

# Classical and Romantic in *Sonata in A minor op. 164 D 537* by Franz Schubert

Junior Lecturer **Brîndușa Tudor** PhD  
(The University of Arts “George Enescu” Iași)

## Abstract:

In this paper, we tried to highlight the complexity and value of the *sonata in A minor op. 164 D 537* by Franz Schubert, from two perspectives: **structural** and **semiotic** - of musical discourse analysis, emphasizing the connection to tradition (classical elements) and the novelties introduced by the composer (romantic elements).

*Sonata in A minor op. 164 D 537* reveals the composer's own clearly defined conception on the sonata genre, as well as on the sonata form, Schubert proving his deep knowledge of the traditional patterns, but that he adjusts them according to his own thinking, of romantic conduct.

**Key words:** *Franz Schubert, classical, romantic, sonata, piano*

On the threshold between the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the European musical culture was marked by the passage from one great musical current to another – the *Classicism* and the *Romanticism*.

It was in this environment that emerged the one who will embody the essence of the Viennese spirit, the composer Franz Schubert (1797 – 1828). He will be the paragon of his age, standing not only on the threshold of two centuries, but also at the pass between the full-fledged Classical aesthetics and the budding aesthetics of Romanticism.

Franz Schubert was attracted very early on by the sonata genre, and started to write his first works in 1815 (at 18 years old) until 1828. In 13 years of creation, each musical element suffered transformations as a result of the composer's permanent search.

*Sonata in A minor op. 164 D 537*, composed in March 1817, was published posthumously in 1852 in Vienna under the name *Siebente Sonate für piano komponiert von Franz Schubert*<sup>1</sup>. It is made up of three parts: *Allegro ma non troppo*, *Allegretto quasi Andantino* și *Allegro vivace*.

**Part I**, *Allegro ma non troppo* is in *A minor* in 6/8 metre, as a matter of fact, it is the only sonata in which Schubert uses this time signature in the first part. Although it follows every formal standard of a classical sonata, the composer brings various innovations on both the structural and the sonorous level, replacing the classical structure principles with the romantic ones, and thus language acquires a new freedom of expression.

**The exposition** contains all the elements specific to the traditional pattern, each of them carrying a new aspect.

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<sup>1</sup> *The seventh piano sonata composed by Franz Schubert*

**The main theme A** has reduced dimensions (m. 1 - 5) and an atypical structure, as it is not marked by an explicit cadence which would separate it from the rest of the discourse. The strong character of the beginning comes from the *forte* nuance, the upbeat and the dotted rhythm  $\text{♩} \cdot \text{♩}$ ; the melodic line is given by the superior level of the chords. The sudden change to *piano* is followed by a dynamic accumulation towards *forte*, which underlines the *E major* dominant:

Ex. 1, m. 1-5

Apparently, the main theme can be extended, but the second presentation of the main idea, together with the arpeggio figures at the end, bring a modulation towards the relative tonality (*C major*), becoming thus the first stage of the **bridge**.

The second bridge segment is dynamic in nature, due to the repetitive treatment of a motive deriving from the thematic motive ( $\text{♩} \cdot \text{♩} \rightarrow \text{♩} \text{♩} \text{♩} \text{♩}$ ):

Ex. 2, m. 16-19

Numerous ascending transpositions bring new tonalities in an unusual order, which clearly suggests the tonal freedom of romanticism – *E flat major*, *f minor*, *F major*, *D flat major*. This tonal shift ends with the affirmation of the *F major* tonality, in the subdominant area of the initial tone, which is an unusual approach for classical composers (who had established the dominant or relative relation between themes).

**The secondary theme B** (m. 28 - 52) is not structurally elaborate, as it consists in a single melodic idea, repeated variously in the form of a double period and is less individualized melodically, due to the fragmented nature of the articulation. Its beginning contrasts with the main theme by the cantabile character conferred by the low *piano* nuance, by *legato* and by the simple melody which is based on a repeated four-sound cell, on large and equal rhythmic values ( $\text{♩}$ ), and which goes with an multiple pedal accompaniment on *F* and a mobile median plane (note the descending second *D Flat* – *C* from the left hand tenor), thus bringing a few harmonic color elements:

Ex. 3, m. 28-29



The repeat of the thematic idea gains in complexity by the variation of the right hand melodic line in *pianissimo*, by multiple sequencing and by a sonorous culmination consisting in the insertion of a homophonic-chord segment in *fortissimo* (măsură 49).

The second theme becomes extremely important later in the musical discourse, because it is also present in the *conclusion* and in the middle section of the sonata form, the *development*.

