

Returning Cycles: Contexts for the Interpretation of Schubert's Impromptus and Last Sonatas.

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Book Review

Returning Cycles: Contexts for the Interpretation of Schubert's Impromptus and Last Sonatas

***Returning Cycles: Contexts for the Interpretation of Schubert's Impromptus and Last Sonatas.* By Charles Fisk.** Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. [xi, 308 p. ISBN 0-520-22564-3. \$45.]

A volume devoted to detailed analytic consideration of the piano works of Franz Schubert is reason for celebration. Charles Fisk's *Returning Cycles: Contexts for the Interpretation of Schubert's Impromptus and Last Sonatas* examines the composer's treatment of cyclic procedures in the two sets of Impromptus, opp. 90 and 142 of 1827; the last three Sonatas in C Minor, A Major, and B-flat Major of 1828; and, prior to these five chapters, the "Wanderer" Fantasy and the Symphony no. 8, both composed at the end of 1822. Their cyclic characteristics "provide a basis in musical detail for articulating an analytic and dramatic understanding of the complementary and respective roles of separate movements" (p. 20).

In addition to their shared preoccupation with cyclic procedures, the compositions are linked by their connections to Schubert's songs, especially "Der Wanderer" of 1816 and the *Winterreise* cycle of 1827. Their shared subject serves as the interpretive linchpin for considering their musical relationships to the keyboard works. Fisk is "convinced that Schubert's identification with the *Fremdling* wanderers of these songs links these protagonists, through the music they inspired, to the instrumental music of his last year, and that exploration of that link may explain more cogently than can any other line of inquiry some of the compositional paths on which Schubert embarked after *Winterreise*" (p. 21). That identification is buttressed by biographical evidence in the "Prologue" and "Epilogue," with "Mein Traum" shouldering the bulk of the interpretative weight. This document, "the one narrative of potential autobiographical significance" (p. 270), unfolds a story that befalls the individuals in the songs and is enacted in the compositions Fisk analyzes. Its plot archetype is one of "exploration, banishment, exile, and eventual homecoming," and Schubert's works "engage the story's patterns of tension and conflict ... to find new ways of exemplifying and resolving them" (p. 267). Analysis of the music is thus intimately bound up with the study of narrative. Acknowledging a partial debt to Edward T. Cone, Fisk harnesses his analyses to the purpose of "a kind of verbal performance" (p. 283). Analyses that explicate the subtle (a favorite word) and complex relationships between individual movements and entire works are at the service of articulating a tonal drama whose agents are significant musical elements such as motives, keys, and so on.

The first chapter provides a characteristic example of cyclic intertextuality arising from the last movement of the Sonata in B-flat Major. Juxtaposing his interpretation with those of other scholars, Fisk assesses its connections to other works by Schubert as well as to the substitute Finale of Beethoven's String Quartet in B-flat Major, op. 130. He adduces an implicit hierarchy of correlations in which musical relationships between movements take priority over those between compositions however close the latter associations may be. From a theoretical perspective, this viewpoint is probably indisputable, although this writer is less sanguine about it in the case of Schubert for whom self-referentiality and the example of his older contemporary are so intricately wound into the fabric of his style. Schubert's music furnishes spaces wherein many types of memory—a word that Fisk uses with totemic frequency—are coevals rather than competitors. Hierarchy of reference need not be a necessary precondition for analytical discovery, and, in fact, several of Fisk's subsequent analyses eloquently illustrate that such coexistence can deepen one's understanding of the music.

The second chapter offers another instance of a "rich and elaborate web of associations." Fisk considers the concept of a "blocking technique" whereby "the finale of the C-Minor Sonata also contains a block of

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The second chapter offers another instance of a "rich and elaborate web of associations." Fisk considers the concept of a "blocking technique" whereby "the finale of the C-Minor Sonata also contains a block of musical material that returns, in clearly recognizable form, from an earlier movement" (p. 38). One reason that this reader finds much of the technical analysis to be persuasive is that Fisk does not rely entirely on individual motivic or harmonic features when examining cyclic procedures (although these are often the most prominent elements), but also considers the significant interplay of texture, register, rhythm, and so on. Less satisfying is Fisk's judgment



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