

56th Annual Meeting of the American Osler Society

IT ALL BEGAN HERE



Friday, May 1 – Monday, May 4, 2026
DoubleTree by Hilton Downtown Hotel
108 Chestnut St, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Appendix – Schubert Piano Recital



Dr. Saman Arfaie, McGill University

Echoes of Time & Memory: The Late Piano Works of Schubert

Dr. Saman Arfaie is a published researcher, classically trained pianist, thought leader, nationally recognized TEDx speaker, author, and award-winning neurology resident physician/M.Sc. candidate at McGill University. His work at the crossroads of science, medicine, and the arts has received both national and international recognition. Saman earned his Doctor of Medicine and Master of Surgery degrees from McGill University. He also completed degrees in Neurobiology and Persian Literature, with minors in chemistry and music at the University of California, Berkeley, and conducted brain tumor research at the University of California, San Francisco. He has received over 30 academic and national awards and has published more than 30 peer-reviewed papers. As a pianist, he has performed in Vancouver, Berkeley, Montreal, and recently recorded a lecture-recital at TEDx McGill University. Along with Professor Phillip Pearl of Harvard University, Saman is the author of 'Music, Medicine and the Neurobiology of Creativity,' published by Cambridge University Press in 2026, and is the forthcoming author of COVID-19 Contextualized.

The late works of **Franz Peter Schubert** (31 January 1797 – 19 November 1828) reveal a rich metaphysical depth in the ways structure, time, and rhythm are treated. In them, form becomes less a vehicle for triumph, but a vessel for return, where repetition is never mere reiteration, but the audible inscription of memory. Schubert understood this with unusual clarity, and in his final years, he built an entire musical language around that truth. Schubert's late piano works differ from other works of Romanticism in that they are purely about time itself. With his illness and the awareness of his impending death by 1827– 1828, Schubert made a choice that eschewed victory rhetoric and instead presented works that unfold, return, hesitate, and recall.

Themes come back, yet never intact. Harmony shifts sideways through mediant relationships, avoiding the gravitational certainty of classical resolution. Rhythm persists even when tonal ground alters beneath it. The pulse persists while identity transforms. In this sense, the repetition that occurs does not occur for the purpose of reiteration, but rather as a form of memory. Each cadence has a provisional quality, rather than a conclusive one. Schubert's late style is characterized by a constant struggle between change and decay. On the surface, it appears stable, though the processes that occur beneath the surface are those of change, drift, and recontextualization. The listener can never hope to understand the theme as it exists, for it is always becoming something else.

The **Four Impromptus, Op. 90 (D. 899)** were composed in 1827, a year before Schubert's death at the tragically young age of thirty-one. Vienna at that time was emerging from the shadows of Beethoven, whose late works had already redefined the expressive and structural ambitions of orchestral, chamber, and solo piano works. Where Beethoven intensifies structure toward transcendence, Schubert diffuses it toward interiority. The impromptu, a genre associated with spontaneity and lyrical charm, becomes in Schubert's hands a vessel for philosophical reflection.

Impromptu in *C minor*, Op. 90 No. 1 opens the cycle in the gravity of the *C minor* with a firm stance. The dotted rhythm suggests a collective statement, though underlying this choral presence, the pulse moves in a quiet, flowing undercurrent. The lyrical section in *A flat major* shifts to a more song-like plane, and the harmonic language relaxes into warmth. But the earlier chorale does not disappear. It remains in memory, shaping how we hear its tenderness. When the material returns, it is transformed by what has intervened. The chords are the same, yet they no longer sound declarative. They carry an inward weight. The left-hand motion, which once seemed secondary, now feels essential, as if time itself has been working beneath the surface. The

piece closes not in triumph but in altered stillness, and the awareness that identity survives only through transformation.

In the **Impromptu in E flat major, Op. 90 No. 2**, motion drives the structure. The opening triplet figure establishes continuous flow in the right hand. Harmony shifts through mediant colour and subdominant warmth, creating lateral expansion, in a world where the brightness of E flat is ever so resonant. As the piece proceeds further into the middle section, there is a marked acceleration of harmonic rhythm. Instead of lateral mediant color, there is a stronger sense of directionality and increased chromatic tension. The texture becomes slightly deeper, and the melody becomes more angular. The triplets continue, but their meaning changes. The *coda* is one of Schubert's most unsettling gestures. After the return of E flat major and the restoration of surface brightness, he does not crown the piece with affirmation. Instead, the music thins. Schubert closes not with triumph, but with inward absorption. Motion continues until it fades into a darker stillness. The final sonority suggests that brightness was never secure, only passing.

After the restlessness of the first two Impromptus, time slows in **Impromptu in G flat major, Op. 90 No. 3**. Marked *Andante* in *dual cut time*, melody unfolds in extended arches, supported by a rocking accompaniment reminiscent of the medium of life itself. This piece has often been heard as a confession of love, and not without reason. The *cantabile* line seems to offer itself without defense. Yet Schubert protects it from excess through harmonic subtlety. Inner voices shift the light constantly. Chromatic inflections tint the serenity. Nothing is static. The beauty is alive because it is unstable. The middle section introduces darker colouration and greater density, but even here the fundamental pulse remains steady. When the opening returns, it no longer carries the same innocence it once held. It returns changed, softened by what has passed. The final measures dissolve rather than resolve. It is perhaps the most famous of the set because it feels inevitable and allows love to pass through time without holding it.

