

SCHUBERT'S  
ARPEGGIONE SONATA  
**REVISITED**  
PRESENTED BY DISCORDIA MUSIC

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The 40 years that followed the initial discovery of Franz Schubert's posthumous body of work yielded a hefty stack of published editions, the purification and expansion of which has occupied scholars and publishers to the present day. This is Schubert's legacy: 174 years of conjecture, due in part to his premature death, but also because of his own stubborn unwillingness to promote his music while he lived. By the time the “Sonata for Arpeggione and Piano” (D821) was published in 1871, the instrument for which it was written had long vanished into obscurity, essentially creating a free-for-all for just about any pitched instrument that could handle the composition's range; today it is played most frequently on the viola, cello, double bass, and classical guitar, but performances on the flute and clarinet are not uncommon.



The arpeggione, or bowed guitar, is exactly that: a fretted instrument with six strings tuned exactly like a classical guitar (E–A–D–G–B–E) and held vertically between the knees. The similarity to the tuning of the double bass is inescapable, however, due to the use of solo tuning strings; any advantage that this conveys—whether technical or musical—is undone when the piece is played in written G minor. This article introduces a new edition of the sonata that will provide double bassists with an uncluttered presentation of the score (based on the composer's autograph and other Urtext editions) and puts forth another view of the solo part that takes advantage of the similarities between the double bass and the arpeggione. To this end, this article examines the strange phenomenon of the arpeggione itself, the composer and the circumstances under which he composed the sonata, the existing editions for the double bass, and, finally, the musical and technical implications that our edition presents.

## The Arpeggione

Developed in 1823 by the Viennese guitar luthier Johann Georg Staufer (1778–1853), the arpeggione (also known as the bowed guitar/bogen-gitarre, gitarre d’amour, and gitarre-violoncell) was a bowed, six-stringed, fretted instrument, which was tuned exactly like a classical guitar. Its body shape was also similar to a guitar, with smooth rather than pointed violin corners. Because the instrument lacked an endpin, it was held between the knees like a viola da gamba. Presumably, Staufer used a thread of logic similar to the 15<sup>th</sup> century creators of the viol family when he envisioned the arpeggione: a bowed version of an existing plucked instrument (in the case of the viol family, the lute) that could easily be learned by players of the existing instrument after only a few simple bowing exercises.<sup>1</sup>



Staufer was arguably the most important figure of the Viennese guitar luthierie in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. He introduced several critical innovations to the shape and structure of the guitar, many of which are still in use today. The “Persian slipper” shape of the headstocks—a defining design element instigated by Staufer—is currently brandished on all Fender Stratocaster electric guitars. The most striking of his innovations, however, was the “flying fingerboard,” which allowed the performer to set the action of the instrument according to his taste by raising or lowering the height of the fingerboard. Refinements such as sloping, violin-style backs, pronounced upper and lower bouts (like those of modern guitars), and range-increasing 22-fret fingerboards are also attributed to Staufer’s shop in Vienna.

The arpeggione itself, though not well received generally, did breed a small group of players and enthusiasts. According to the preface of the sonata’s first edition, it was for one of these enthusiasts—Vincenz Schuster—that Schubert wrote the piece. In addition to being the first person to perform the sonata, Schuster also published the only method book for the instrument in 1825 (*Anleitung zur Erlernung des von Herrn Georg Staufer neu erfundenen Gitarre-Violoncells—Diabelli*). But despite his and others’ better efforts, the arpeggione only remained in use for just over 10 years.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Kolneder, *The Amadeus Book of the Violin: Construction, History, and Music*, trans. Reinhard G. Pauly (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1998) 83.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Clive, *Schubert and His World: A Biographical Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997) 230.

The arpeggione's rapid extinction could have occurred for many reasons. Any luthier who has attempted to design, build, and then introduce a new instrument to classical performers will tell you that it is an uphill battle; the likelihood of failure is extremely high. In the case of the arpeggione, Stauffer's miscalculation was twofold, both of mechanics and aesthetics. Like the viola da gamba<sup>3</sup> and other fretted stringed instruments with more than four strings, the arpeggione was a delicate instrument, whose bridge curvature was very slight, making it difficult to apply pressure on a single string without touching off adjacent strings. The late 18<sup>th</sup> century proliferation of the brighter (and louder) pianoforte as the keyboard instrument of choice<sup>4</sup> (surpassing plectrum-based keyboard instruments like the harpsichord) demanded more volume from solo instruments in order to achieve the appropriate balance between the instruments. The absence of an endpin also made it awkward to play and hold.

If the mechanical shortcomings contributed to the arpeggione's quick demise, then the evolving aesthetics of this era in music history sealed its fate. The fretted members of the string family (such as the viola da gamba) were regarded as musical archaisms<sup>5</sup> in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and were long out of fashion by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> The sound of the viola da gamba and its odd cousin, the baryton, was described in the most pejorative terms, as evidenced by this statement by Burney in the late 1760s:

[The baryton] was practised longer in Germany than elsewhere; but since the death of the late Elector of Bavaria... the instrument seems laid aside. [...] The tone of the instrument will do nothing for itself, and it seems with Music as with agriculture, the more barren and ungrateful the soil, the more art is necessary in its cultivation. And the tones of the viola da gamba are radically so crude and nasal, that nothing but the greatest skill and refinement can make them bearable. A human voice of the same quality would be intolerable.<sup>7</sup>

If the viola da gamba was held in such low esteem in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, then one can only imagine the chilly reception the arpeggione must have received in 1823. Much had happened in the intervening years, and the sound of the viol became more and more anachronistic. Musical expressiveness—as represented by an expanded and more

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<sup>3</sup> "Viol," *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th ed. "[The viola da gamba] is a chamber instrument with a soft, sweet tone, incapable of the dynamic extremes and brilliance of the violin; this helps to account for its decline."

