second, third, and fourth movements of "Improvisation" (D.899), as well as the second and fourth movements of "Improvisation" (D.935) and the three piano

pieces (D.946), exemplify this structure. While these musical passages often exhibit dramatic contrasts in emotional content between the A and B sections, the thematic material typically does not undergo significant development. For example, the second and fourth movements of "Moments of Music" and the second and fourth movements of "Improvisation" (D.899) illustrate the contrast between the thematic sections and the middle sections. In the second movement of "Improvisation" (D.899), the primary theme is characterized by a scale-like phrasing, which, when combined with flowing triplet figures, creates an elegant impromptu style. The middle section retains the triplet figures in the inner voices, emphasizing rhythmic stress in contrast to the thematic material.

Furthermore, within these collections of piano pieces, Schubert exclusively employs the sonata form in the first movement of "Improvisation" (D.935). In contrast, he predominantly utilizes a non-sonata three-part structure or variations thereof. The sonata-style movements are evident in the first movement of "Improvisation" (D.899) and the first movement of "Improvisation" (D.935), while variations are represented in the third movement of "Improvisation" (D.935).

### 3.2. Harmony and Tonality

Overall, Schubert's compositional approach to his piano works predominantly reflects a monophonic musical perspective. While this characteristic is prevalent throughout much of his music, it is essential to acknowledge the presence of polyphonic elements, such as the incorporation of original two-part compositions expanded into three or four parts in certain sections, exemplified by measures 18-19 of the first piece from "Improvisation" (D.899). Furthermore, in the second piece of "Improvisation" (D.935), Schubert adeptly integrates four distinct parts within his performance.

Beyond the chordal structure and harmonic organization, the design of harmonic texture significantly contributes to the formation of the musical narrative. This aspect, in conjunction with the chordal framework and harmonic arrangement, works to convey the musical imagery and character, resulting in an inseparable unity. Schubert exhibits a particular affinity for triplets patterns within these compositions. For instance, in the first piece of "Improvisation" (D.899), the unaccompanied melody traverses the harmonic progression, permeating the entire work. Similarly, the first piece from "Music Moments" (D.780) and the first piece from "Three Piano Pieces" (D.946) feature sections where both hands engage in a triplets interplay. Other works, such as the second and third pieces of "Improvisation" (D.899), the second piece from "Moments of Music," and the second piece of "Improvisation" (D.935), also exhibit comparable triplets textures.

### 3.3. The Concept of Improvisation

The concept of improvisation in music can be traced back to Western musical traditions at the close of the fifteenth century, where it generally pertains to non-fixed forms of musical expression. During the nineteenth century and earlier, the distinctions between composers and performers were often ambiguous and subject to change. In the Baroque era, improvisation and performance were fundamental attributes of a composer's identity. This interplay between performance and composition is notably exemplified in the elaborate and spontaneous sections of Bach's compositions.

The characteristics of improvisation in musical works exhibit significant variation across different historical periods.

In the Baroque period, musicians frequently improvised based on a predetermined bass line, with Bach often incorporating a fourth voice to complement the three-part harmony. The advancements in decorative music during the Classical period can be seen as a continuation of the improvisational practices inherited from the Baroque era. This lineage is evident in the opening phrase of the fourth piece from "Moments Musicaux," where the rapid reiteration of a single pitch contrasts with the more overtly improvisational nature of Bach's preludes. Similar improvisational qualities are also present in the second and fourth pieces of Schubert's first set, "Improvisation" (D.899).

From a structural perspective, the essence of improvisation appears to emphasize content over formal constraints. In contrast to the rigidity of formal structures, Schubert's piano compositions prioritize musical flexibility and the uninhibited expression of emotion. The overall compositional technique is relatively informal, characterized by simple and free structural forms. These works often embody improvisation within a straightforward framework, eschewing the stringent requirements of forms such as fugue or sonata, and frequently revolve around a singular theme or tonal center. Notably, the third piece of "Improvisation" (D.935), which is structured as a variation, alongside the first piece of "Improvisation" (D.899), further substantiates this argument through the exploration and evolution of thematic material.

### **3.4. Special Grammar- -The Development of the Romantic School**

In the evolution of music composition techniques, Franz Schubert established a rich and varied musical landscape, demonstrating significant innovation in compositional methods during the Classical period. He diverged from traditional sonata form, instead directing his music through shifts in sound that more intuitively conveyed emotional depth. His exploration of pure sound, harmonic development, and textural color aligned with the expressive modalities characteristic of later Romantic schools.

As previously noted, Schubert's piano compositions can be considered precursors to Romantic music, with their intricate and nuanced harmonies and unexpected tonal shifts underscoring the innovative essence of his musical language. For instance, in the second piece of "Moments of Music," Schubert employs a distinctive piano texture, where the color transitions are marked by strong half-tones. In the sixth piece, the thematic harmony and its relationship to the title exhibit qualities that are uncommon within the Classical tradition. Furthermore, Schubert's piano works are imbued with a poetic quality, achieved through the use of alternating tones and frequent modulations. This shifting of harmonic colors is a defining characteristic of Romantic piano music.

Additionally, the abrupt contrasts in dynamics are a notable feature of Schubert's technique. For example, in "Improvisation" (D.899), the fourth section transitions unexpectedly from C minor to C major, while in the first piece of the same collection, the progression from C minor to A major is gradual. The third piece of the renowned "Improvisation" (D.899), originally published in G major, showcases a lyrical line accompanied by flowing arpeggios, further enhanced by the Romantic harmonic shifts that permeate the composition.

