



presents...

JONATHAN BISS | Piano

Echoes of Schubert

Thursday, January 18, 2024 | 7:30pm

Herbst Theatre

**TYSON
GHOLSTON DAVIS**

...Expansions of Light, for piano (2023)

I. Arietta I
II. Interlude
III. Arietta II

SCHUBERT

Impromptu in F Minor, D. 935, No. 1

INTERMISSION

SCHUBERT

Sonata in C Minor, D. 958

Allegro
Adagio
Menuetto: Allegro
Allegro

**This program is made possible in part by the generous support of
Neil O'Donnell and Chris Motley.**

Jonathan Biss is represented by Opus 3 Artists
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Steinway Model D, Pro Piano, San Francisco



ARTIST PROFILE

San Francisco Performances presents Jonathan Biss for the thirteenth 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-Seguín 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

...Expansions of Light, for piano (2023)

TYSON GHOLSTON DAVIS
(B. 2000)

...*Expansions of Light*, for piano (2023) is a triptych piece in response to *Winter Light* (1979), a painting by American abstract expressionist Helen Frankenthaler. The composition, like the artwork, is deeply contemplative in nature, providing a meditative and ethereal atmosphere in which the music flows through. While studying the canvas, it became apparent to me that the essence of *Winter Light* is one of great concern to the expansion and development of a singular visual motive. Hues of bright golden bronze in the upper left of the canvas sweep in a downward fashion gradually to the right; this amorphous, draping

background is influenced by muted dark shades of brown, green, and orange. In addition to this, a deep, yet vibrant blue (of the Yves Klein fashion) impacts the bronze, bleeding into it, mutating itself into various turquoise greens. The metamorphosis of these hues, along with the manner in which they interact with one another, lead this work to explore subtle manipulation of musical gesture and material within my composition.

The name “Expansions of Light” comes from the ideas previously stated as well my continuous, literal “expansion” of the musical ideas I did in my sketches for the work. The gently flowing lyricism, along with the subtly frozen aspects of Frankenthaler’s canvas are the origin for the movement titles of *Arietta I* and *Arietta II*. These movement titles, belonging to the operatic tradition meaning “short aria,” were introduced into instrumental writing by Beethoven in his later piano sonatas (most notably Opus 111). The *Caprice* provides textural contrast for the composition’s preoccupation with pensive and vocal qualities.

Helen Frankenthaler’s canvases have led me to create several compositions reflecting the nature of her aesthetic concepts. There are currently five “Studies on Frankenthaler” and there are plans for several more in the future. *Expansions of Light* (2023), was commissioned by the Terezin Music Foundation for pianist Jonathan Biss and is dedicated to Ara Guzelimian with admiration and gratitude.

—Tyson Gholston Davis (11.16.23)

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 (consider 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.

Sonata in C Minor, D. 958

When Mozart was still a teenager, he wrote a series of violin concertos which are among the first of his works to have entered the repertoire and remained there. They are age appropriate, assuming one is a genius: impeccably wrought, full of imagination and charm, largely unconcerned with the great questions of life, and wholly untroubled by the specter of death.

When Schubert was 18 years old, he wrote his first great song, the *Erlkönig*: a man rides through the night on horseback, holding his child but failing to protect him. Death beckons, in the form of the Erl-king; he is seductive and terrifying. Throughout the song, the pianist is asked to play lightning-fast octaves—the situation is nightmarish, the music close to unplayable. Moments from the end, the relentless

motion in the piano part finally stops. Has the danger passed? No. The child has died.

This is Schubert. We forget, because the beauty of his music is so overwhelming, that his nature is *morbid*. Long before he had reason to suspect that his life would be short, he wrote music that fixates on death, with fascination and terror. When, at the age of just 25, he began to show symptoms of the syphilis that likely killed him, this fixation grew stronger, and found increasingly personal and increasingly devastating expression in his music. This is the Schubert of the *Unfinished Symphony*, of *Die Schöne Müllerin*, works that, in their different ways, confront the horror of death, and offer consolation without offering hope.