<sup>4</sup> Richard W. Maunder, *Keyboard Instruments in Eighteenth-Century Vienna* (Oxford, England: Oxford University, 1998) 106. Maunder cites 1783 as the year when sales of pianofortes and fortepianos overtook sales of harpsichords.

<sup>5</sup> William S. Newman, *The Sonata in the Classic Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963) 92.

<sup>6</sup> Julie Anne Sadie, ed. *Companion to Baroque Music* (New York: Oxford University, 1998) 366. "[The stringed instruments] were... the first to be affected by changes in taste, for... they were already going out of fashion in England. Purcell, in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, was the last major English composer to write for viols, and he was regarded as old-fashioned for so doing."

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

colorful palette of markings and dynamics, the changing nature and function of vibrato, and so on—had been redefined by Beethoven, which established a forward-moving course that presumed itself uninterested in the reserved aesthetic of the Baroque and pre-Baroque periods. Unfortunately for its maker and devotees, the arpeggione was anathema before it was even built.

## A Composer of Friendship



What would compel Schubert to write a sonata—and a substantial one at that—for such an instrument? For a man who spent his entire adult life in dire financial straits, this appears to be a very foolish decision indeed. It is evident, however, that although Schubert was interested in and motivated by commercial success, he was a notoriously bad businessman and an even worse self-promoter. In the midst of the Rossini craze in Vienna, composers during this period came to understand that financial prosperity was no longer tied exclusively to commissions from the aristocracy and the church, and that the rise of the bourgeoisie in Europe had created a new, lucrative opportunity in opera for the masses. Schubert, for his part, made several attempts to break into this scene, but was met with little success. Even though his music consistently received favorable reviews, the overwhelming consensus among critics and audiences alike was that Schubert’s operas were ill paced and lacked the most basic elements of compelling drama. *Alfonso und Estrella*, an opera for which Schubert had particularly high hopes, failed to ignite any excitement among the Viennese at all. Even some of Schubert’s closest friends admitted that it was not his best work and discouraged the pursuit:

... the weaknesses of the libretto are apparent. The stage movement is slow and clumsy, and the main action is constantly held up by the pageantry and the pastoralism. There are no minor characters of any importance, so that the action proceeds for the most part in a series of duets. The piece is full of fresh lyrical writing, especially in the love scenes of Act II. But even here it is too static. It seems to be more a succession of musical tableaux than a music drama.<sup>8</sup>

Schubert met this kind of criticism with open-mouthed astonishment. The opera’s librettist, Franz von Schober, was a very close friend of Schubert’s and a charismatic, influential member of the bourgeois cluster of artists, writers, and musicians with whom Schubert kept company in Vienna. Schober’s charisma, however, did not translate into a talent for dramatic writing, and blame for the opera’s failure lies mostly at his door. Loathe to accept the libretto’s shortcomings at first, he admitted the following, long after Schubert’s death: “... an opera libretto... such a miserable, still-born, bungling piece of

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<sup>8</sup> John Reed, *Schubert*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University, 1997) 75. In reference to Schubert’s collaborative effort with Franz von Schober for the opera *Alfonso und Estrella*.

work that even so great a genius as Schubert was not able to bring it to life...”<sup>9</sup> It is clear that Schubert’s devotion as a friend to Schober clouded his own assessment of the opera’s virtues, for he continued to believe that *Alfonso und Estrella* was one of the best works he had written, if not *the* best.<sup>10</sup>

The case of *Alfonso und Estrella* illustrates Schubert’s tendency—shared by many composers and artists—to not only express his devotion to his friends and colleagues through his compositions, but also to allow his friendly, sentimental nature to exercise a high degree of influence on the choices that might have made him more financially successful as a composer. With that in mind, and in the absence of more specific information, it seems logical that Schubert’s decision to write a sonata for arpeggione and pianoforte must also have been guided by nothing more than a friendly gesture toward the instrument’s maker and the enthusiast, Vincenz Schuster, who presumably requested the piece. No evidence suggests that the sonata was a legitimate commission or indicates that Schubert received any remuneration whatsoever from the requesting parties. “One might almost say that Schubert is a composer of Friendship as Bach had been a composer of the Church and Handel a composer of the State.”<sup>11</sup> Although certainly sweeping in its generalization, this statement by the authors Harman, Milner, and Mellers implies that in order to understand Schubert’s *modus operandi*, one must position his friends and colleagues at the epicenter of his motivation.