**The conclusion** (m. 53 - 65), in *pianissimo*, is based on an ostinato pedal on the new tonality key note (*F major*), doubled by a melodic line built on the descending second cell from the second theme which brings, through chromatic elements, inflections of the tonality melodic variant:

Ex. 4, m. 53-56



**The development** has an unusual beginning, its first part being a modulating extension of the conclusion in *pianissimo* and *pianississimo*, which apparently makes the transition from the *F major* tonality to *G flat major*. The beginning of the following segment in *fortissimo* is, at the same time, uncertain from a tonal point of view, but also contrasting to the previous discourse:

Ex. 5, m. 65-74



The direct approach of the *G flat major – E major* modulation is specific to the romantic tonal-harmonic thinking.

From a melodic point of view, the content of the second segment of the development (m. 73 - 95) is new, but its treatment, based on the descending sequential transposition, represents the element of continuity with the previous sections. The dynamic, robust character of this segment, contrasting with the previous one, is determined by the large nuance – *fortissimo* and by the unison writing, applied both to the homophonous-chord moments and to the melodic ones. Towards the end, the sequential treatment is maintained only for the left hand, while the right hand discourse is made of chord structures. From a tonal point of view, we can notice the succession of major tonalities *E – D – C*, and in the second part of this stage, the relation of the tonal centers occurs at a descending fifth interval – *D – G – C*:

Ex. 6, m. 75-89

The last part of the development is the widest (m. 96 - 121). It is built on an episode theme with a clear melodic profile, based on the repeat of a descending scalar motive in an unusual rhythmic configuration (♩ ♩ ♩) that cancels the second accent of the ternary pulsation:

Ex. 7, m. 98-106



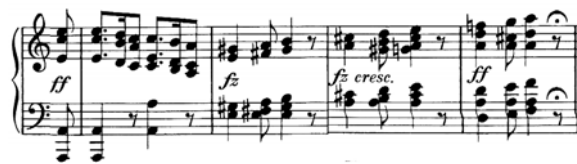
The cantabile nature is given by the figural accompaniment, first of an arpeggio type and then harmonic, which suggests the waltz rhythm. The romantic language is visible in the insertion of ascending figural arpeggio formulas (exceptional division – septolet), with an ornamental function, into the simple melodic discourse.

The second segment of this section, which represents the amplification of the previous segment, implies the tensioning of the expression by obsessive repetitions of the motive doubled by the amplification of the dynamics towards *fortissimo* (m. 120), but also a modulating progression towards the *D minor* tonality, where the **reprise** begins.

The composer approaches the subdominant area, maintaining however the ascending fifth relation between the two thematic ideas – *D minor - A major*. This deviation from the classical tonal principles is the sole difference of the reprise from the exposition; the structure and content of the bridge, of the secondary theme and of the conclusion do not change. Moreover, starting from the *B* theme to the end, the tonality of the sonorous discourse is in *A major* tonality, Schubert's obviously intention to comply with the traditional rules.

The **coda** (m. 183 - final) of this part has also an unusual structure, as it is, in fact, the presentation of the *A* theme in the basic tonality (*A minor*). The composer proves thus his familiarity with the subtleties of the sonata form, but also with the possibilities of extending and renewing it:

Ex. 8, m. 187-191



In **Part II**, *Allegretto quasi Andantino in E major* (in 2/4 metre), the composer approaches a form of monothematic rondo: **A B Av1 C Av2 coda**.

The entire part has a fragmented character by the numerous repetition signs indicated on the score, both between the sections making up the rondo form and within them.

**The refrain A** (m. 1-16), with a cantabile nature in *piano*, is made up of two symmetrical square periods, with a quasi-related sonorous background,

where melody and harmony combine in a unitary whole representative for Schubert's compositional style:

Ex. 9, m. 1-16

The image shows two systems of musical notation for piano accompaniment. The first system is marked 'ligato' and 'p' (piano). The second system is marked 'staccato'. The music is in 2/4 time and features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes in the right hand, with block chords and moving bass lines in the left hand.

**The first couplet (B m. 17-42)** brings a contrast by the sudden change towards the *C major* tonality (the third relation between the tonal centers involved in the modulating process is specific to romantic thinking), by the high nuances used (*mezzoforte*, *forte*), by the mainly arpeggio-type writing, accompanied by a melodic plane placed in the inferior register with sequential character:

Ex. 10, m. 17-21

The image shows a single system of musical notation for piano accompaniment, starting at measure 17. It features a melodic line in the right hand with a long slur over measures 17-20, and a bass line in the left hand with arpeggiated figures. The dynamics are marked 'mf' (mezzo-forte) and 'f' (forte).

