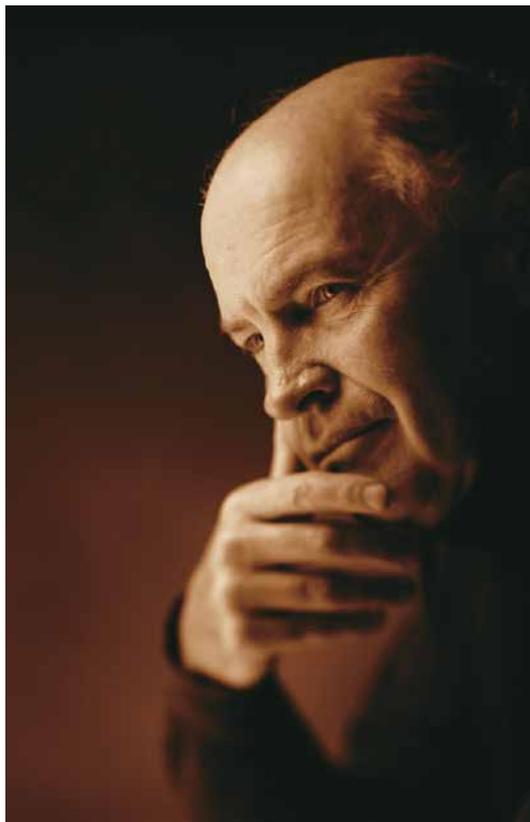


# RONALD FARREN-PRICE



FRANZ SCHUBERT  
Sonata No. 20 in A Major, D. 959



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## **FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)** **Sonata No. 20 in A Major, D. 959**

- 1** Allegro (A major) 16'30"
- 2** Andantino (F sharp minor) 7'41"
- 3** Scherzo. Allegro vivace (A major) 5'25"
- 4** Rondo. Allegretto (A major) 13'21"

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Schubert died in November 1828 at the age of thirty-one. Two months before, in September of that year, he finished three long piano sonatas and after that he completed the now great String Quintet in C major. During his last year there must have been times when he was severely ill, for it is now believed that he had signs of tertiary syphilis. His masterworks from this time therefore represent a creative fortitude that is unmatched.

It was decades before pianists developed an appropriate stylistic approach to the Schubert sonatas so as to reveal their singing quality and haunting harmonies. Their balance of strength and delicacy is destroyed if they are played in an over dramatic manner or given an excessively romantic interpretation. The first champion of Schubert's music was Robert Schumann who wrote rapturously about its melodic and harmonic beauty. It had been Schubert's intention that the sonatas be dedicated to the pianist-composer J. N. Hummel who had been taught by Mozart and who continued the Mozart tradition that Schubert was also steeped in. But Hummel died shortly after Schubert and the publisher took the liberty of dedicating the posthumous work to Schumann, a tribute to his pioneering appreciation of Schubert's beautiful music.

The long **first movement** begins with a lofty rhythmic figure accompanied by rich chords. This striking opening is not developed but, rather, recurs at strategic points like a great sound marker separating the major sections of the sonata. It establishes the exalted tone of the movement and appears at the very end, transmuted with pathos by being played softly. After the grand opening a descending triplet figure is the simple pianissimo germ of an idea which spreads its way throughout the work. It colours the energetic first subject and leads into a song-like second subject of quiet beauty that is, on several repetitions, overtaken by triplets that link back to the first subject. The middle section of the movement is enlightened naivety. It takes up a little running figure that begins like inspired doodling as it alternates between C major and B major. This decorative music gradually broadens into a transition back to the bold opening rhythmic figure and a recapitulation of the first and second subjects. At the end the music dissolves into silence.

The **second movement** is the music of a lost soul. An earlier Schubert song, *Pilgerweise*, gives a suggestion of the strange desolate opening. The melodic fragment is haunted by a fixation with its opening note which is insistently returned to as the sad, aimless movement unfolds. But worse is to come. A cadenza-like section moves dramatically towards a terrifying middle section. This wild music is shattering in its violence. Through a series of no less violent transitions the work returns to the desolate and aimless first section, decorated with additional notes which heighten its poignancy.

The **third movement**, a scherzo and trio, is a game for the hands. For all its playfulness the music has a grim edge and its capriciousness removes it from the simple pleasures of a Viennese dance. The trio, with an innocent simplicity, plays with crossing the hands. But the inner harmonies contradict the simple scheme and cast an uncomfortable shadow over the innocence of the game.

