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SF<sup>SYMPHONY</sup>



**MATTHEW GRIFFITH**  
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**encore**

# ERIC LU

# SHENSON SPOTLIGHT SERIES

Wednesday, January 31, 2024, at 7:30pm

Eric Lu piano

**FRANZ SCHUBERT**

Four Impromptus, Opus 90, D.899 (1827)

No. 1 in C minor

No. 2 in E-flat major

No. 3 in G-flat major

No. 4 in A-flat major

**FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN**

Piano Sonata No. 3 in B minor, Opus 58 (1844)

Allegro maestoso

Scherzo: Molto vivace

Largo

Finale: Presto non tanto

This program is performed without intermission.

# Four Impromptus, Opus 90, D.899

## FRANZ SCHUBERT

**Born:** January 31, 1797, in Vienna

**Died:** November 19, 1828, in Vienna

**Composed:** 1827

The first two of Franz Schubert's Four Impromptus, Opus 90, were published on December 10, 1827, not quite a year before his untimely death. Calling them Impromptus was apparently an inspiration of the publisher, Tobias Haslinger; the name does not appear on the composer's manuscript. It was a new and trendy title for a musical composition, its first appearance having been for a piano piece by Jan Václav Hugo Voříšek released in Vienna in 1817. That, too, may have been the publisher's idea rather than the composer's, but the title is there on Voříšek's modest piece one way or another, and it set the stage for the more famous impromptus soon to be written by Schubert, Chopin, and many others. Schubert must have approved of the title, and when he composed another four in December 1827, the same month that the earlier two appeared, he headed his manuscript *Vier Impromptus* (Four Impromptus).

Schubert's Impromptus are carefully worked-out compositions that, by and large, do not suggest the off-the-cuff spirit their name implies. A rare exception is the opening of the First Impromptu, in C minor. After the opening "call to attention"—the note G spread across four octaves, so the dominant note rather than the tonic one might have expected—Schubert tries out his theme in a tentative way: four measures of just the melody, unaccompanied; then a four-measure response, harmonized; then another four, unaccompanied; then four more, harmonized. Once he finds his sea legs with his theme, he expands it into a more spacious version, sung against an accompaniment of triplets. The piece develops through variations on this theme-plus-variant, the music being filled with Schubert's characteristic harmonic side-steps, often yielding surprising modulations just as he homes in on a cadence. An emotionally ambiguous atmosphere hovers over this work, sometimes reminding the listener of the song cycle *Winterreise*, which Schubert was composing at about the same time.

The Second Impromptu, in E-flat (the relative major of the First Impromptu's C minor), is more straightforward. It is essentially a waltz, based on a purling theme in triplets, with a contrasting trio section; and, after a return of the opening waltz music, a coda that recalls the sounds of the trio and ends in E-flat minor, in contrast to its overriding tonic of E-flat major.

We don't know why Haslinger did not immediately issue all four of Schubert's first group of Impromptus. It appears that he intended to, since in December 1828 he advertised the four pieces as a set. But they did not appear as planned, and the third and fourth of them were not published until 1857, again by the Haslinger firm—by which time both Schubert and Tobias Haslinger were long gone and the company was directed by Tobias's son, Carl. Perhaps some of the reticence is explained by the curious history of the Third Impromptu. Schubert cast it in G-flat major, which has six flats in its key signature. For most pianists, the layout of notes in the key of G-flat major lies very comfortably beneath the hand, but all those flats can look scary to musicians not accustomed to them, which would have included all players in 1827. And then there was Schubert's bizarre time signature: two alla breve (aka "cut time") signs, one right after the

other. It does look strange, but the general consensus is that he meant "cut cut time," or what we might today write as 4/2 meter—one half-note per beat (the denominator), four beats per measure (the numerator). When Carl Haslinger finally issued the piece, he normalized matters. On Schubert's manuscript is written, likely in Carl's hand, "Im ganzen Takt und in G-dur umzuschreiben" (To be rewritten in measures of whole notes and in G major); then the second alla breve mark is scribbled out and bar lines are inserted to slice each of Schubert's four-beat measures in half. So was it published and so it remained until 1894, when the relevant volume of Schubert's complete works appeared.

It is sometimes said that this is the first piano piece set in six flats. That may be true for 1827 (although a movement of Beethoven's Opus 26 Piano Sonata, from 1800–01, is set in seven flats); still, this was of limited import since the piece wasn't published until three decades later. The idea of expanding pianists' technical mastery to encompass remote keys was in the air. Chopin would use the key of G-flat major for two etudes (one in 1830, the other a few years later) as well as—nota bene!—his Impromptu No. 3 (1842); and he wrote two works in similarly six-flatted E-flat minor, an etude (1830) and a polonaise (1836). If Schubert was the first to set a composition in six flats, Chopin was the first to do so with music anyone outside of Schubert's circle of friends would have heard.