## Mood Swings

Unperturbed by the instrument’s obscurity and the slim likelihood that it would ever catch on, Schubert proceeded to compose the sonata in November 1824 while living at his family’s residence in Vienna. Based on some obvious idiosyncrasies in the score, he seems to have intended to exploit the possibilities presented by the instrument’s extended range. The arpeggione’s guitar-like tuning allows the performer a range of two octaves plus a fourth without shifting or changing positions (compared to two octaves plus a step on the cello), and its six-string setup easily facilitates virtuosic, arpeggiated passages. In the first movement, the passage at m. 177, where a range of four octaves is spanned in just over two bars, demonstrates the flexibility the instrument allowed the composer. Indeed, Schubert’s melodic lyricism finds expanded drama in the extended range of the arpeggione.

These idiosyncrasies aside, the form and musical structure of the sonata is typical to Schubert and needs no attention here. Like many of his late compositions, it presents a candid account of his volatile emotional state at the time during which this piece was composed. From his adolescence until 1822, Schubert was an active, gregarious character who eventually became quite comfortable in Vienna’s rowdy, bohemian

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth McKay Norman, *Franz Schubert: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University, 1997) 118.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 120.

<sup>11</sup> Alec Harman, Anthony Milner, and Wilfrid Mellers, *Man and His Music: The Story of Musical Experience in the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962) 660.

nightlife. He was politically active, outspoken, and vivacious. In November 1822, however, Schubert began a gradual retreat from his customary social haunts. For several months afterwards, he was rendered unable to compose—an effect caused by the symptoms of primary syphilitic infection.<sup>12</sup> The degree to which this disease affected Schubert from this point forward cannot be underestimated. When he was not ill with the symptoms of the disease itself, he was ill from the side effects of the barbaric treatments prescribed for syphilis; one particularly bewildering, but common, treatment prescribed toxic mercury applications (quicksilver), fasting, purging, and bloodletting. All of this, including the terrible social stigma associated with syphilis, contributed to a significant deterioration in Schubert's health (both physical and mental) and overall quality of life.

It is true that Schubert's music—even the music that was written prior to the onset of venereal disease—exhibits manic-depressive (or cyclothymic<sup>13</sup>) qualities, but these intensify after 1822 as intermittent periods of relative good health grew shorter and shorter. When the “Arpeggione” Sonata was written in November 1824—exactly two years into the progression of the disease—Schubert's health had deteriorated significantly, and his depression had certainly deepened. Only seven months earlier, he had written the following oft-cited quote in a letter to his friend Leopold Kupelweiser (1796–1862):

In a word, I feel myself to be the most unhappy and wretched creature in the world. Imagine a man whose health will never be right again, and who in sheer despair over this ever makes things worse and worse, instead of better; imagine a man, I say, whose most brilliant hopes have come to nothing, to whom the joy of love and friendship have nothing to offer but pain, at best, whose enthusiasm (at least of the stimulating kind) for all things beautiful threatens to vanish, and ask yourself, is he not a miserable, unhappy being?—“My peace is gone, my heart is sore, I shall find it never and nevermore.” I may well sing every day now, for each night, I go to bed hoping never to wake again, and each morning only tells me of yesterday's grief.<sup>14</sup>

This anguished language is a perfect example of the severely depressed Schubert, informed by his illness and persecution complex. He relied heavily on the position of an artist in an inhospitable and unsympathetic world, and the resulting pathos, bordering on ecstasy, was a treasure trove of poetic and musical material. Pleasure, while fleeting, was derived almost exclusively from nostalgic, Proustian reminiscences of better times.

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<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth McKay Norman, *Franz Schubert: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University, 1997) 164.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 138. McKay writes, “Cyclothymia is defined medically as a mild form of manic depression characterized by pronounced changes of ‘mood, behaviour, thinking, sleep, and energy levels.’ In adults, periods of depression, hypomania (mild mania), and complete normality alternate, the latter lasting no more than two months at a time. The condition at this level of severity is not debilitating, but the severity is liable to increase with the years, in many cases into full-blown clinically definable manic depression. However, even when psychotic illness is severe, many individuals are normal for most of the time, and are able to reason and function without impairment of the faculties in both personal and professional capacities. Common early symptoms of cyclothymic depression are dark moods manifested by apathy, lethargy, pessimism, self-deprecation, and irritability, and loss of interest in things usually enjoyed.”

<sup>14</sup> Franz Schubert, *Dokumente 1817–1830, i: Texte*, ed. T. G. Waidelich (Tutzing, 1993) 234.

Schubert’s music explicitly imitates his life—it is, perhaps, our most accurate portrait of the man—and this informs our aesthetic reading of the “Arpeggione” Sonata. A clearer picture of just how frequently and abruptly Schubert’s mood shifted from bright and cheerful to dark and brooding emerges when the contrasting sections are labeled as follows (blue indicates dark; yellow indicates bright):

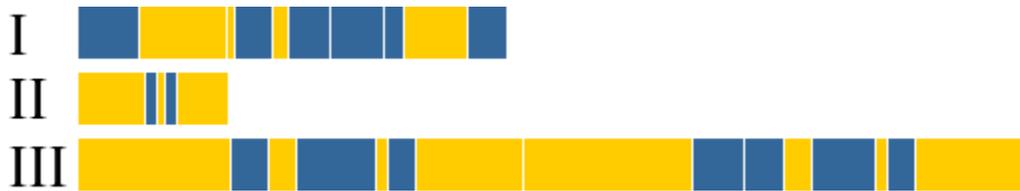


Figure 1. Dark and bright moods in the three movements of the sonata.

