Schubert's Instrumental Music and Poetics of Interpretation

by René Rusch.
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reviewed by

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As suggested by its title, René Rusch's monograph *Schubert's Instrumental Music and Poetics of Interpretation* is at once an analytical study of selected instrumental pieces by Franz Schubert and an exploration of the poetics, or aesthetic and disciplinary values, underlying contemporary scholarship on Schubert and his music. Rusch notes that a variety of music-theoretical and analytical approaches have "radically shifted" the ways in which Schubert's music can be understood (vii). Harmonic excursions once perceived as arbitrary or irrational can acquire a certain logic or coherence when viewed through the lens of neo-Riemannian theory (Cohn 1999 and 2012). Formal excursions that previously appeared meandering and discursive can now be rationalized using terms from the new *Formenlehre* (Caplin 1998; Hepokoski and Darcy 2006) or reconciled with a processual view of form (Schmalfeldt 2011). Strange-sounding "promissory notes" can be hermeneutically linked to musicological findings about Schubert's final illness (Cone 1982). One of the main goals of Rusch's book is to contextualize the poetics of Schubert scholarship from the last forty-five years within the larger arc of the music's reception history and to interrogate the circumstances and values that have prompted these ongoing "re-presentations" of Schubert and his music (ix).

Rusch's other main goal is to propose and model an "alternative poetics" for engaging with Schubert's instrumental works. While acknowledging that contemporary analytical approaches have had the welcome effect of countering negative strands in Schubert's reception history, Rusch asks whether "the act of transforming the foreign into something more familiar and perhaps conventional may also run the risk of neutralizing an aesthetic experience" (15–6). In other words, are analytical models that seek out unity and coherence possibly inadequate to the task of explaining the strangeness that many listeners hear in Schubert's compositions? This question is by no means a new one in Schubert studies. It lies, for instance, at the heart of the exchange between Charles Fisk and Richard Cohn (2000b) in response to Cohn's (1999) reading of the Piano Sonata in B-flat Major, D. 960. Rusch's response to the question is to invite readers to explore alternative "forms of play" for engaging with Schubert's instrumental music. Drawing on concepts from early German Romanticism, post-structuralism, and

historiography, Rusch's analyses "embrace indeterminacies and multiplicities in lieu of textual or historical unities that establish a determinate order for music phenomenon, especially those that seem unusual or inchoate" (16).

The book is organized into six chapters, flanked by a preface and some brief closing remarks. Following an introductory chapter on "Schubert's Musical Reception and Contemporary Schubert Criticism," the five remaining chapters are organized around specific themes: unity, tonality, form, biography, and musical influence. As Rusch notes, this setup allows readers, for instance in a graduate seminar or an upper-division undergraduate course, to sample chapters and topics on an individual basis, facilitated by the absence of a single overarching theory that unifies the book.

Chapter 1 offers an overview and evaluation of how Schubert reception has evolved from the nineteenth century to the present. Rusch notes that this evolution is attributable both to the posthumous discovery of many of Schubert's most important instrumental works (including for instance the "Unfinished" Symphony) and, perhaps more importantly, to changing conceptions of epistemology (how we know or make sense of music) and aesthetics (how we assess the value of music). Rusch points out that during the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, Schubert's instrumental music was often criticized for its harmonic and formal practices. It was only in approximately the last forty-five years that, as a result of revisions to interpretive practice and contexts, "the same instrumental works and musical moments that were at one time chided for their digressions, redundancies, and idiosyncrasies can obtain a new kind of intelligibility" (11). The search for these new kinds of intelligibility, however, often begins with the premise that Schubert's works are inherently coherent and unified, if we can but find the right context or theory for interpreting them. Rusch argues that treating "the art of making sense of music as . . . the task of uncovering musical unities and structures" both reinforces music theory's empirical and objectivist orientation and limits the ways in which we can engage with Schubert's instrumental music (14). As a corrective, she offers in the following chapters alternative readings that "mirror the kinds of indeterminacies and multiplicities that we might experience in Schubert's instrumental music and thus decenter the notion of a unified subject" (17).