And when, only a few years later, death was indeed imminent, Schubert reckoned with it in a way no other composer has, before or since. The astonishing final three piano sonatas, dated simply “September 1828”—he died in November—represent three different approaches to facing the inevitable. Perhaps because it was published as the last of the trilogy, the B flat major, with its extreme surface serenity, has most informed our perception of Schubert at the end of his life. He is at peace.

Listen to the *Sonata in C Minor, D. 958*, and you will come to the opposite conclusion. Schubert is in rage, and he is in *terror*. The work is frightening to play and frightening to listen to; Schubert surely intended it that way. Schubert is staring death in the face and insisting that you do so as well.

One of the signature qualities of Schubert’s late period instrumental music is its digressiveness, its willingness to wander. These works take on epic proportions in part because while Schubert knows the road very well—his sense of structure is unconventional but brilliant—he often veers off it. While the C Minor Sonata has one such moment, much of its power comes from how otherwise tightly argued it is. There is a relentless focus to this music which is atypical: perhaps this is why listeners have often found this to be the most Beethovenian of Schubert’s great works. The voice is unmistakably Schubert’s, but the sense of being led, inevitably and even inexorably, down a terrible path, is highly reminiscent of the man who had died just a year earlier, and at whose funeral Schubert had been a pallbearer.

This sense of a remorseless architecture begins instantly: the opening theme rises and rises, reaching upward with terrible insistence, punctuated by silences that

continued on page 4

only increase the tension. This is a motive but not a melody—a striking and significant choice on the part of a man who wrote hundreds of songs, and whose lyrical gift is rightly venerated. There is plenty of beauty in this sonata, but it is not the starting point, and it will not be the ending point; it is not the point. This opening rise is extreme, as befits the piece: just 12 measures in, we are three octaves higher than where we began, and already at a fever pitch. The terms of the work have been set; the path has been laid.

And again, Schubert shows a commitment to this path that is uncharacteristic. The second theme is in the major mode and, on its face, lyrical, but it is not consoling; it is too unsettled for that. It is surpassingly beautiful but also ambiguous, never reaching a secure resolution, and constantly threatening to turn dark, which it inevitably does. The overall mood of this exposition is consistent, and Schubert's discursions—his daydreams and his hallucinations—are nowhere to be found.

The development is another story. Midway through, for the first and only time in

the sonata, we are suddenly unmoored. The opening of the movement was solidly diatonic, reaching ever upward, moving with total forthrightness; this music is unnervingly chromatic, moving up and then down with slithering uncertainty. It is a ghoulish detour from the movement's central argument, joined to it only through the terror it evokes.

This pervasive sense of terror makes what follows all the more deeply moving. The sonata's second movement, an *Adagio*, puts the Schubertian qualities that had been sidelined in the first movement front and center: the tenderness and consolation in this *Adagio*'s main theme are almost more than one can bear. This theme, already perfect in and of itself, becomes so much more powerful in context—further evidence of how brilliantly constructed this work is. The theme appears three times, interrupted twice by music with the sense of foreboding that permeates the rest of the sonata: dark, and with the harmonic ground shifting perilously underneath it. Each time the main theme returns, it grows more affecting; each time we grow more aware that it is an oasis

whose respite will prove temporary.

And so it is. The third and, particularly, the fourth movements return us to the road we started out on: by the end, it will feel very much like the road to hell. The finale, a dance with death, is among the most grim, most unremitting pieces of music ever written. Its primary material's rhythmic drive is nonstop, its motion relentless; its secondary material, launched by a terrifying sudden shift—a modulation it isn't—from C minor up to C sharp minor, is, if possible, even more obsessively driven. The central episode, the movement's only music in the major mode, while beautiful in an unearthly way, is not ultimately less frightening—this is the *Erl-King*, leading us with a smile to our death.

And death does come. The sonata began with a furious rise to the top of the keyboard; it ends with a plunge all the way to the bottom. It is the culmination of an altogether harrowing work, one which gives magnificent expression to the darkest corners of Schubert's psyche.

—Schubert notes by Jonathan Biss