Although this graphic oversimplifies the nuance of Schubert’s transitions and makes no allowances for different degrees of dark and bright, it does put forth a vivid image of his wild compositional mood swings. With that in mind, consider the paradox of Schubert’s statement regarding another great manic-depressive composer:

“[His music is replete with] eccentricity, which unites the tragic with the comic, the pleasant with the repulsive, heroism with rant, the very saint with the harlequin, unites, exchanges, and even confuses them.”<sup>15</sup>

The composer to whom Schubert refers is, of course, Beethoven. Based on various statements made in his letters and diaries, Schubert had conflicting opinions about Beethoven; he was very much in awe of his accomplishments, but as the previous quote illustrates, he rejected the harsher elements of his later period<sup>16</sup> in deference to the more delicate sensibilities of Mozart and Haydn. It is possible that Schubert’s affinity for Mozart obfuscated the obvious similarities he himself shared with Beethoven. Schubert must have recognized that Beethoven had changed—or at least influenced—all things musical in and around Vienna (including himself), having raised the level of drama that early 19<sup>th</sup> century audiences came to expect from music and the theater. Plus, Beethoven’s embodiment of the brilliant, but crazed, artist fit neatly within the aesthetic of the period. In spite of his entreaties to the contrary, Schubert (in 1824 and later) was not dissimilar to his predecessor. Consider the following account by the author/journalist Wilhelm von Chézy:

As soon as the blood of the vine was glowing in him, he liked to withdraw into a corner and give into a quiet, comfortable anger during which he would try to create some sort of havoc as quickly as possible, for example, with cups, glasses and plates, and as he did so, he would grin and screw up his eyes tight.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> D. Jablow Hershman and Julian Lieb, *Manic Depression and Creativity* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998) 92.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth McKay Norman, *Franz Schubert: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University, 1997) 51.

<sup>17</sup> Wilhelm von Chézy, "Erinnerungen aus Wien: Aus den Jahren 1824 bis 1829," *Deutsche Pandora* (Stuttgart, 1841) 183.

Accounts such as this offer us a view of the extremities of Schubert's personality and give us a better indication of the mindset with which performers should attempt to approach his music. The challenge as a performer, of course, is to seamlessly sew the pieces together, and suffuse the melodrama with madness and the sweetness with Mozartian delicacy.

Knowledge of a composition's historical context is an essential component of musical study, but the most important artifact—if it is available—is the composer's original manuscript. Much to the advantage of the instruments for which Urtext editions are available, Schubert's manuscript of the "Arpeggione" Sonata survived. Although existing editions for the double bass succeed in putting a friendlier face on the sonata, they fail to provide an accurate representation of the original composition. Stuart Sankey's edition (International Music Company, 1963) hearkens to a time when the solo double bass repertoire experienced rapid expansion and predates the era of Historically Informed Performance that commenced in the late 1960s. With that in mind, the changes evident in this edition are somewhat understandable, as Sankey presumably prioritized playability and accessibility over scholarly concerns. Unfortunately, David Walter's edition (Liben Music, 2002), although released in 2002, presents similar shortcomings and a drastically altered score. In the following section, Michael Hovnanian examines these editions in detail and compares them with Schubert's score and Discordia Music's new Urtext edition for the double bass.

## **The Sonata Revisited**

**A**s mentioned previously, Schubert's sonata survives today as a living piece of music almost exclusively in the form of transcriptions due to the failure of the instrument for which it was written. Among stringed instruments, the cello incorporates the piece into its repertoire most successfully based on the similarities of size and range to the arpeggione. However, the piece poses difficulties for cellists because the arpeggione possessed a slightly greater range across the open strings and utilized a different tuning system. For double bassists, whose repertoire consists of a large number of pieces adapted from cello literature, the problems of a smaller range across the open strings coupled with a different tuning system are familiar. For the most part, the issues of how cellists have grappled with the problems of adapting the sonata for their instrument will be left aside except for where I believe adaptations for double bass have been influenced, making them in essence transcriptions of adaptations for cello. The primary goal of this article is to focus on the original score as written by Schubert with the arpeggione in mind and to offer some observations on how the piece might be successfully adapted for performance on the double bass.

When comparing the arpeggione to the modern double bass with the idea of transcribing Schubert's sonata, some encouraging similarities and troublesome differences immediately appear. The register of the double bass, even for the most ambitious soloist,

falls well below what Schubert wrote for the arpeggione, rendering an at-pitch transcription unrealistic.

Double bass: an ambitious range extending three octaves above the top string (solo tuning one step higher)



Arpeggione: a range extending two octaves above the top string (the range used in Schubert's sonata)



Figure 2. Showing the difference in ranges of the double bass and arpeggione—sounding pitches.

While acknowledging the difference in registers, the most striking similarity between the double bass and the arpeggione, and the one that is at the heart of this reevaluation of Schubert's sonata, is the tuning of the two instruments. The modern double bass in orchestral tuning is identical to the lowest four strings of the arpeggione. The following section examines details of the sonata, showing how Schubert crafted it with the unique tuning of the arpeggione in mind and how the passages written for an instrument tuned primarily in fourths can be performed successfully on the double bass.

