

Robert Schumann: Florestan & Eusebius

(excerpts from 'The Lives of the Great Composers', by Harold C. Schonberg)

With Robert Schumann romanticism came to full flower. Every aspect of romanticism was reflected in him. He was introspective, idealistic, closely allied spiritually with the literary aspects of the age, an innovator, a critic, a propagandist for the new – and a great composer. His music at first almost entirely dispensed with old forms. He was the first of the completely anti-classic composers, and form – as it previously existed – meant little to him, though he was a superior theorist and as well informed as any musician then alive. While composers of his day were writing sonatas, symphonies and variations, Schumann was writing music named *Carnaval*, *Fantasy*, *Arabesque*, *Kreisleriana*, *Davidsbündlertänze*, *Kinderszenen*. These are caprices bundled together; they are spiritual diaries as well as music. A critic once rebuked him for not writing orthodox sonatas. Schumann's response was fervid, and it represented the romantic attitude: *"As if all mental pictures must be shaped to fit one or two forms! As if each idea did not come into existence with its form ready-made! As if each work of art had not its own meaning and consequently its own form!"* This is an important, and very modern, statement. For the first time in music is found the expressed statement that content and idea dictate form, not the reverse. More than any composer, more even than Chopin, whose forms also to a large extent were anti-classic, Schumann established an entire aesthetic that verged on impressionism. In this concept, a short statement can be as valid as a long speech, and perhaps more so. Schumann, along with Chopin (although the two worked independently of each other), demonstrated that forms existed not for the academicians but for the creative mind: that pure idea could impose its own forms, and that a small but perfect form, one that captured and exploited a single idea, could be its own aesthetic justification.

Mood, color, suggestion, allusion – these were important to Schumann, much more important than writing correct fugues, rondos, or sonatas. Invariably his music has a capricious and unexpected turn, a kaleidoscopic texture and emotion, and intensity of personal utterance that can be measured only in astronomical units. Naturally, every pedant and academician in Europe promptly set Schumann up as a whipping boy. To them his works were the end of music, a sign of the degeneracy of the times. His music appeared strange, formless, anarchic, from the void. It was a music tied up with poetry, painting, personal allusions, and romantic aesthetics. To Schumann it was all one. *"The aesthetic experience,"* he once wrote, *"is the same in any art, only the materials differ."* Liszt would write essentially the identical words in his "Life of Chopin". Few major composers have been so disliked in their own time, and even fewer have been so little performed. Wagner, for instance, was hated in many quarters, but he received plenty of performances, and his work was discussed all over Europe. Wagner knew how to promote himself. The gentle Schumann never did. A quiet man, medium-sized, with a sensitive face and lips that were always pursed as though he were whistling to himself, he never really fought back, as Wagner and Berlioz did. When he did fight, and he did so as a critic, it was for the new music and not for himself. Big-hearted, generous, dedicated, in love with music, he lent a helping hand to all young talent. In the meantime his pungent harmonies, his unusually strong dissonances and syncopated rhythms, his new concept of free but functional form – all were being described by the conservatives as the work of a madman. Fortunately, Schumann had friends and disciples, and his

admirers saw to it that his music was spread around. He also had a wife who was one of the best pianists in the world. Little by little his music made progress, though – unlike Chopin – it was not until after his death that he was accepted as one of the immortals.

If ever a composer was doomed to music it was Robert Schumann. There was something of a Greek tragedy in the way music reached into his cradle, seized him, nourished him, and finally destroyed him. From the beginning, his emotions were over-strung, abnormally so. His mind was a delicate seismograph upon which music registered violent shocks – shocks that would not even be noticed by people with less sensitive receiving apparatus. He himself once described how, as a child, he stole at night to the piano and played a series of chords, weeping bitterly all the while. He was so moved by the writings of Jean Paul that the intensity of the pleasure drove him (in his own words) to the *“verge of madness”*. When he heard of Schubert’s death he wept the whole night. Anybody with sensibilities refined to such a pitch is apt to lose control, and Schumann eventually did. Sometime around 1851, five years before his death, he began having hallucinations. He would hear harmonies from heaven. One night he imagined that the spirits of Schubert and Mendelssohn had brought him a theme, and he leapt out of bed to write it down. Like William Blake, he had visions. Unlike Blake, he could not live with them, and his mind finally gave way. But he accomplished much in the forty-six years of his life. His daemon dictated to him a kind of music that no composer up to that time had begun to visualize. The derivative forces in the music of Bach, Haydn, Handel, Mozart and Beethoven can easily be traced; those in Berlioz and even Chopin too. But Schumann from the beginning struck off entirely on his own, and it is hard to find a precedent for his music.

