

Musical Analysis and Performance Practice in Schubert's Piano Sonata in A Major, D. 664: A Study of Form, Style, and Technical Solutions

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Abstract: This paper conducts a comprehensive musicological analysis and performance technique study of Schubert's Piano Sonata in A major, D. 664. The article first outlines the compositional background of the work, noting that 1819 marked a crucial transitional period in Schubert's piano sonata composition. The piece was completed during Schubert's trip to the Steyr region of Upper Austria with the singer Vogl and was dedicated to the local 18-year-old woman Josephine von Koller. Building on this foundation, the article then conducts a detailed formal analysis of the first movement's sonata form structure, including the exposition (bars 1–47), development (bars 48–79), recapitulation (bars 80–126), and coda (bars 127–134). The thematic structure follows an A+B+A' layout, with the tonality seamlessly shifting between A major and related keys, fully showcasing Schubert's distinctive musical language. However, the analysis of performance techniques constitutes the main focus of this article, which proposes specific solutions to the technical difficulties of each section: the exposition emphasises balance between the left and right hands and triplet technique; the development emphasises alternating octaves and pedal use; the recapitulation requires emotional control and stylistic contrast; and the coda emphasises tone control. Additionally, the article specifically discusses the handling of dotted rhythms, triplet rhythms, and the principles of pedal technique during the Romantic period, thereby providing performers with systematic technical guidance and musical expression suggestions.

Keywords: Schubert; Piano; Performance Technique; Romanticism; Musical Analysis

Online publication: July 26, 2025

1. Background

Franz Schubert, an Austrian composer, is regarded as one of the most important figures of early Romantic music. Schubert was born on 31 January 1797 in the suburbs of Vienna. His father, Franz Theodor, was a primary school teacher. Schubert demonstrated extraordinary musical talent from an early age, beginning his musical education under his father's guidance at the age of five and taking up the violin at eight. In 1808, at the age of 11, Schubert was admitted to the Stadtkonvikt in Vienna due to his exceptional vocal abilities, where he received formal musical education under renowned teachers such as Antonio Salieri. However, after leaving school in late 1813, Schubert briefly taught at his father's school but soon dedicated himself entirely to musical composition^[1]. Despite his short career of only fifteen years, Schubert was extremely prolific, composing over 600 Lieder, several symphonies, a large number of chamber music works, piano sonatas, and sacred music. However, Schubert lived in poverty, and his works received little recognition or publication during his

lifetime, relying primarily on the financial support of friends to sustain himself. On 19 November 1828, Schubert died in Vienna at the age of 31 from typhoid fever. Unfortunately, it was only after his death that Schubert's music began to gain widespread recognition. Composers such as Felix Mendelssohn, Robert Schumann, and Johannes Brahms later championed his works, ultimately establishing his important place in music history^[2]. Today, Schubert is widely regarded as one of the greatest composers of Lieder, and his music is renowned for its beautiful melodies, rich harmonies, and profound emotional expression.