After determining whether or not a particular transcription can be rendered at pitch, an octave lower, or in a different key from the original altogether, the next most important factor, and one with a potentially greater impact on the result, is the choice between orchestral and solo tuning. In the case of the "Arpeggione" Sonata, the decision is of primary importance because choosing solo tuning means completely abandoning the relationship of the open strings to the structure of the composition and their similarity with the instrument for which the piece was intended in order to gain a few technical crutches, mostly in the form of harmonics in the upper register of the double bass.

It seems clear that Schubert gave thought to the tuning of the instrument when he chose the key of A minor. The low E (corresponding to the lowest string on the double bass) is important in the structure of the sonata. In fact, Schubert appears to have featured this note at important parts of the composition. The low E appears as an extended note before the recapitulation of the first movement and in the short bridge-phrase between the second and third movements. The low E is also the pedal in the pizzicato section before the return of the second theme in A minor during the Rondo.

As stated before, opting for solo tuning provides a few technical crutches arising from the tonic/dominant relationship between the top two strings and the resulting harmonics in the upper register. This relationship, if not discovered by Dragonetti in his compositions of solo music for the double bass tuned in fourths, rather than in the older Vienna School tuning, was at least heavily exploited by him. The same idiomatic use of the top two strings continues through Bottesini, and on into the 20<sup>th</sup> and now the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The pull toward the key of G minor (A minor in solo tuning) and the reliance on technical

crutches is so great that many transcriptions have tended to migrate to that key out of habit even when there are compelling reasons for other choices.

In many cases, the correlation between the top A string of the double bass (in solo tuning) with the top A string of the cello is a hard enticement to avoid. But the fact remains that Schubert had no top A string in mind when he wrote the “Arpeggione” Sonata. The open string corresponding to the tonic was second from the bottom in the low register. All of the high A harmonics and open A strings are idiomatic to the cello, not the arpeggione; as a result, using what is idiomatic to the cello to influence our choices has turned the piece into a transcription of the arrangement for cello. Also, the gains achieved by choosing solo tuning are outweighed by the loss of the open low A and the open D above it.<sup>18</sup> The following section provides some concrete examples of why this appears to be true.

The following example shows mm. 16–17 in both the A-minor and G-minor versions,<sup>19</sup> and demonstrates the reliance on upper-register harmonics in the G-minor version and the resulting impact on phrasing caused by the loss of a D string.

The original version in A minor:



Transposed to G minor:



Figure 3. A comparison of the A minor and G minor versions. In G minor, note the reliance on harmonics, particularly the high D as a technical crutch for the shift from F-sharp. Also note the awkward interval in m. 18—the E-flat and C are not on adjacent strings. The low C is often executed too short and with an unwanted accent. In the A-minor version, the open D string has the advantages of smoothing the following leap, softening the end of the phrase segment, and placing a more resonant note on a chord tone of the new harmony. Arguably, the open string is in line with Schubert’s intentions since the arpeggione has the same open string.

<sup>18</sup> Not to mention the musically unfortunate loss of the low E if the fourth string is not tuned down.

<sup>19</sup> For the sake of clarity, the keys in which the different versions are notated will be used. Obviously, the version written in G minor sounds in A minor if solo tuning is used.

Several measures later, the relationships of the open strings and their resulting harmonics produce some interesting differences between the G-minor and A-minor arrangements.



Figure 4. A comparison of the A minor and G minor versions. In G minor, the D and G harmonics are often used (m. 22 beats 1 and 2) for what in the A-minor version is a not particularly challenging shift. The technical crutch of the high D harmonic is undeniably useful in the G-minor version and corresponds well with the E harmonic one octave above the top string on the arpeggione. However, the open top string on the double bass (m. 24) preceding the high D often produces musically unsatisfactory results in the form of accents and jarring timber. In the A minor version, the corresponding note may be played as the more pleasant sounding harmonic on the third string to facilitate the large leap.

The following passage shows Schubert writing for the high E string on the arpeggione. On the double bass, this passage is admittedly more difficult to perform in A minor, but it is by no means unplayable. Note that the final A, for which the use of the top string harmonic on the cello and double bass has become *de rigueur*, would have been a closed note on the arpeggione.



Figure 5. Although intended to be played on the high E string of the arpeggione, this passage is still playable on the double bass without natural harmonics.

The following passage is one that often brings unhappy results when performed on the double bass.



Figure 6. A difficult passage to perform in G-minor editions.

Looking at the passage in the original key alongside a reminder of the arpeggione tuning shows the cleverness of Schubert's writing and sheds some light on the cross-string possibilities of the arpeggione, and the way in which this and similar passages may have been executed on that instrument.



Figure 7. A suggestion of which strings might have been used to play the phrase on the arpeggione.

This passage, and others like it, poses the greatest challenge because of the idiomatic use of the two additional strings on the arpeggione. What Schubert intended as a facile cross-string passage becomes more of an exercise in virtuosity on a four-stringed instrument when it is “telescoped” up and down the top string.

