

Franz SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

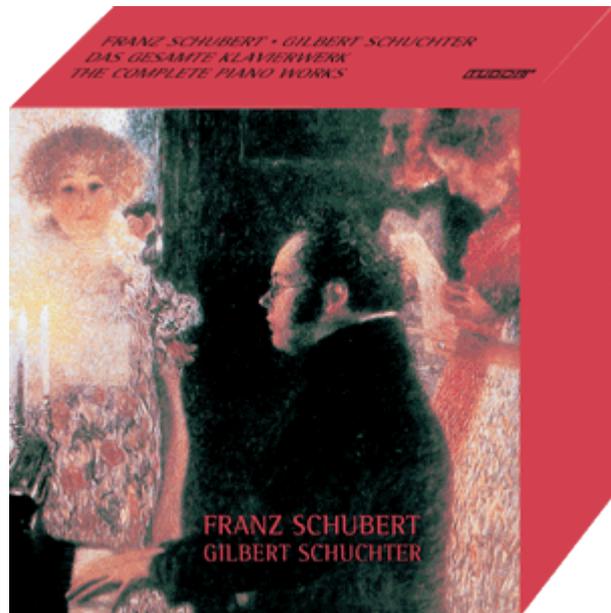
The Complete Piano Works

Gilbert Schuchter (piano)

rec. 1969/70, Studio Casino Baumgarten, Vienna

TUDOR 1640 [12 CDs: 808:24]

These recordings were made between 1969 and 1970 on a Bösendorfer grand piano in Vienna's Casino Baumgartner studio, and at the time its hefty 15 LP box represented the world premiere complete recording of Schubert's piano works. The recordings were first released on CD in 1989 as single discs, and this box set re-release represents the re-emergence of a set that has been quite hard to acquire for some time. At around £4 a disc this is a comparative bargain, though not quite as super-cheap as some labels offer. By way of added value this set comes with a substantial booklet with useful notes on all of the genres of Schubert's piano works in German, French and English.



At nearly 50 years old, these analogue recordings sound very good indeed. The piano sound is mellow but not dull, and well captured in a fairly close perspective. We've become so used to digital editing that it's quite an ear opener to be re-acquainted with the old-fashioned tape splicing in evidence here. These occasional moments aren't particularly disturbing, though there are times when a slight shift in balance between left and right channels can be perceived, especially with headphones. You'll only notice tape hiss if you turn the volume up uncomfortably high, and production values are entirely satisfactory for the period.

Gilbert Schuchter was a highly respected Austrian pianist who appeared with conductors such as Karajan, Wand, Krips and Sawallisch, and was also a conductor himself. Performance tradition is always in a state of development, but beyond the better known sonatas, Impromptus and a few other pieces my impression is that Schubert's piano works were regarded seriously by only a handful of artists. Wilhelm Kempff's Deutsche Grammophon recordings come from roughly the same period, and they share with Schuchter an approach that selects measured tempi and a highly civilized manner.

Just picking out a few key works should give a fair impression of this set as a whole. The "Wanderer-Fantasie" D 760 is something you might associate with stormy moods, but the tempo here is restrained, the mood conveyed more one of nobility and poise than melodrama. Schuchter's timing adds around five minutes when compared with Paul Lewis in Harmonia Mundi (review), but avoids becoming a lumbering dinosaur through convincing dynamics and authenticity of expression. This work shares space on disc with the Sonata in A major D 959, the first movement of which is taken broadly but by no means at a slouch. The second movement Andantino is nicely lyrical, if not infused with that reverential sense of wonder conjured by some these days. The Scherzo is deliciously light and actually undercuts Paul Lewis in its timing, leaving us with a final Rondo which has all of the song-like character you could wish for.

While we're on the subject of the sonatas, the last great Sonata in B flat major D 960 is inevitably a point of focus. Recent performers such as Krystian Zimerman (review) have moved away from a richer use of the sustain pedal, particularly in that Andante sostenuto second movement, but Schuchter is relatively uncontroversial in his tempi here, going for smoothly lyrical movement in the first two movements and lightness of touch in the Scherzo and the final Allegro ma non troppo. He doesn't plumb the greatest depths of profundity or attempt extremes of characterization, but by no means leaves us feeling short-changed. This wouldn't be in my top five of performances of this particular work, but comes close enough and as part of the set is perfectly fine.

Other Schubert highlights include the Impromptus D 899, which are attended to with sensitivity by Schuchter. You can sense the thoughtful approach given to the minor-key Allegro molto moderato of the first of these, and the musical rather than virtuoso feel of the second Allegro. This is the measure of Schuchter's Schubert, putting the musical content before overt display and delivering performances that make the listener think as well as relish the experience. That gorgeous third Andante reaches out into Lisztian realms without seeming to try, showing us where Schubert's forward-looking literary mind infused his abstract piano writing. The final Allegretto is non-quirky but poetic in a straightforward fashion, putting us in mind of a Chopin etude. The Impromptus D 935 are also very fine. These are unpretentious readings but appreciative of the composer's genius. We're used to the music being given a little more breathing space these days but there is no discomfort here, and the dancing final Allegro scherzando has plenty of Eastern European kick. This disc is shared with the Sonata in A major D 664 which again is heard more often these days with a little more space around the notes, but the expressive world of that central Andante is given plenty of imaginative inflection, and the shaping of the whole is like a little gift from the gods.

CD 3 of this set has the Sonata in C major, D.840 'Reliquie' which can see some performers tying themselves in all kinds of knots. Schuchter keeps his cool here, and delivers a first movement that has the feel of an orchestral transcription for which the original has been lost, which to my mind is where Schubert's mind might well have been wandering when he wrote it. Equally, the Andante is a song without words, the narrative of which is by no means answered by the exploratory Menuetto that follows. Schuchter lets this all speak for itself without creating an enigma imposed by time. We all love the Moments musicaux D 780, and again Schuchter is healthily sanguine in his performance, not lingering over expressive moments, but not denying Schubert his voice. The last Allegretto is especially nice, with that extra layer of ruminative inflection just raising the expressive stakes a little higher.

I think there's almost enough comment here to gain a general impression. The various sundry Ecosaisien, Variationen and Tanze are by no means lacking in interest, and there is nothing here that can be counted as a dud performance. These are integrated into each disc to make up a mixed and interesting recital for each, so this is very much a collection from which you can pluck any of the twelve CDs and have yourself a Schubertiade of quality. Schuchter gives a lovely poignancy to slow movements of sonatas such as the Andante of D 664, and a particularly sustained Andante from the pervasively melancholy D 784, and I would take a bet that any movement you turn to is unlikely to disappoint, though might equally be unlikely to unseat a long-held favourite version. Competition for more or less complete sets of Schubert's complete piano works is thin on the ground, and the only alternative I could come up with is Michel Dalberto's collection, originally from Denon and re-released on Brilliant Classics (review). This is an excellent set in general, spread over 14 discs but with shorter timings for some, with a bright, modern sound and more extrovert performances when compared to Schuchter. Dalberto is a sensitive player of Schubert, but the larger acoustic and more distant perspective, greater extremes of dynamic and more energetic tempi all combine to give more of an exciting, concert-hall effect. If you prefer your Schubert on more of a one-to-one scale then Schuchter will find favour, and nearly half a century after being committed to tape, this attractive set can still very much stand on its own two feet.

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