2. Creative Context

Franz Schubert (31 January 1797–19 November 1828) was an Austrian composer and one of the most important figures of the early Romantic period in music. The Piano Sonata in A major, D 664, was composed in July 1819, when Franz Schubert was 22 years old and in the midst of his creative development. In fact, the period from 1815 to 1819 was a crucial phase in Schubert's piano sonata composition, marking a significant transition from his early imitation of classical masters to the development of his unique musical language^[3]. However, during this period, Schubert also faced multiple challenges in his piano sonata composition, including the establishment of his works' structure, the confirmation of the composition dates, and the clarification of his compositional intentions. It was against this backdrop of creative exploration that the Piano Sonata in A major, D 664, was born, playing a pivotal role in the development of Franz Schubert's piano sonata compositions. At the same time, the composition of this work also has a special historical context: in the summer of 1819, Franz Schubert travelled to the Steyr region of Upper Austria with his close friend and renowned baritone Johann Michael Vogl. Johann Michael Vogl was not only Franz Schubert's close friend but also an important interpreter and promoter of his Lieder. During this trip, Franz Schubert was captivated by the local natural environment and made some new friends there. The Piano Sonata in A major, D 664, was completed in July 1819 and dedicated to an 18-year-old local woman named Josephine von Koller. In a letter, Franz Schubert praised her as 'very beautiful' and 'an excellent pianist' (Steen, 2004)^[4]. From a musical composition perspective, Schubert's works from this period exhibit several notable characteristics. While maintaining the basic structure of the classical sonata form, the Piano Sonata in A major, D 664, demonstrates the emergence of personal stylistic development in melodic treatment and emotional expression. The lyrical qualities and relatively concise structure of the work confer on it a unique status within Schubert's piano sonatas. Therefore, this Piano Sonata not only reflects Franz Schubert's creative state and artistic aspirations during the 1819 period but also provides important material for understanding the transition from his early to mature period through its musical language characteristics. As Steen observed, Franz Schubert's musical compositions emphasise emotional expression^[5], a characteristic that is also evident in the Piano Sonata in A major, D 664.

3. Form Analysis

The first movement of Sonata in A major, D664, is in Allegro Moderato, sonata form, A major, 4/4 time, Sonata form. And the formal structure can be divided into four parts: Exposition (bars 1-47), Development (bars 48-79), Recapitulation (bars 80-126), and Coda (bars 127-134). First, the structure of the primary theme is A+B+A', where the A section (bars 1–8) is in A major, with an 8-bar period consisting of 4-bar phrases. However, the appearance of the tonic G and the sharp A in bar 5 causes the tonality to shift to B minor before returning to A major. Next, the B section (bars 8–12) begins in bar 9 with the tonality shifting from A major to F# minor, while the A' section (bars 12–20) enters on the weak beat of bar 12, with the tonality reverting to A major. After a 20-bar transition, the secondary theme begins, with the tonality of the transition section shifting from A major to its dominant key, E major. Next, the secondary theme C section (bars 21–33) begins with the right-hand melody in a high register for the first four bars, giving a bright impression. It still uses the primary theme's tonality of A major but then shifts to A minor and then to E major after bar 25. Immediately following, Section

C' (measures 34–41) introduces the restored C and G. The appearance of #D in measure 35 indicates a tonal shift from E major to E minor, though the tonality returns to E major by the end of this section. Additionally, the coda (bars 42–47) features a melody reminiscent of the secondary theme, with dynamics gradually diminishing to conclude this section. The development section is very brief, consisting of only 31 measures. The primary theme undergoes a transformation from F# to C# minor, while the tonality of the transition section is C#-D-E. The melody is advanced through alternating octaves between the left and right hands, resembling the sound of trumpets in a symphony, enhancing the sound effect and creating a sense of accumulated power that pushes the atmosphere of the entire piece to a climax. While also laying the groundwork for the development of the secondary theme later on. Meanwhile, the secondary theme shifts from E major to F# minor, and the development section undergoes multiple tonal shifts, showcasing its expressive power. Finally, the recapitulation adheres to the traditional sonata form, beginning in E major and returning to the tonic, unifying the tonality and stabilising it. The coda, similar to the primary theme's chord, slowly concludes the first movement.

4. Analyzing and solving performance problems

4.1. Exposition (bars 1-47)

The difficulty in this section is the balance between left and right hand strength. Begin by practicing the technique of left hand triplets (bars 21-24). The triplets require a light fingertip touch to produce an even and 'crystal clear' sound. It is recommended to use a metronome for the parts where the rhythmic pattern of the triplet is mixed with the rhythm of the eighth note. When the right hand is added to the one-handed practice, new problems arise. The hand begins to tense up during two-to-three rhythms, and after much practice, the performer is still in a situation where the performer cannot take care of both hands, and when the performer is forced to align his hands, accents suddenly appear to disrupt the line of the phrase, and when the performer pays attention to the right hand's melody, the triplets in the left hand are not played neatly, and the performer realizes that the performer has neglected relaxation exercises during the one-handed practice. Relaxation exercises should be a very slow practice process, first of all, to find a relaxed state, shoulders down small arm relaxation, finger tips for the center of gravity down to play a long tone, until the rest of the fingers are in a relaxed state after playing the next tone, the second tone down the key after the previous finger immediately relax to complete the transfer of energy. After initially mastering the state of relaxation (see **Figure 1**), we practiced lifting the fingers high, relaxing quickly after lifting the fingers high, and mastering the relaxation of the arm when playing, each bar is a breath, and subsequent exercises utilized recorded audio controls to address left and right hand strength control ultimately. (see **Figure 1**)