With the final **Impromptu in A flat major, Op. 90 No. 4**, Schubert turns outward. The perpetual sixteenth-note passages drive the entire structure, demanding clarity, buoyancy, and control. Unlike the inward cantabile of the G flat major, this piece demonstrates kinetic brilliance. Sudden modulations by thirds and unexpected turns toward remote tonal areas destabilize what might otherwise feel like straightforward exuberance. From a technical standpoint, the writing demands transparency. The right-hand phrases must articulate rapid passagework without heaviness, allowing harmonic color to register beneath velocity. The left-hand passages anchor the dance without adding thickness to the sound. The central section offers harmonic deepening and thicker sonority. The tonal field darkens briefly, as if the dance pauses to introspect inward. But the rhythmic engine never fully stops. As the final movement of the Opus 90 set, it completes a trajectory from gravitas to radiance, but never toward permanence. Even brilliance, here, passes.

The **Drei Klavierstücke (D. 946)**, written in May 1828 but published posthumously, extend this late style further. Though less frequently performed as a unified set, this collection is a hidden triptych: grandly conceived, structurally daring, and harmonically adventurous. Taken together, these works reveal a composer who had absorbed Beethoven's structural weight but filtered it through a uniquely Schubertian lens.

The most radical element of **Klavierstück No. 1 in E flat minor, D. 946 No. 1** is not harmony, but rhythm. This is a key that invites overt pathos with controlled tension and an interior gravity that is unique amongst the triptych. Underlying the surface, a steady temporal grid is maintained in the left hand, which only infrequently wavers, even as the harmonic foundation traverses a series of mediants and deflected dominants. This is the essential design. Schubert provides a foundation for temporal progression while simultaneously undermining tonal space. Continuity is felt, not through cadential resolution, but through a constant pulse.

As the lyrical section in G-flat major materializes, its warmth is not felt to cancel the modality of the piece, but remains suspended above the same underlying rhythmic inevitability, like light passing through an unaltered current. The piece, therefore, raises a philosophical question: if harmony is in a constant state of flux and identity remains constant, then perhaps it is duration, and not key structure, that provides the essential sense of continuity.

Klavierstück No. 2 in *E flat major*, D. 946 No. 2, with its three flat key signature and flowing 6/8, begins in a pastoral openness that seems almost untroubled, with the rocking meter giving the first pages a wide breathing horizon. Yet the heart of the piece lies in what interrupts that ease. The middle section darkens the tonal field and tightens harmonic rhythm, and Schubert's most unsettling move is to destabilize the ear through abrupt third-related turns and chromatic inflections. The same 6/8 movement continues, but no longer as a landscape, rather as a compulsion, a movement that continues to propel forward even as the harmonies become strange, denser, more inward. Then follows a retrospective movement, a sense of the music surveying its original creation with a newfound awareness. The return of E flat major is not restoration but memory, the pastoral light now filtered through time lost. The light of the landscape is now seen through a perspective of time lost. Melodies extend, become more complex, reaching a beauty almost too rich, too painful, a sense of the music gathering its richest material at the very time that it knows this cannot be sustained. But the final pages do not end in affirmation. Rather, they recede with a quiet, melancholic clarity, a sense of movement continuing, but of innocence no longer.

Klavierstück No. 3 in *C major*, D. 946 No. 3 opens with a blank page harmony in a zero accidentals key signature, and Schubert uses that apparent simplicity as a philosophical trap. The theme arrives with luminous directness, but it is quickly complicated by modal shading, chromatic inner motion, and excursions that cast shadow across the surface. The design is not about conflict and resolution. It is about how clarity can be disturbed, and then returned to, without ever becoming innocence again. Episodes move into darker regions and thicken the texture, but the return of the opening does not sound like triumph. It sounds like recollection, as if C major has become reflective rather than declarative. The most important structural idea is that Schubert treats the return as an ethical event rather than a formal requirement. The theme comes back carrying the weight of what it has passed through, and the ending releases rather than concludes. In performance, the challenge is to keep the opening genuinely plain without being empty, to let the later chromaticism read as a change in consciousness, and to shape the final return with restraint so the listener feels that the piece ends not because it has solved its question, but because it has learned how to live inside it.

Over the past year, as I have listened more inventively to my own sound at the keyboard, I have repeatedly returned to the genius of a man whose birthday and age I share, bringing his works to life. It is not sentimentality, but a strange structural kinship, as if the same questions about time arrive at the same threshold. His untimely death robbed the world of creative potential that may have been without precedent. Yet it also leaves us with something concentrated and complete, a late style that seems to think in time rather than merely unfold within it. In that sense, the Schubert that remains offers a deeply personal philosophy of life. After all, we measure life in time, but we remember it in space.