Chapter 2, titled "Rethinking Conceptions of Unity," explores possible ways of understanding the idiosyncrasies of Schubert's music without resorting to principles of unity. The chapter begins with a consideration of two analyses of Schubert's *Moment musical* in A-flat Major, D. 780, no. 2, by Cadwallader and Gagné (1998, 272–89) and Fisk (2000a), respectively. Rusch notes that while the first analysis views the piece through a Schenkerian framework and the second through a narrative framework of exile and return, they both exhibit varying conceptions of unity: tonal and motivic unity

vs. the unity of a single narrative consciousness. Both analyses also notably attempt to subsume the "irrational" key of the piece's two B sections (F-sharp minor) into the unity of the larger whole. As an alternative approach, Rusch proposes a reading of the same piece from a Romantic-ironic perspective, informed by the work of Schubert's German contemporaries Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Schlegel. Drawing on Fichte's idea that language has a dual nature that can "posit the self and the nonself at the same time," Rusch's analysis is informed by the presence of a "double consciousness" (31), where the "positive (what we hear)" constantly encounters "the negative (what is paradoxically heard through 'not hearing')" (35).[1] This gives rise to a dialectical system whereby the opening sixteen bars of Schubert's piece, for instance, are compared to and contrasted against an unheard but generic sixteen-bar period. Listening to a piece in this manner "involves the act of comparing and contrasting the work to itself and other musical works in order to create a framework for understanding the piece" (37). Musical moments that diverge from this tropological narrative (such as the F-sharp minor sections in the *Moment musical*) can be interpreted, following Schlegel, as instances of parabasis, where the text ironically interrupts or comments on itself. Rusch suggests that by adopting this perspective, Schubert's "disjunct progressions and musical gestures . . . may be heard as the result of an ironic swerve away from perceived conventions, the outcome of an effort to find a unique voice in music such that the destruction of that which can seem limiting—the absolute—is a necessary path toward revealing that which is infinitely possible" (46).

The third chapter, "The Value of Diatonic Indeterminacy When Traveling through Tonal Space," revisits the first movement of the B-flat major Piano Sonata, D. 960, one of the most examined Schubert movements in the analytical literature. Cohn's (2012, 4) contention that key relations in the movement are "not entirely determined by the logic of classical diatonic tonality" famously led him to propose an alternate neo-Riemannian framework for interpreting passages from the movement. Rusch, by contrast, chooses to pursue the question of "what consequences would arise if we embraced [diatonic] indeterminacy in our odysseys through Schubert's harmonic fields?" (59) She posits that in a synchronic hearing of the movement, local key areas "can each function as a base or 'shore' for which to aurally perceive the distance between adjacent key areas and local tonicizations" (77–8).[2] Harmonic function is acquired "from a system of

1 This idea of a double consciousness involving positive and negative selves may be familiar from the scenario of "Der Doppelgänger" (D. 957, no. 13), which Rusch cites as a well-known example of the use of Romantic irony in Schubert's songs, especially in his settings of texts by Heinrich Heine (29).

2 This contrasts with Cohn's (2012, 2) argument that if the local keys do not work together to express the global tonic of B-flat major in a diatonic reading, "we just have a bunch of tubs floating around on their own bottoms."

differential relationships" (86), rather than with reference to a global tonic, and is thus susceptible to multiple revisions. At the same time, a diachronic understanding of form can help correct for any sense of "apparent tonal drift" in one's hearing: once we hear the exposition repeat, for instance, we know that we are (back) in B-flat major, as opposed to C-double-flat major (79).[3] Rusch's reading thus invites us to conceive of tonal structure as "an open, malleable entity that is constantly in flux as the function of each region within a system of differential relationships changes with each perceptual shift in the formal context" (86).

Chapter 4 is titled "Sonata Forms, Fantasias, and Formal Coherence" and explores different ways of engaging with the formal structure of the first movement of the Piano Sonata in B Major, D. 575. Viewed through the lens of sonata form, the movement has been cited as a rare example of a "four-key exposition" (B major, G major, E major, F-sharp major). Rusch presents a sonata-form reading of the exposition that highlights its loose-knit structure and the way it requires continuous reinterpretation of Caplin's formal functions. She then presents an alternative reading of the exposition as a fantasia. Under this second reading, the subordinate themes of the sonata-form reading are revealed as "topical or stylistic modifications" of the opening theme; the final F-sharp major section, which seemed like an afterthought or appendage in the first reading, becomes more integral to the form; and "the imaginative play and spontaneity from section to section invites us to temporarily suspend in our hearing the notion of a global tonic" (108-9). Rusch suggests that the movement is "a sonata *and* fantasia while being neither at the same time" and viewing the work through both frames permits us to consider how it and similar works "balance freedom with restraint" (112). The chapter ends with a summary discussion of further examples of loose-knit sonata expositions (from two more Piano Sonatas—D. 537 and D. 845—and the String Quintet, D. 956) where characteristics of the fantasia may similarly be in play.