Does it matter whether the piece is played in G-flat major or G major? G-flat is generally considered a warmer, more ruminative key than cheerful G major, although, given modern equal-tempered tuning, hearing these distinctions is probably more a question of tradition and predisposition than of actual acoustics. How Schubert's pianos were tuned we simply don't know. More to the point is that setting this work in G-flat major connected it to the preceding piece, which ended in E-flat minor—again, with six flats. Schubert is continuing his logical succession of related keys: C minor (three flats) for the First Impromptu, E-flat major (three flats) moving to E-flat minor (six flats) for the second, G-flat major (six flats) for the third. The unusual meter should make a psychological impact on the player. The piece may be marked *Andante* (a relaxed tempo), but a melody notated mostly in whole-notes and half-notes over long-spanning measures invites utmost spaciousness in this unfussy but exorbitantly beautiful masterwork. Hearing it just once is never enough.

The Fourth Impromptu, structured in forthright A-B-A form, opens in A-flat minor—a dialogue between downward-cascading arpeggios and a stately, chordal response. Major and minor forms of a key often mesh in Schubert's music, and so they do here, in both the main section and the contrasting trio. In the end, the composer leaves us in the comfort of the major mode, with the four flats of A-flat major bringing to a conclusion this four-impromptu voyage through flat keys.





# Piano Sonata No. 3 in B minor, Opus 58

## FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN

**Born:** March 1, 1810, in Żelazowa Wola, near Warsaw

**Died:** October 17, 1849, in Paris

**Composed:** 1844

Born about 30 miles west of Warsaw to a French father and a Polish mother, and baptized Fryderyk Franciszek (which he later changed to Frédéric François), Chopin was only 15 when he saw a piece of his appear in print as his Opus 1. In 1829 he triumphed in a concert tour to Vienna and in the winter of 1830–31 returned there for a follow-up. He would never again see his homeland. A week after he arrived in Vienna, Poland erupted in political uprising. It was impractical for Chopin to return home, and he gradually made his way to a new life in France, though he remained fiercely allied to Polish revolutionary ideals. Paris was a cultural hotbed when Chopin arrived, and he was greeted by a circle of artistic luminaries that included Vincenzo Bellini, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Hector Berlioz, Franz Liszt, Heinrich Heine, and Victor Hugo—and, of course, the cross-dressing author George Sand, who became Chopin's unlikely yet intimate companion. Chopin's distinctive pianistic style captivated everyone. "Let us imagine," Robert Schumann wrote, "that an Aeolian harp had all the scales and that an artist's hand had mingled them together in all kinds of fantastic decorations, but in such a way that you could always hear a deeper fundamental tone and a softly singing melody—there you have something of a picture of his playing." This was Romanticism itself, and Chopin's status was further enhanced by his exotic origins, his refined but aloof character, and—sad to say—his ongoing struggle against tuberculosis, considered at the time the most Romantic of deadly diseases.

The piano was Chopin's bailiwick; his reputation is based almost entirely on his solo piano music. Most of his music is distributed among piano genres represented by multiple pieces in his catalogue: mazurkas, nocturnes, polonaises, waltzes, preludes, etudes, impromptus, scherzos, ballades. Many of these may be considered miniatures, but he did venture into the domain of the multi-movement sonata on four occasions, each time in a minor key, for his Cello Sonata in G minor, Opus 65 (1845–46), and his three Piano Sonatas: in C minor, Opus 4, of 1827–28; in B-flat minor, Opus 35, of 1837, containing the famous Funeral March; and the work played here, in B minor, Opus 58, of 1844.

We know little about the genesis of the B-minor sonata. Chopin composed it in 1844, apparently that summer, at about the same time he wrote his *Berceuse*, Opus 57. On December 1, 1844, he alerted his Parisian publisher, Maurice Schlesinger, that the sonata was available (requesting 1,200 francs for the two works together), and in August 1845 he reported in a letter to his family that the *berceuse* and the sonata were in print. Indeed, it had appeared in June, released simultaneously by three different publishers in Paris, Leipzig, and London. The sonata carried a dedication to Countess Emilie de Perthuis, one of the many nobles in his artistic circle; in 1836, Chopin had dedicated his *Four Mazurkas*, Opus 24, to her husband. There is no record of Chopin ever playing this sonata in public, although he may have. (It is sometimes stated that he premiered it in his Paris concert of February 26, 1845—almost surely erroneously, since the playbill for that event has him playing a concerto, and not a sonata.) On Christmas Day

of 1845 the pianist Frédéric Kalkbrenner wrote a letter to Chopin reporting that his son "makes so bold as to want to play your fine Sonata in B minor, and ardently wishes for advice from you, so that he may come as close as possible to your intentions." If Chopin provided the requested guidance, it has been consigned classical music's dead-letter office.