Figure 1. F. P. Schubert - Piano Sonata in A major D. 664, I. Allegro moderato, bars 21-24.

4.2. Development (bars 48-79)

The difficulty of this section lies in the upward octave (57-64), played alternately by the left and right hands, a magnificent

and showy florid phrase that also relies on crescendos and pedals throughout the measure to make a powerful buildup of sound. Firstly, the performer needs to go through the octave scales individually with either the left or right hand. Secondly, the speed of this section is faster than the rhythmic exercises. You can change the rhythm to a rhythmic pattern of dots to practice wrist relaxation (see **Figure 2**), or two-tone, three-tone groups in increasing order to practice wrist endurance. This way, you will retain the romantic and delicate character of the Schubert sonatas while showing octave technique^[6]. Moreover, the performer should be very careful with the pedals (see **Figure 2**), use the pedal after the note and put it cleanly before the start of the phrase, and the timing of the rests is precise and the whole is clean and transparent. (see **Figure 2**)

Figure 2. F. P. Schubert - Piano Sonata in A major D. 664, I. Allegro moderato, bars 58-63.

4.3. Recapitulation (bars 80-126)

The structure of the recapitulation is the same as that of the exposition. The difficulty of the recapitulation is to play the same material in a style and emotion that contrasts with that of the exposition. Because of the ‘heart-pounding’ of the climax at this point, it was difficult for me to control the repertoire to be as calm and introspective as the presentation, so the melody was brighter and more passionate, with more pronounced changes in intensity. After recording this work, we can see that the performance of this section often changes according to the performer’s state of mind, sometimes overly dramatic, sometimes uninteresting and consistent with the theme. Therefore, I recommend that performers use recordings during practice. Always pay attention to the control of the material.

4.4. Coda (bars 127-134)

The difficulty of the coda lies in the control of the timbre. The rest at the end of the recapitulation seems to press the pause button, and the mood is introverted into the coda stage^[7], which is still complex, although the mood is calmed down. The performer needs to control the timbre to make the sound serenity and softness. Try to touch the keys with fingertips at different angles and speeds and change how you generate force. In bars 127-134, it is recommended to use the metacarpal joints when playing chords in the right hand and to use the big arm to drive the little arm down to get a deeper sound when playing chords in the left hand. (see **Figure 3**)



Figure 3. F. P. Schubert - Piano Sonata in A major D. 664, I. Allegro moderato, bars 127-134.

5. Rhythm Patterns and Pedal Techniques

5.1. Dotted Rhythm

This piece makes extensive use of dotted rhythms throughout, stretching out the phrasing. The sequential movement of dotted notes up and down makes the piece more song-like and beautiful, highlighting the emotions the composer wants to express^[8]. Additionally, the dotted rhythm appears on the strong beat at the beginning of the piece, emphasising the musical phrasing and making the music sound more lively and vibrant. However, when playing, do not play the sixteenth note following the dotted eighth note too briefly; instead, extend the rhythm of this note appropriately to make the melody feel more lyrical, aligning with the emotional expression of the piece. Furthermore, be careful not to play too lively, as this would go against the composer's original intention^[9].

