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Franz Schubert: Late Piano Works, Vol. 1

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The first volume in Andrea Lucchesini’s projected survey of Schubert’s late piano works cheats a bit by including the relatively early A minor Sonata alongside the big A major Sonata from the composer’s last year. I, for one, wholeheartedly approve of this inspired coupling, which allows one to hear the D959 Rondo’s main theme at close proximity to its earlier version in D537’s Allegretto.

In the A minor’s opening Allegro, Lucchesini’s massive, granitic approach decidedly takes Schubert’s ma non troppo qualifier to heart. His outsize dynamics impart an austere countenance to the music that differs from the animated intimacy conveyed in Michelangeli’s 1981 DG recording. It barely hints at the aforementioned Allegretto’s controlled transparency and pinpointed voicings. For the Allegro vivace finale, Lucchesini reverts back to monumental mode, and here I prefer Eldar Nebolsin’s comparably focused yet faster, more pliable Naxos recording.

One might assume that Lucchesini’s 17-minute timing for D959’s first movement indicates a slower than usual tempo, along with his observation of the exposition repeat. But timings are deceptive. Minutes and seconds add up on account of the pianist modifying Schubert’s basic Allegro directive with frequent italicisations of phrase and emphatic caesuras and tenutos. Where others press ahead (Zimerman, Goode and Uchida, for example), Lucchesini lovingly lingers. He sustains his ruminatively unfolding Andantino with subtle ebb and flow, without quite matching the hypnotic legato and timbral allure of Imogen Cooper’s live recording. While Lucchesini carefully organises the dynamics in pursuit of maximum dramatic effect at the harrowing central climax, the latter falls short of Pollini’s unrelenting intensity and inevitability. The Scherzo’s tiny hesitations and inflections seem a tad unctuous rather than pointedly angular, as in Alfred Brendel’s valedictory live recording. As in the first movement, Lucchesini can’t help stopping to sniff at the many roadside posies spread across the finale, in contrast to Pollini’s more internalised and proportioned sense of rubato. It takes maybe five or six minutes into the movement for Lucchesini to find his emotional centre and lock into the music’s gathering momentum.