When playing this passage in G minor, the tendency is to try to incorporate the open D string into the fingering, seemingly at all costs, so that the following unwieldy combinations of shifts or string crossings result. Note that when playing the passage in A minor, with essentially the same fingering concept, the more satisfactory result is achieved.

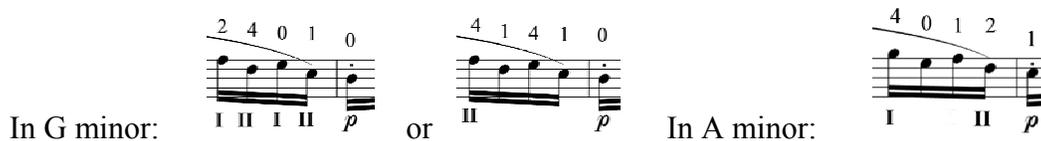


Figure 8. A comparison of the fingering of the passages in different keys.

By going further and emulating the way in which the passage could be played on the arpeggione, it is possible to arrive at a fingering that is more facile.

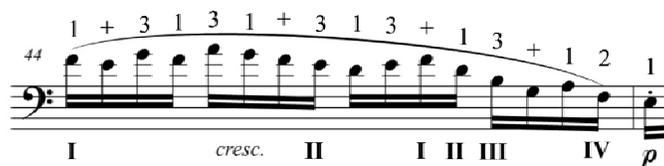


Figure 9. A facile fingering that imitates the way in which the passage would be played on the arpeggione.

The same concept applies even more strikingly to the corresponding passage in the recapitulation.

The following passage from the development section is another example of how reliance on the open top string for ease of execution produces results that are contrary to the way the passage would have been executed on the arpeggione, not to mention often musically unfortunate.



Figure 10. Use of the open string in mm. 88 and 90 often produces unsatisfactory results—non-legato execution of the slur and unwanted accents.



Figure 11. In the corresponding passage in A minor, note that the repeated As in mm. 88 and 90 would not have been an open string on the arpeggione. Schubert undoubtedly composed this passage, and all occurrences of the motive from which it was derived, to be played on adjacent strings.

The issues detailed so far concerning passages in the first movement also apply to the corresponding phrases in the development section.

The Adagio (second movement), like the rest of the sonata, loses a few of the familiar crutch harmonics on the top string when played in A minor rather than G minor, but it is otherwise not strongly impacted by the choice of key, the one exception being the low E in m. 67. Taking this note, or the entire passage containing it, up an octave tampers with the formal construction of the sonata.

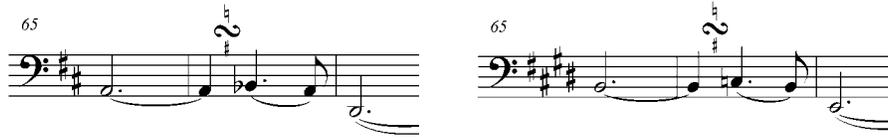


Figure 12. In G minor, execution of this passage requires lowering the fourth string.

The Allegretto (third movement) poses great technical challenges to double bassists, no matter which key is used. The first section (mm. 1–76) loses some of the familiar harmonics and open strings, but it is otherwise not much affected by the choice of key. However, in the second section (beginning m. 77), the loss of an open D string in the key of G minor is acutely noticeable. Schubert again appears to be writing specifically with the cross-string possibilities and specific tuning of the arpeggione in mind. To play the following passage on one string (as in Figure 13.2) is an unfortunate departure from his intentions.



Figure 13. Mm. 77–78. 1. The passage directly transposed to G minor is prohibitively difficult. 2. The way the passage is rendered by Walter and Sankey. 3. The passage as originally composed.

The section beginning at m. 320 poses a similar problem due to the loss of an open A string.

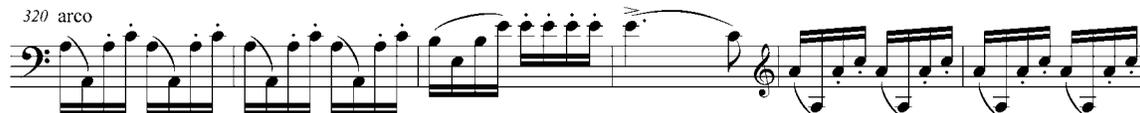


Figure 14. Note that when the theme shifts one octave higher, the low A in mm. 324 and 325 does not correspond to an open string on the arpeggione. Execution on the arpeggione might have been similar to the solutions suggested in the following figure for performance on the double bass.



Figure 15. Suggestions for fingering on the double bass, and a conjecture as to how this might have been executed on the arpeggione.

The section in the dominant (beginning m. 212) contains several passages that seem to be stumbling blocks for many double bassists. This section is admittedly easier to play in the key of G minor rather than A minor. The D and A string octave harmonics correspond nicely to the top two strings of the arpeggione, where the passage would most probably have been executed across the top two open strings. Nevertheless, many double bassists seem to have great difficulty with this section despite the easy availability of harmonics. This is probably due more to difficulty handling cross-string technique in general than anything specific to this passage.

