

Programme Notes

Sonata Bb Major, opus 24 #2 by Muzio Clementi

Muzio Clementi is best known for his influence on other composers as well as for his pedagogical compositions rather than for his approximately 110 piano sonatas, symphonies and other works. It is commonly acknowledged that he had a great influence on Beethoven and was, perhaps, the first to write truly idiomatically for the pianoforte.

But to consign him to an historic role is unjust – it is surely time to begin to reverse the neglect which has been the fate of the bulk of his mature works. Most of the symphonies have been lost. The surviving symphonies demonstrate how sad this loss truly is. As for the sonatas, the best of them deserve to stand alongside those of Haydn and Mozart.

There are a number of reasons for this neglect. First of all, Clementi was also a businessman who later in life was successful in piano manufacture and music publishing. For the Romantics, Mozart's single-minded and impractical nature was a much more sympathetic model for the Great Artist.

Secondly, we pianists all were required to study at least a few of Clementi's sonatinas in the course of our early training. In spite of the undeniable charm of these works, many of us have struggled to forgive him.

But it was Mozart who harmed his reputation most seriously. In 1781, while in Vienna, Clementi was asked by the Emperor Josef II to enter a musical playing contest with Mozart for the amusement of the Emperor's guests, the Grand Duke and Duchess of Russia. Clementi's later accounts of this event were extremely respectful towards his younger rival. In contrast, Mozart wrote to his father: "Clementi plays well, as far as execution with the right hand goes. His greatest strength lies in his passages in thirds. Apart from that, he has not a penny's worth of taste or feeling – in short he is a mere mechanicus." In a subsequent letter he was more succinct: "Clementi is a charlatan, like all Italians."

These sentiments, inspired perhaps by a need to put a threatening rival in his place, became an ongoing part of the lore surrounding Clementi's life and reputation. Of course most of us have said things in letters that we would not want to see published, and Mozart's letters are filled with playful and often spiteful opinions. But undoubtedly his words very much slowed the process of a genuine critical appreciation of Clementi's achievement.

Beethoven admired Clementi's sonatas for their wealth of melodic and harmonic invention and their formal facility. But Clementi is also a master of texture. Many of his sonatas suggest elaborate and original orchestrations. Some of the later sonatas, with their powerful sense of drama and rhetoric, can be seen as a continuation of 18th-century Opera Seria after such works were long out of fashion.

This Sonata is a relatively early work. We know that it was written before 1781 because it was one of the works that Clementi played in his contest with Mozart. And in spite of Mozart's words of disdain, this work must have made an impression since the opening motive clearly is the basis for Mozart's Magic Flute Overture. Mozart never acknowledged this and the only sign of pique from Clementi came in his insistence that when the work was later republished, it include in the score a note confirming that the sonata was written a considerable time before Mozart's Magic Flute.

If this Sonata lacks the drama and daring of some of Clementi's later masterpieces, it demonstrates a wide range of comic characterizations. And unlike some of Mozart's early sonatas, it is never boring.

Twelve German Dances Opus posth. 171 D. 790 by Franz Schubert

Franz Schubert did not find it easy to find publishers for his more ambitious instrumental works: his chamber music, his symphonies and his piano sonatas. But his Waltzes and other dance collections were another matter: the middle class was hungry for lighter piano fare and his dances found a ready audience. An exception was this collection of German Dances which were only published 36 years after Schubert's death. It is obvious why Schubert could not find a publisher for them. These are very unlike the simpler dances that make up his other collections. Instead there is a powerful originality in the modulations, a great richness of texture, and a surprising range of emotion within this seemingly limiting form.

Sonata in Bb Major and Rondo in A Major for Piano Duet

The piano duet as a genre is typically lighter and conceived more for the enjoyment of the players than for the edification of the listener. Certainly Schubert's duet works are a pleasure to play. What makes them unique is their quality. Even the lighter works have a great deal of invention. And the more ambitious works are among the greatest works he wrote: indeed they rank among the finest piano works of the 19th century. It could be said that they provide the most complete portrait of his musical genius among any of the instrumental forms he undertook. In the definitive Henle Edition, his complete duet works take up three fat volumes, and one finds in these volumes everything from dances and lighter forms to a number of works that are among his greatest masterpieces.

The Sonata in Bb, opus 35, is a work of great warmth and feeling as well as charm. It was written in 1819 and most closely resembles in scope and in delicacy the well known A Major solo sonata, opus 120 D. 664, also from 1819. Both works are miniatures in length only. Both hint at depths which their modest scope cannot obscure.

The Rondo in A Major was written just a few months before the composer's death. The quality of the works written in the last few months of his life are astonishing, and this work is no exception.

Sonata in G Major, Opus 78, D. 894 by Schubert

For any composer after Beethoven, the older composer's sonata legacy was an intimidating presence. It is now generally conceded that Schubert succeeded more than any other composer in creating a major body of music in this form. His ten or more mature sonatas collectively represent one of the great achievements of the piano literature.

Such an opinion would have been considered incomprehensible up until the beginning of the 20th century. Before then, these sonatas were considered too long, too diffuse and too lacking in formal mastery to be playable. Even in his lifetime, they were difficult for the public and publishers alike to make sense of. This sonata is one of only three that were published in Schubert's lifetime, and the publisher – perhaps finding the first movement's radical nature too confusing – did not publish it as a sonata but rather with the title: *Fantasie, Andante, Minuetto & Allegretto*. Four individual character

pieces would have been, at that time, a much more marketable product.

Schumann referred to this Sonata as "Schubert's most perfect in form and spirit." And indeed there is a high level of mastery throughout, but it is the first movement that is surely the most unique. There is little of the discursive working out of conflicting material that we expect from the first movement of a sonata. Instead there is a powerful sense of stillness and contemplation. The harmonic movement is radically slowed and the silences and particularly the striking sustained sonorities seem to alter our sense of reality.

Bruce Vogt