Chapter 5 addresses the topic of "Biography, Music Analysis, and the Narrative Impulse." Drawing on the epistemological framework of Wilhelm Dilthey, Rusch suggests that a music analysis can be thought of "not only as a reexperience (*Nacherleben*) of a [composer's] lived experience . . ., but, on another level, as a kind of *Erlebnisausdruck*—a reflective writing that conveys an analyst's lived experience of the work" (132). In their respective analyses of the *Moment musical* in A-flat Major, D. 780, no. 6, for instance, both Cone (1982) and Beach (1998) function as "narrators who appear to convey their lived experiences of the work in the form of a reflective writing" (138). Rusch argues that narrative analyses that connect Schubert's music to his life or

3 Rusch draws here on Tovey's (1928, 351) idea that "the most fundamental rule for operations in large-scale tonality is that key-relation is a function of form."

to conceptions of gender and sexuality (e.g. McClary 1994) can reflect contemporary sociocultural contexts in their attempts to give moral meaning to Schubert's biography. As such, analyses may carry their own moral meaning: they "may teach us that the hero of a story need not always conform to dominant constructions of masculinity and encourage us to imagine a utopian state where cultural pluralism, in its truest sense, prevails" (154).

The final chapter, "Beyond Homage and Critique: Rethinking Musical Influence," is a loose reworking of Rusch's (2013) article on the first movement of Schubert's Piano Sonata in C Minor, D. 958, and Beethoven's Thirty-Two Variations in C Minor, WoO 80. As Rusch notes wryly, "[w]hen one engages with the writings on Schubert's music and his life, one is likely to encounter Beethoven" (159). Rather than treating Schubert's sonata as an homage to, or critique of, Beethoven's variations, Rusch uses Jacques Derrida's notion of grafting ("'cutting' a prior text and transplanting it into another text") (166) to argue that "the potential connections between Schubert's and Beethoven's themes may be located in the space between the respective texts" (174). Both works could be thought of as being in dialogue with the passacaglia, for instance, or with the first movement of Mozart's Piano Concerto in C Minor, K. 491. This potential for "the repetition of a graft within a graft" means that "the context for understanding the meaning of Schubert's apparent reference to Beethoven's theme becomes boundless" (185). Following the last chapter, Rusch emphasizes in her closing remarks that her aim in proposing an alternative poetics for Schubert's instrumental works is not so much to revise contemporary music theories but to ask "whether there might be other ways to engage with musical moments that seem peculiar and idiosyncratic" (194).

Rusch's book is a valuable addition to the analytical literature on Schubert. As Rusch herself notes, however, readers may notice a degree of overlap between the book's premise and the approach taken by Suzannah Clark in *Analyzing Schubert* (2011). Clark's book, for instance, similarly contains chapters (or subchapters) on Schubert's reception history, perceptions of sonata form, "harmony and hermeneutics," "the Schubertian, or the non-Beethovenian," and Schubert's biography. Like Rusch, Clark also offers evaluations of prior analyses (Cone, McClary, Cohn, etc.) and uses Schubert's music as an "opportunity to explode many assumptions about the normative and prescriptive pretensions of music theory" (2011, 271). Rusch acknowledges these points of intersection, but notes that Clark's focus is on how the choice of a music-theoretic lens influences conclusions about Schubert's music. Clark accordingly situates her discussion of interpretive practice within the context of the history of music theory, drawing on figures like Dahlhaus and Schenker. By contrast, Rusch's focus is on aesthetics and her book "primarily draws from the fields of philosophy, literary

theory, and historiography" (x), through figures such as Fichte, Schlegel, Dilthey, and Derrida. As such, Rusch sees her work as complementary to Clark's, in what I think is a reasonable (self-)assessment.