Like the sonata that preceded it, the B-minor proclaims Chopin's consummate ability to work within larger formal structures. This is essentially a sonata in the Classical mold (though with liberties, to be sure), cast in four full-scale movements. It starts with an *Allegro maestoso* in sonata form, beginning with the primordial shriek of a descending figure that sets the portentous mood. That extends through ensuing themes—or suggestions of themes—until the music lands in the relative-major key of D for the extended working-out of a lyrical melody, marked *sostenuto*. Following Classical convention, the score calls for a repeat of the opening exposition, but pianists often ignore this and power right on into the development section, presumably because observing the repeat might make the movement overly long. Still, Chopin does seem intent on striking a Classical pose in this piece, and he wrote the repeat—with first and second endings—into the score all the way back to the daintily penned manuscript copy he provided to his German publisher. Then, too, he departs from the structural norm by exciting the principal theme from the start of the recapitulation and jumping right in at the lyrical tune. He may have made that choice precisely because, with the repeat, the principal thematic territory would have already gotten two complete work-throughs—plus the principal theme was also the main matter explored in the development section.

The second movement is a sparkling *Scherzo*, its fast music encasing a gentle, introspective trio section that sounds surprisingly Brahmsian (like *late* Brahms, even), with inner voices more overtly contrapuntal that we expect from Chopin. After a stentorian two-measure introduction, the ensuing *Largo* settles into the world of the Chopin nocturne, mostly untroubled—suggesting in its second theme that Debussy lies in the future. The sonata-rondo Finale is built on two themes. The first is marked *agitato* (easily over-accented to become galumphing), while the second involves more cheerful gusto, which gets the last word in the sunny coda.

—James M. Keller

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James M. Keller, now in his 24th season as Program Annotator of the San Francisco Symphony, is the author of *Chamber Music: A Listener's Guide* (Oxford University Press) and is writing a sequel volume about piano music.



## About the Artist



### ERIC LU

Eric Lu won first prize at the Leeds International Piano Competition in 2018 at the age of 20. The following year, he signed an exclusive contract with Warner Classics, and has since collaborated with some of the world's leading orchestras and performed in major recital venues.

Recent and forthcoming orchestral collaborations include the London Symphony, Chicago Symphony, Boston Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Oslo Philharmonic, Orchestre Philharmonique du Luxembourg, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Orchestre National de Lille, Finnish Radio Symphony, Seattle Symphony, Helsinki Philharmonic, Shanghai Symphony at the BBC Proms, among others.

As a recitalist, Mr. Lu has performed at the Cologne Philharmonie, Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Leipzig Gewandhaus, Hamburg Elbphilharmonie, BOZAR Brussels, Fondation Louis Vuitton Paris, 92NY, Seoul Arts Center, Warsaw Philharmonic, and Sala São Paulo. In 2024 he will appear for the sixth consecutive year in recital at Wigmore Hall. Mr. Lu's third album on Warner Classics was released in December 2022, featuring two Schubert sonatas, and received critical acclaim, including *BBC Music Magazine's* Instrumental Choice.

Born in Massachusetts in 1997, Mr. Lu first came to international attention as a laureate of the 2015 Chopin International Competition in Warsaw. He was also awarded the International German Piano Award in 2017 and an Avery Fisher Career Grant in 2021. He was a BBC New Generation Artist from 2019–22. He is a graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music, studying with Robert McDonald and Jonathan Biss, was also a pupil of Dang Thai Son, and has been mentored by Mitsuko Uchida and Imogen Cooper. He is now based in Berlin and Boston.

## FROM THE ARTIST

**Tell us a little about what you're playing on this program.**

I am performing Schubert's Four Impromptus, Opus 90, and Chopin's Third Piano Sonata in B minor. I think these two opuses contain some of the greatest music out there in the repertoire—truly emotionally touching and powerful music.

**What's your process for preparing for a concert and how do you know when a piece is ready for an audience?**

This is very difficult to pinpoint into words, but on specific levels the process is always changing and evolving, like a living organism. On a general level, I will try to live with a piece for some time, and preferably have played it many times on stage prior as well. You absolutely feel like you go on a journey with the pieces you perform and work on intensively during any given time. You never really know whether a piece is "ready" for an audience until you go there and do it and prove to yourself that you can do it to a certain level and expectation that you have for yourself.

**What inspired you to pursue a career in classical music?**

Ultimately, the music itself is the greatest source of inspiration. Beyond that really—an all-consuming part of life, and vocation.