5.2. Triplet rhythm

Triplet rhythm is also a difficult rhythm to master. When playing, we often get the timing wrong, and the left and right hands appear to be playing a 3:2 rhythm pattern, which often gives the melody a sense of dislocation. This rhythm pattern makes the melody more lively, so the right-hand melody should be brighter in volume, and attention should be paid to the accuracy of the timing so as not to be affected by the left-hand triplet rhythm. At the same time, the left hand's triplet rhythm must be steady, with the fingertips not raised too high. Control the volume of the left hand's accompaniment and maintain a close-to-the-keyboard playing technique to highlight the fluidity of the left hand's accompaniment^[10]. Additionally, before performing each piece, listen to other pianists' interpretations to gain inspiration for your own interpretation. Since the entire piece is lyrical and slow, with few dynamic phrases, we should accompany the performance with our breathing. At this time, we should hold our breath and not release it, relaxing our forearms and allowing them to move with the melody to drive the fingers. In addition, we should pay attention to one more point: when playing a soft melody, it is easy to only play half of the keyboard. We should try to play the tone colour as richly as possible.

5.3. Use of the pedal when playing

When studying each piano piece, in addition to analysing its harmony, form, and compositional background, we must also place significant emphasis on pedal technique. This is particularly crucial during the Romantic period, where pedal usage is of utmost importance^[11]. If the pedal is interpreted incorrectly during performance, it will be difficult to capture Schubert's playing style. Performers must never overlook pedal technique; instead, they should carefully analyse where to use the pedal to make the music more aligned with the composer's intended expression. Historically, during the Baroque period, the piano had not yet reached full maturity and did not have a pedal mechanism, so the pedal was rarely used in works from this period. However, during the Classical period, Beethoven's works required passionate and intense emotions to be expressed, and the pedal was used to convey the style of the pieces. In Romantic works, composers often marked the use of pedals in their scores, which also led performers to gradually pay more attention to the use of pedals. Therefore, when performing this piece, we should not use pedals like in the Classical period to pursue a clear and grainy tone colour, nor should we use pedals throughout the entire piece like in Romantic Chopin works. Specifically, at the beginning of the

piece, we use the pedal to connect the entire melody. Each measure uses one pedal for two beats, but in the third beat of the second measure, we lift the pedal to ensure the clarity of the right hand's ascending scale and the left hand's descending scale^[12]. The same principle applies to subsequent measures. In the secondary theme, we only use the pedal on the strong beats. At the same time, pay attention to the changes in chords and use a different pedal for each chord to ensure the clarity of the harmony lines. In the development section, the melody alternates between the left and right hands, so when using the pedal, add it according to the direction of the melody. Additionally, Most parts of this piece require rhythmic pedal, which enhances the rhythm and creates a dramatic atmosphere. For example, in measure 10, an accent mark is added on the strong beat in the pp section. At this point, we should use the pedal to emphasise the presence of this note, but the volume should not be too loud, as the beauty of the melody should not be disrupted. Similarly, many subsequent accents should also be played with the pedal^[13].

6. Conclusion

Through an in-depth study of Schubert's Piano Sonata in A major, D. 664, this article reveals the important position of this work in Schubert's creative development. Composed in the summer of 1819, a special historical period, the work marks an important turning point in Schubert's transition from imitating classical masters in his early years to forming his own unique musical language^[14]. From a musical analysis perspective, while maintaining the basic framework of the classical sonata form, the sonata demonstrates significant personal stylistic characteristics in its melodic treatment and emotional expression. Its lyrical quality and relatively concise structure give it a unique position among Schubert's piano sonatas, providing important material for understanding the composer's transition from his early to mature period. In terms of performance practice, the technical solutions proposed in this paper also have important practical value. Through systematic practice methods and clear technical requirements, performers can better grasp the musical connotations and technical difficulties of the work, especially the detailed elaboration of rhythm patterns and pedal techniques, providing useful references for accurately interpreting early Romantic piano works^[15]. Therefore, this study not only enriches the theoretical understanding of Schubert's piano music but also provides specific guidance for piano teaching and performance practice, which is of great significance for the inheritance and development of Schubert's piano works.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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