As far as Rusch's alternative poetics is concerned, I suspect that a reader's receptivity will depend greatly on their attitude towards the postmodernist/post-structuralist stance taken in her readings. Rusch's analyses consistently embrace multiple subjectivities and subject positions and decline to "give . . . unqualified allegiance to unity as the supreme value for analysis" (Korsyn 2004, 338). Like Rusch, I find poetic correspondences between this open-ended analytical approach and the strange or uncanny qualities of Schubert's music, and I think her analyses reveal the potential for others to attempt a similar approach with the music of other elusive composers (Fauré comes to mind). Even if one is not persuaded by Rusch's "postmodernist reluctance to accept a single or objective reality and engage with master narratives," it is important to note that she never rejects other analyses that privilege unity (194). The reader is rather repeatedly "invited" to contemplate Schubert's music from multiple different angles—the word "invite" is somewhat of a leitmotif in the book—and it would seem churlish to decline such a graciously offered invitation. I should also add that Rusch's embrace of multiple perspectives and subjectivities does not come at the expense of analytical detail or rigor. Her analyses are copiously illustrated with meticulous annotated examples that range from extremely detailed Schenkerian voice-leading graphs to neo-Riemannian *Tonnetze* to score excerpts annotated with formal labels.

Perhaps fitting for a postmodernist text, there are some notable moments of self-reflexivity in Rusch's narrative. The discussion of ironic interruption is itself interrupted by a moment of parabasis that breaks the fourth wall ("Yet here we reach an interruption in our own narrative") (43). The analysis of Schubert's four-key exposition as a fantasia is prefigured by the characterization of chapters 2–6 as "a fantasia of alternative subject positions that engage with four research topics" (17). And having pointed out that analyses of Schubert's music can be viewed as "cultural artifacts that convey certain values of our historical world" (146), Rusch reflects in the closing remarks on her lived experiences that have shaped the alternative poetics presented in her book.[4] Thus, the preponderance of piano pieces in a book that ostensibly examines Schubert's instrumental music is explained as "a likely consequence of [Rusch's] musical training as a pianist," while the "constellation of alternative subject positions introduced" is attributed to "experiences that have prompted [her] to continuously question what

4 I am reminded of Marion Guck's (2006, 197) remark that "[a]nalyses necessarily bear the traces of the personal sensibilities, experiences, and inclinations of their authors, or their public personae." Rusch cites Guck's article (but not this specific quote) in chapter 5.

might be gained and lost from assimilation" (194).[5]

Rusch's questioning of "what might be gained and lost from assimilation" refers back to a recurring theme of the book, namely the interplay between the familiar and the foreign. Embracing diatonic indeterminacy allows us to engage with harmonic regions "in ways that allow the familiar to transform into something foreign" (83). Analyzing a sonata movement as a fantasia "can challenge expectancies and transform the familiar into something foreign" (112). Grafting (or "reinscribing") the passacaglia within a classical formal rhetoric "renders it as both foreign (as a new beginning) and familiar (as a prolongation of a prior musical discourse)" (184). In these and other passages, Rusch consistently expresses ambivalence about "whether that which seems foreign need always be assimilated or resolved" (194).

Rusch's subject position represents a distinctive take on how music theory might respond to what Charles Fisk (2000b, 302) has called the "ambivalent magic" of Schubert's music.[6] In response to Fisk, Cohn (2000b, 304) argued that "[t]o understand the ambivalent magic . . ., we need a theory of chromatic space that works hand in hand with a diatonic model." Clark (2011, 202) similarly suggests that music-theoretical tools enable us to appreciate how Schubert creates "the illusion . . . of apparently magical harmonic effects." For Clark, "the dream-like quality of Schubert's music is the result of careful calculation," and "[t]he job of the music theorist, surely, is to explain that careful calculation" (2011, 160). Rusch, by contrast, conceives of Schubert's music as "an indeterminate object whose intelligibility is unfixed" (17) and asks "whether the musical attributes that we seek to understand are amenable to complete explanations" (194). By applying the tools of music theory not so much to explain, but to engage in "forms of play" with, Schubert's music, Rusch offers a model of how our discipline might try to break out of its "long-standing commitment to empirical and objective orientations" (13) and embrace "music's vibratory enchantments" (Lochhead 2020, 15).

5 The preponderance of piano music can be illustrated by the fact that 56 of the 62 musical examples in the book deal with solo piano music. One could very reasonably argue that the book's title should refer to "Schubert's piano music" rather than "Schubert's instrumental music."

6 Fisk was referring specifically to a passage towards the end of the development section in the first movement of the Piano Sonata, D. 960, where the B-flat major tonic is recovered, "at first chimerical[ly]," following a prolonged passage in D minor (302).

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