## **4. Stylistic Features of Schubert's Piano Compositions**

### **4.1. The Thematic Melody**

Franz Schubert is recognized as a highly skilled composer, particularly noted for his ability to create exquisite melodies that permeate his diverse body of work. His compositions are characterized by profound emotional depth, as he adeptly conveys lyrical themes and employs cantabile phrases, effectively blurring the lines between instrumental and vocal music. This approach aligns seamlessly with the Romantic perspective on music, which prioritizes emotion and lyricism as fundamental elements of musical expression. A notable example of this is "Impromptu Op. 90" No. 3, which is celebrated as a quintessential representation of the Mendelssohn style of "Songs without Words." The significance of this piece lies in its embodiment of the concept of a "song without lyrics."

### **4.2. Musical Structure**

The majority of Schubert's impromptu compositions adhere to the conventional three-part structure; however, they also employ distinctive compositional techniques that allow for innovation and reformulation of the traditional musical framework in various ways. The methods utilized include the incorporation of the Strophenlied, Varieties Strophenlied, and techniques such as repetitive reproduction and variation, which serve to broaden the scope of the musical structure and disrupt its original orderly presentation. Notably, the third piece from "Impromptu Works 90" utilizes the technique of repeated reproduction, while the first piece employs the technique of variation.

### **4.3. Harmonic Techniques**

During the Romantic period, the innovative and varied application of harmonic energy emerged as a significant area of exploration for composers. Franz Schubert stands out as one of the trailblazers of this movement, employing a distinctive approach that transcended the conventional triplets harmonies characteristic of the Classical era. In addition to utilizing the standard triads and seventh chords, Schubert extensively incorporated variations, auxiliary harmonies, Neapolitan sixths, German augmented sixths, unexpected semitone alterations, and unresolved seventh chords, thereby enriching his compositions with a diverse array of harmonic effects.

### **4.4. The Variability Associated with Tonal Conversion**

In addition to the conventional inheritance of both proximal and distant tonalities, Schubert exhibits a preference for "the opposition of identical tonic and major tones" as well as "the same tonic tone alternating between major and major tonalities," thereby establishing a pronounced contrast between light and dark sound. Furthermore, he demonstrates proficiency in employing second and third degree transpositions, utilizing equivalent sounds and synonyms to enhance the interest of transposition. A pertinent example of this technique can be observed in "Impromptu Op. 90" No. 1, which transitions from C-flat to E-flat major (a third major transposition), among others. Schubert elevated the significance of minor tonalities, producing distinctive sound effects through their application. His adept manipulation of changing tones, alongside the juxtaposition of minor at the

outset and major at the conclusion, contributes to the imaginative quality and contrast within his compositions. For instance, "Impromptu Op. 90" No. 1 commences in C minor and concludes in C major.

#### 4.5. The Rhythmic Style

In the consistent meter of "Impromptu," one can readily observe the subtle alterations in rhythm that Schubert employs to establish his distinctive rhythmic technique. During this period, Schubert was frequently influenced by the folk traditions and dance music of Hungarian and Czech origins, which he adeptly incorporated into his rhythmic compositions. Common rhythmic patterns utilized by Schubert include variations in accentuation, the implementation of syncopated rhythms, and the use of unequal rhythmic groupings (such as three against two or four against three). These techniques allow for a more flexible arrangement of rhythm, enhancing both the vitality and character of his musical works.

#### 4.6. Piano Texture

Schubert's utilization of continuous notes and chords, akin to the "measured tremolo" or "regular" accompaniment style, is a hallmark of his piano compositions and represents one of his most distinctive techniques. In his works, the principal melody is typically situated in the outer fingers, with Schubert being recognized as one of the early proponents of this compositional approach. He employs the right hand to articulate the lyrical melody while simultaneously engaging the middle register. This technique is exemplified in "Impromptu Op. 90," where it manifests in various forms: the harmonic theme at the outset of No. 1, the string rhythm in No. 2 B, the pervasive harmonic string in No. 3, and the central melody of No. 4.

Moreover, when Schubert composes melodies, he frequently incorporates ascending and descending scale passages that are shaped by harmonic overtones, as illustrated in "Impromptu Op. 90" No. 2.

### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, while the Schubert piano pieces share numerous characteristics, it is evident that each individual piece possesses its own unique and varied interpretations,

each reflecting distinct personalities. This observation aligns with the general compositional approach of piano works, which often exhibit a clear personality despite their brevity.

In the case of the improvisation (D.935), Schubert's designation of the piece indicates a departure from traditional sonata form. The six pieces from "Musical Moments" reveal Schubert's distinctive musical techniques, predominantly characterized by a three-part structure with a contrasting middle section. Subsequent generations have frequently emphasized Schubert's contributions to art songs and sonatas, while also recognizing him as a composer of stylistic pieces.

In the final year of his life, Schubert composed three piano pieces (D.946), which were created during the latter stages of his career and remained unpublished. The first piece not only showcases the unique emotional expression typical of the Romantic era but also reflects Schubert's quest for self-exploration through its free musical style. In this work, the composer conveys his musical ideas through an artistic and nuanced mood, eschewing the pursuit of expansive sonata forms.

While Beethoven's music is characterized by the development and extension of thematic material to construct a logical structure, Schubert's hallmark lies in his ability to capture ephemeral musical moments, allowing melodies to flow seamlessly. Both composers embody elements of the Classical and Romantic periods. Furthermore, Schubert's influence on numerous composers of the 19th-century Romantic era warrants further investigation and scholarly discourse.

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