In the end of the couplet, Schubert brings the first element of novelty by the modulation towards another tonality, different from the initial one: *F major*. Thus, the second occurrence of the refrain is in a different tonal context. Another unusual element for the rondo form is the varying treatment of the refrain, which keeps its melodic profile, but is given another type of accompaniment that confers melody to the discourse, with typically romantic sonority and expressivity:

Ex. 11, m. 43-47

The image shows a single system of musical notation for piano accompaniment, starting at measure 43. It features a melodic line in the right hand with a slur over measures 43-47, and a bass line in the left hand with arpeggiated figures. The dynamics are marked 'p' (piano) and 'ligato'.

Despite all these innovations, the composer does not change the structure of the refrain, but keeps all the formal parameters.

**The second couplet** (C m. 59-114), in *D minor*, has a marching character, given by the ostinato rhythm of the chord accompaniment, but also by the rhythmic homogeneity of the main line, made up of fourths, alternating with dotted formulas. The melodic line is very simple, made up of melodic oscillations followed by leaps or repetitive cells:

Ex. 12, m. 59-65



The last refrain (m. 115-130) in the initial tonality brings a new sonorous version of the main melody. This time, the accompaniment carries on the dynamic character of the couplet by using rhythmically divided figures, as well as by transposing the main melody in the superior octave. The complex writing, implying four melodic levels, is taken by Schubert from the structure of the string quartet:

Ex. 13, m. 114-118



**The coda** reiterates the initial sonority by using the same type of accompaniment, the superior plan exploiting motives derived from the ones in the refrain.

**Part III**, *Allegro vivace* in the basic tonality (in 3/8 metre), is a slow movement sonata, where we can find the same tonal exceptions seen in Part I, together with other original constitutive elements. It has a tense character due to the numerous pause times that create suspense moments.

**The main theme A** (m. 1-30) has an unusual structure, which combines symmetry with exceptional elements. It is made up of three phrases, each segment having a common debut, characterized by the unison writing (specific to Schubert) and the ascending scalar tendency with a rhythm that changes its configuration every time. The distinguishing element is the open cadence that

ends each phrase: on the dominant, on the modulating (*B flat major V*) and on the homonym (*A major*):

Ex. 14, m. 1-30



**The bridge** is ample (m. 31-94), each phase having its own individualized melody. The first section begins in the *A major* tonality and includes figural, dynamic fragments, based on melodic oscillations or gradual progress, as well as segments in which the superior melodic outline, although fragmented as cells treated by repetition, stands out due to the ostinato sharp chord accompaniment:

Ex. 15, m. 31-44



Towards the end of the section, the tonal plane becomes ambiguous, mobile, ending in an *F sharp major* cadence.

The second part of the bridge starts in *D major* tonality (the homonym of the basic tonality subdominant) and presents a lyrical thematic idea, with figural arpeggio accompaniment, whose melodic nature is emphasized by the presence of numerous ornamental elements (appoggiatura):



Ex. 16, m. 59-72



The treatment of this melodic line by motive fragmentation becomes the means by which the composer evolves tonally towards the *E major* tonality, which is in the dominant area of the basic tonality.

**The secondary thematic group B** is made up of three segments: the first (*B1*) consists in the transposition of an alternative motive in different registers in the two tonality variants (major-minor<sup>2</sup>) and its accompaniment is ostinato harmonic; the second segment (*B2*) is virtuosity-oriented, as it is based on the alternation of chords and figural structures; the last thematic idea (*B3*) takes over motive elements from the second part of the bridge, transposed in the *E major* tonality, which, in the framework of the rapid succession of the figures in *B2*, represents an expressive contrast element:

Ex. 17, B1, m. 95-102



Ex. 18, B2, m. 115-121



Ex. 19, B3, m. 130-138



<sup>2</sup> One of the characteristics of Schubert's composition style is the oscillation between major and minor.

**The reprise** (m. 164-311) starts in the *E minor* tonality, the basic tonality dominant, which is unusual, given the subdominant approach in the first part. The main theme is reproduced in full, as well as the first part of the bridge, which is extended towards the *G major* tonality in the end for modulation purposes. In this tonal context, the composer introduces the second part of the bridge, making thus a correlation between the sonorous centers and the corresponding segment in the exposition: *D major* ~ *E major* / *G major* ~ *A major*. The presentation of the secondary thematic group is varied by concentrating the three thematic elements in a single occurrence (in the exposition, *B2* is played two times).

Instead of a conclusion, the composer presents the main theme *A* in the basic tonality (*A minor*):

Ex. 20, m. 310-318



In the next part, Schubert treats by motive segmentation a melodic unit obtained from the synthesis of the melodic elements in *A* and in the bridge, and places it under different tonalities, transforming it in a conclusive formula. In the end, the composer surprises us by inserting the *A major* tonality in *pianissimo* and the sonata ends triumphantly in *fortissimo*:

Ex. 21, m. 358-final



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