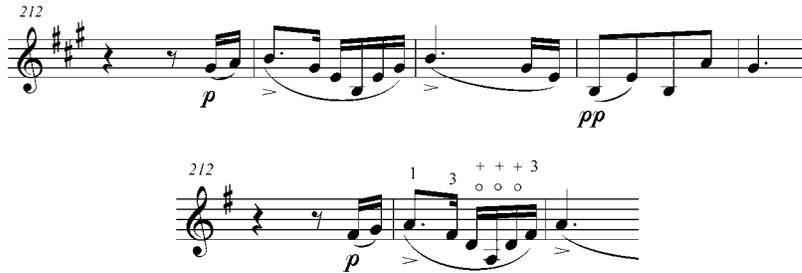


Figure 16. The original passage, followed by the commonly transcribed version. Despite natural harmonics, the passage is still difficult to execute because of awkward string crossings.

As with many of the difficult passages throughout the sonata, workable solutions to technical problems can often best be solved when the cross-string possibilities are explored and the inordinate reliance on traditional positioning systems based on harmonics and open strings is cast aside.



Figure 17. A fingering suggestion.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The notation **N** was used by my teacher, James Harnett, to indicate thumb Nail, actually the end of the thumb pressed laterally against the lower string—a useful way to finger perfect fourths.

## A Brief Examination of Editions

The purpose of looking at various editions of the sonata is to underscore the opaque editorial layer through which double bassists have experienced this piece. Obviously, since this is a transcription, the end result of any process of editing and arranging will result in something that differs from the composer's original manuscript, and all editorial decisions are assumed to have subjective validity. For the most part, I will restrict my observations to editorial choices affecting phrasing and articulation as well as those that significantly alter the pitches or relationship of registers as originally composed. The bowings and fingerings indicated will be largely ignored, except where they appear to suggest the editor is calling for a significant departure from the composer's intent or where he demonstrates a particularly insightful (or the contrary) approach to a passage.

Schubert wrote many long slurs, some of which might actually have been intended as phrase marking rather than bowings. Even before taking into account the shorter bow-to-string ratio of the double bass, an editor who wants to make specific recommendations on how to execute certain passages, either for pedagogical reasons or out of a sense of being helpful, must grapple with the meanings of these markings.



Figure 18. A long slur or phrase marking from the first movement.

The passage cited previously is an obvious example of a phrase marking probably not meant to be played strictly as notated. However, it cannot be assumed that all of Schubert's slurs are only phrase markings. The problem faced by editors of the double bass editions lies in balancing the musical and practical considerations of the markings throughout. Rather than present a measure-by-measure comparison of how the various editions depart from Schubert's original markings, I believe it is of more interest to isolate a few examples and discuss them in some detail.

### The Transcriptions by Stuart Sankey and David Walter

The edition by Stuart Sankey is probably the most familiar edition of the sonata to double bassists in the United States. There appear to be two versions of this edition. In the earlier version, the tuning of the first movement is the traditional solo tuning (A–E–B–F-sharp), whereas the tuning indicated for the second movement is A–E–B–E. In the later version, the tuning for the entire piece is marked with the latter tuning. Since the two editions appear identical except for a few passages in the first movement altered to

take into account the low E string, I will restrict my comments to the latest version. The transcription by David Walter is newer than the one by Sankey and probably less well known.

Sankey has taken the practical step of breaking up many of the long slurs that appear in the original. However, he has a predilection for adding syncopations to the phrasing that are not evident in Schubert's manuscript.

The image displays two pairs of musical staves comparing Schubert's original notation with Sankey's transcription. The first pair, labeled 'Schubert' and 'Sankey' with measure number '13', shows a melodic line in treble clef. Schubert's version features a long slur over the entire phrase, while Sankey's version breaks this into several smaller slurs. The second pair, labeled 'Schubert' and 'Sankey' with measure number '16', shows a melodic line in treble clef and a bass line in bass clef. Both versions include a *pp* dynamic marking at the end of the phrase. In Schubert's version, the phrasing is more continuous, whereas Sankey's version introduces syncopations and breaks up the phrasing.

Figure 19. Changes to phrasing that appear to attempt to disguise shifts into or out of thumb position.

Other changes have dubious technical rationale, relying on the notion that changes in bow direction can be masked by shifting these changes off the beat. This trick, although effective in some cases, tends to add unintended syncopations to what is an otherwise square phrase structure.

*Schubert*  
 36

*Sankey*  
 36

*Schubert*  
 63

*Sankey*  
 63

Figure 20. Some of the changes to Schubert's markings.

Although tuning the lowest string down to E is indicated, Sankey chooses to avoid it at m. 149 of the first movement. It is possible that this passage was overlooked when he reworked the second edition, in which he introduces the *scordatura*. If it is in fact an oversight, this is unfortunate, as the passage written by Schubert can be executed quite naturally on the double bass.

*Schubert*  
 148

*Sankey*  
 148

Figure 21. An editorial decision not to use the low E.

In the Adagio (second movement), the change of register is a significant alteration of the original.

Figure 22. A change of register.

In the Allegretto (third movement), the change in register and the failure to use the low E string results in the following departure from the original.

Figure 23. Editorial decision to avoid the open E results in a large leap.