The **fourth movement** is a Rondo that flows with a lyrical sweep that is both purposeful and wistful. The alternating themes are related back to the first movement by the return of triplets into the texture of the music. The first theme resembles one in an earlier Sonata in A minor written when Schubert was twenty and the song *Im Frühling*, written in 1826, is also entwined in the movement. While many large-scale works end with an extended fortissimo display, this piece as it approaches its end starts to falter by breaking into a series of fragments separated by silence. The model for the whole movement is Beethoven's G major Sonata Op. 31, No. 1 which

Schubert expands into the 'heavenly length' so admired by Schumann. The Beethoven Sonata even suggested the novel ending that stops and starts. Schubert though concludes with a quite original touch. The final bars mirror the opening chords of the first movement. The Sonata returns on itself, like James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, to begin again.

Schubert was a composing prodigy whose talents were recognised early. One of his teachers, Michael Holzer, said of the ten-year-old Schubert: "If I wished to instruct him in anything fresh, he already knew it. Consequently I gave him no actual tuition but merely conversed with him and watched him with silent astonishment." Another offered the simple explanation: "He has learnt everything from God, that lad." It is an appropriate explanation for the source of this great sonata.

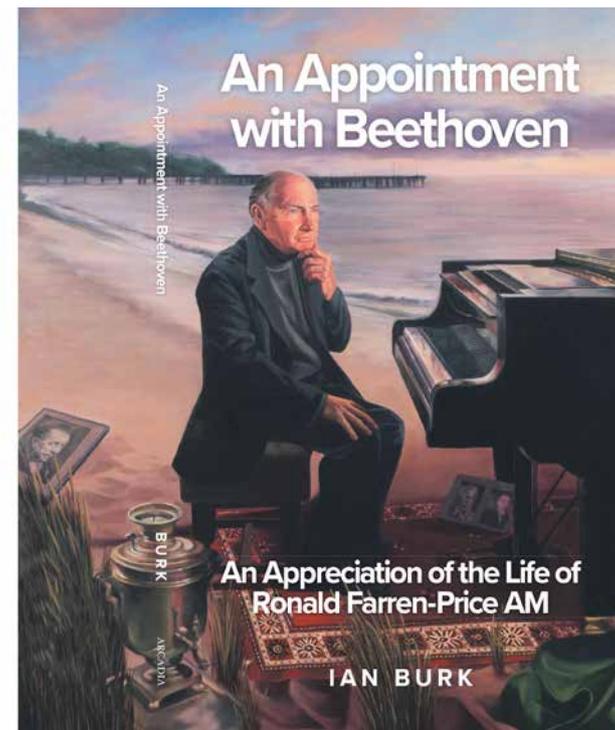
Ronald Farren-Price is the grand old man of the piano in Australia. His international career began with his recognition by the legendary pianist, Claudio Arrau, under whose guidance his distinctive style of playing matured.

He has appeared both in recital and as concerto soloist in the major concert halls of some forty countries. Among his noted appearances are those at Queen Elizabeth Hall London, Carnegie Recital Hall New York, Tchaikovsky Hall Moscow, Philharmonic Hall St Petersburg, Musikhalle Hamburg, Brahmsaal Vienna, Teatro Colon Buenos Aires, Sydney Opera house, Villa Pignatelli Naples, Royal Casino Bagni di Lucca, and the Melbourne Town Hall and Concert Hall.

In Melbourne his annual concert in December to celebrate Beethoven's birthday became something of an institution. Ronald Farren-Price's unique success as an Australian instrumentalist has been his twelve tours of the former USSR, where he played to capacity houses in the finest music centres. He is an Honorary Professor of the Tianjin Conservatory of Music, and was a pioneer in bringing Australian performance to China and to South-East Asia, including Vietnam, where he gave Vietnam's first televised concert in the Hanoi Opera House.

In 2013 Ronald Farren-Price gave

his final public concerts and retired from the concert platform. However, he remains Principal Fellow of the University of Melbourne where he teaches many of Australia's finest young pianists. He is a former Dean of the Faculty of Music, and also a former Director of the Australian National Academy of Music. His recordings are on the Move label. Ronald Farren-Price was awarded the Order of Australia in 1991 for services to music. He was the recipient of the University's Dublin Prize in 2002. In 2005, the AMEB awarded him an honorary FMusA, and the University of Melbourne conferred on him the honorary DMus. In 2014 he received the University of Melbourne Award.



This book on the life of Ronald Farren-Price, published in 2018 by Arcadia (Australian Scholarly Publishing) is written by Ian Burk. The book cover features a portrait of Ronald Farren-Price, an oil painting on canvas by Julia Ciccarone (1999).