

**JOHN SALMON**  
**Piano**

**Program**

Sonata in A Major, D. 959

Allegro

Andantino

Scherzo: Allegro vivace

Rondo: Allegretto

Franz Schubert

(1797-1828)

INTERMISSION

Sonata No. 2 in E Major, Op. 54

Allegro molto

Scherzo: Allegro assai

Largo

Allegro

Nikolai Kapustin

(born 1937)

## Program Notes

On the surface, the two pieces on tonight's program look similar: two piano sonatas, in closely related keys, each cast in four traditional sonata movements. Both have a scherzo. Both use the term "Allegro vivace." Both offer evidence for the durability of the genre.

Upon hearing the works however, it won't take long to notice their different languages. Schubert writes in the style of both Viennese classicism and an emerging Romanticism (in an idiom he himself helped to create), evoking the world of Beethoven, but also pointing toward the drama of Berlioz and Wagner. His music always seems a blend of tightly ordered development and expansive musical canvases, of symphonic textures and heartfelt lyricism, of urgent arguments and dreamy soliloquies. If we were to describe his works as paintings, we might say that Schubert combines the linear precision of Ingres with the colorful opulence of Delacroix.

Nikolai Kapustin, born in 1937, had rigorously classical training at the Moscow Conservatory where he studied piano with Alexander Goldenweisser. He ingested Prokofiev, Rachmaninov and Scriabin and played Chopin etudes. Meanwhile, Kapustin also pursued a career as a jazz pianist, eventually touring with Oleg Lundstrem's Jazz Orchestra. His compositions reflect that background, coming close to sounding like what Rachmaninov would have sounded like had he been born Oscar Peterson. Far from being a mere influence or occasional reference (as one finds in the music of, say, Copland or Ravel), jazz is at the very heart of Kapustin's musical language.

But the more I find out about the still relatively unknown Kapustin (his music isn't even published in the West yet), the more Schubertian he appears. In the history of music, there was probably no gentler soul than Schubert, painfully shy, homely (called "little mushroom" by his friends), and preferring the company of intimates in a Gasthaus over the fancy soirees of the aristocracy. Kapustin hates to travel; seems to despise all the artificiality of that most banal of modern "necessary evils," namely, self-promotion; and dresses with all the panache of a 1960s used car salesman. The Viennese Schubert and the Russian Kapustin - soul mates separated by a mere 109 years.

Schubert's Sonata in A Major, D. 959 was composed within that incredible five-week spurt of creativity, September to October 1828 - just two months shy of his death - when he also penned the C Minor (D. 958) and B-flat (D. 960) piano sonatas and the double-cello String Quintet (D. 956). Did Schubert have a premonition of his own end, which came on the 19th of November, 1828? We'll never know. But one thing is sure: Schubert was working at the absolute height of his creative energies (which, considering his short life, were never low to begin with) when what was to become his penultimate piano sonata emerged. Considering the length of these last three sonatas (the C Minor takes about 30 minutes to play, the A Major 45 minutes, and the B-flat around 50 minutes), the short duration of their composition is truly astounding.

The first movement, "Allegro," begins majestically and urgently, defined by an octave leap in the left hand, two quarter notes that seem to say "Lis-ten!," or, in German "Hör' mal" After this initial declaration and some fleeting triplets, a potently chromatic transition section comes. Soon thereafter, the blandly diatonic second theme appears - as innocent, unhurried, and intimate as the

first theme was proclamatory, demanding of our attention, and universal. Such great contrasts lay the groundwork for the movement's high drama.

The Italianate "Andantino" may show the influence of Salieri (unjustly discounted in the movie *Amadeus*), with whom Schubert had studied early on. Again, contrasts rule the day: the plaintive first melody gradually morphs into a full-blown tone poem (think Delacroix's *Massacre at Chios*), where some heroic struggle erupts.

The "Scherzo" is as light as the "Andantino" was life-threatening. In the trio, a sly reference to the dramatic first movement (remember those two quarter notes in the left hand that descended an octave?) crops up - from one point of view, the most unlikely place for this quotation. In a subtle way, however, perhaps Schubert is saying to us, "Even in our most joyful moments sans souci, we still remember those times of great drama and challenge." (Conversely, great musical dramas, like the first movement, have many moments of calm and utter tranquility.)

The last movement, "Allegretto," is based on a melody Schubert used earlier in his compositional career, namely as the tune of the slow movement of his Sonata, D. 537 (composed in 1817). In both iterations, the melody conjures up a tender but slightly nostalgic feeling. Structurally, the movement combines variation, rondo, and sonata-allegro procedures. The movement concludes with a quotation of the opening octave descent; what was presented at the very beginning of the sonata as a challenge (if not exactly a question) becomes, at the very end of the sonata, a tremendous confirmation, a joyous victory.

Kapustin's Second Piano Sonata, written in 1989, has been followed in the intervening years by eleven more piano sonatas. (Compositional intensity also unites him with Schubert.) The pianists Steven Osborne, Marc-Andre Hamelin, and Nikolai Petrov have recorded his music and been the torchbearers for this still unknown giant.

Opus 54's first movement, "Allegro molto," covers every modulation and jazz chord known to mankind, sometimes in the space of just a few measures. The harmonies are dense yet the textures are supremely pianistic. I hear the tunefulness of Keith Jarrett, a certain Broadway-finale flair, and stride straight out of Erroll Garner. A playful and rubato coda stops the momentum just long enough to provide repose before all hell breaks loose in the second movement, "Allegro assai." This scherzo is more driving than the scherzo in Schubert's sonata.

In "Largo," some may hear lounge-lizard harmonies. It's true that the lazy tempo and abundance of major-seventh chords may suggest clouds of cigarette smoke and the clinks of glasses - not my favorite ambiance (well, at least not the cigarette smoke...) or musical style. But the movement is totally redeemed by the entrance of a rhythm section, about two minutes in. I hear Chick Corea and Maria Schneider - hip voicings and grooves; no polyester suits here. (Does my admission of non-sympathy for the A sections make me less than an effective performer of the work? Must an actor like the person he portrays??)

The last movement is a tour de force. Think "hillbilly on steroids" and you'll have an image of what happens musically (but don't spend too much time pondering that image or the brief, frantically paced piece will leave you in the dust). Kapustin achieves this breathlessness partially

through a meter that is surely the longest meter in music history: 4/4, 7/8, 4/4, 5/8. The whole piece is put together from a consistent alternation of these time signatures. The hurried effect - a 4/4 measure followed by a measure with some of the eighth notes deleted - is brilliantly achieved. I must say that, recently, especially in my old age, I have more and more days like this phrasing, moments when I run about prestissimo, followed by an even quicker pace - because the old, quick pace just can't accommodate everything I must do or say. Before you tell me to see a therapist or read a self-help book (haven't got time! sorry!), just consider that it was that pace that allowed me to learn the Kapustin Sonata at all.