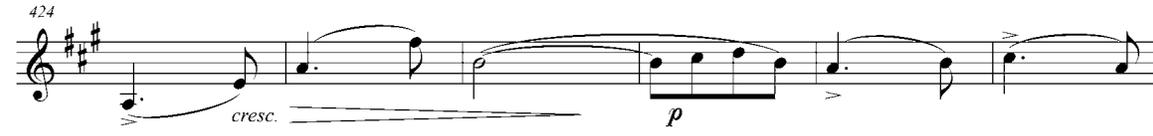
The slurring in the following section has been changed completely, probably in an attempt to make the passage more easily playable.

Figure 24. The change in slurring obscures Schubert's rhythmic emphasis.

In the original, the last statement of the theme is one octave higher.

*Schubert*

424



*Sankey*

424

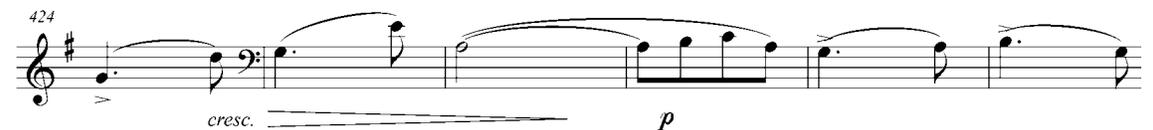


Figure 25. A change of register.

The edition by Walter includes a brief section of notes, which provide some information about the arpeggione along with exhortations to the performer to play musically, containing interesting quotes from Casals, Toscanini, and Bernstein. According to Walter, the *raison d'être* for this edition is that the “tradition” of interpreting this work has become essentially unmusical in his opinion. By offering a new edition, he hopes to aid in achieving more lyrical performances of the sonata.

Despite the aims of the editor, the most striking feature of this edition is the substitution of many of Schubert’s slurs with staccato markings. Beyond taking the step of rendering some of Schubert’s long slurs or phrase markings more easily playable on the double bass, Walter has completely altered the articulations to the point where little of the composer’s original phrasing is left intact. In addition to these changes, Walter has also added myriad dynamic and expressive markings not found in the original.

*Schubert*

17



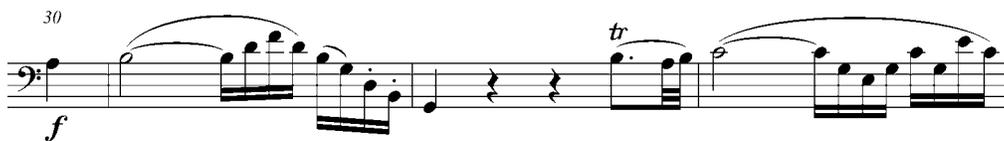
*Walter*

17



Figure 26. Note the substitution of articulation markings for the slur and changes to dynamic markings.

Schubert



Walter



Figure 27. A typical example of the changes from slurred to staccato phrasing.

Although Walter shows a predilection for the staccato marking, it is difficult to discern a pattern in the articulations he has chosen.

Schubert



Walter



Figure 28. Staccato articulations are added to m. 44, but dashes are substituted for staccato dots in m. 45.

Schubert



Walter



Figure 29. Slurs for dots. Accents omitted.

The idiosyncratic phrasing continues through all three movements. Here are two examples from the Allegretto (third movement).

*Schubert*



*Walter*



*Schubert*



*Walter*



Figure 30. Substantial alterations to the original slurs, dynamics, and articulations.

The transpositions of notes and the arrangement of registers are mostly in agreement between the Walter and Sankey editions to the point where one could conclude they are essentially the same arrangement with different slurring, articulation, and dynamic preferences indicated by the editors. However, Walter has made a few changes, which could either be read as the result of a conscious choice to depart from Schubert's intent or even as typographical errors.

*Schubert*



*Walter*



Figure 31. Probably an unfortunate typographical error. In the Walter edition, the solo bass line in the piano score reads the same way (E-natural), although the piano part echoes one bar later with the expected E-sharp.



Figure 32. A change in octave and the addition of a slur to the final eighth note of measure 110. This passage is altered this way in each occurrence.

Ill-conceived changes such as these discount the value of the original score and victimize unsuspecting students and incurious professional players. The art of performing is ultimately a combination of spontaneous personal expression and careful contemplation of the work at hand. Similarly, editing involves some art, but it also requires a didactic function. An editor's freedom of expression should be exercised more carefully than the performer's in light of the responsibility that comes with linking one's name with one of the master composers of the past. Since original sources are not widely available and often of limited practical use to the modern-day performer, the available editions of the work serve as the lenses through which we look to try to glean the composer's intent. When the lens becomes too opaque, sight of the original is obscured. The musical preferences expressed by an editor may often become blurred by those made for technical exigencies until the musical meaning has been obscured as well.

In revisiting the “Arpeggione” Sonata, the editors at Discordia Music have attempted to distill the composition down to its original state. Critical analysis of the composer's manuscript, the original instrument, and historical context reveals information that stands in direct opposition to the common assumptions and performance conventions among double bassists. Since the piece has been a part of the solo double bass repertoire now for over 40 years, these assumptions and conventions will be difficult to unlearn. For practical reasons, many players will continue to perform the piece as they have in the past, but for the interested few, we have endeavored to present a transparent, uncluttered Urtext edition as an unbiased point of reference for each performer to do with as he or she sees fit.



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