Robert was an avid reader, his father being a bookseller and publisher, as well as a writer of romances. He grew up conditioned by literature, and in no other composer is there such an attempted fusion of sound with literary idea. His favorite writer was Jean Paul (Richter), and that great romantic and visionary was constantly making remarks about music – remarks that the young Schumann devoured. *“Sound”,* wrote Jean Paul, *“shines like the dawn, and the sun rises in the form of sound; sound seeks to rise in music, and color is light.”* Also: *“It is music alone which can open the ultimate gates to the Infinite.”* To Schumann, romantic literature in general and Jean Paul in particular were governing processes of life itself. *“If everybody read Jean Paul”,* he wrote to a friend when he was eighteen, *“we should be better but more unhappy. Sometimes he almost clouds my mind, the rainbow of peace and the natural strength of man bring sweet tears, and the heart comes through its ordeal marvelously purified and softened.”* Inspired by literary heroes, Schumann tried his hand at poetry and fiction. He also attempted composition. Indeed, he had been doing so from the age of seven. He had easily learned how to play the piano and had a strong talent for improvisation. But his musical education was almost nil, and he had to pick everything up by himself.

At the death of his father, when Robert was just sixteen, and following the suicide of his mentally and physically challenged younger sister, his mother sent him to Leipzig to study law. But he did not study much law in Leipzig; there was too much music in the city. He would go to concerts, or he would get up early and practice the piano eight or nine hours a day, smoking innumerable cigars in the process. At night he would summon his friends and play for them. Or he would read Goethe, Shakespeare, Byron and of course Jean Paul, committing to memory page after page of their work. He

was a romantic par excellence, affecting a Byronic pose, falling in and out of love, dabbling in the arts, arguing about music, life and aesthetics through the night and well into the morning.

All this was very fine, but musically speaking it was not very professional. Not until Schumann was eighteen did he take his first serious musical instruction. In 1830, upon returning to Leipzig, he came across a piano teacher named Friedrich Wieck. The best testimonial to Wieck's pedagogical theories was his daughter, the nine-year-old Clara. She was a formidable prodigy and she developed into one of history's outstanding pianists. Wieck was enthusiastic about Schumann's potential. He wrote to Schumann's mother, promising that Robert would "be one of the greatest pianists within three years." She was not happy about this, but Robert moved into Wieck's house, practiced hard, started composing, and also took lessons in composition. But his career as a professional pianist ended before it began: trying to achieve a short-cut to finger independence, the impetuous Schumann invented a contraption that permanently ruined one of his fingers. He did not appear to have been greatly distressed by the accident; already he must have known that his future was in composing.

In 1831 his first published composition appeared, the Abegg Variations. Characteristically, he constructed the theme on the letters of a girl's name. Soon came his Op. 2, the *Papillons*, a musical rendering of the ballroom scene from Jean Paul's *Flegeljahre*. This appeared in 1832 and Schumann saw the whole world opening up to him: *"On sleepless nights I am conscious of a mission which rises before me like a distant peak. When I wrote Papillons I began to feel a certain independence. Now the butterflies (papillons) have flown off into the vast and magnificent universe of spring; the spring itself is on my doorstep looking at me – it is a child with celestial blue eyes."*

His head was full of new music and he started putting it on paper. He also started reviewing concerts and new music for the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* and the *Komet*. One of his first reviews introduced Chopin to the German readers, proclaiming: *"Hats off, gentlemen! A genius!"* and amounted to a prescient summary of Chopin's startling new music and what it stands for.

Soon he fell in love with Clara, then about 13, and they became engaged three years later, in 1837. The old man Wieck took it hard. More than that, he did everything in his power to stop the marriage. He had made Clara the outstanding woman pianist of the day. Now, just when he was ready to reap the financial rewards, she was 'throwing herself away on a penniless composer, a vague idealist, a radical musician whose theories were being called mad, an impractical and disorganized man.' Wieck looked around and could find plenty of material to support his arguments. Nobody thought much of Schumann's music at the time. In Paris, Chopin was poking fun at it. And Liszt himself, the great Liszt, had tried to play some Schumann music in public and had failed. If Liszt, the greatest of matinee idols, could not establish Schumann's music, who could? Wieck spread rumors that Schumann was a dipsomaniac, unreliable and the like. Schumann would write to Clara: *"Your father calls me phlegmatic. Carnival and phlegmatic! F-sharp minor Sonata and phlegmatic! Being in love with such a girl and phlegmatic! ... the Zeitschrift has had about eighty sheets of my own ideas... besides which I have finished ten major compositions in two years... And you mean to say all my industry and simplicity, all that I have done, is quite lost upon your father?"* Finally the lovers had to go to court for permission to marry without Wieck's consent. They were married in 1840.

It turned out to be an idyllic marriage, the union of two extraordinary minds. She was the stabilizing force in his life; he was the spiritual beacon in hers. Adjustments had to be made. His work came first, even if it meant that she had to go long periods without practicing; and she worried about that. And Schumann was difficult when he was in one of his moods. In one respect Clara was a bad influence on Robert. Perhaps it was a subconscious wish for Schumann to be “respectable.” She wrote in her diary before they were married: *“It would be best if he composed for orchestra. His imagination cannot find sufficient scope on the piano... His compositions are all orchestral in feeling.”* She was also blind to his other musical lapses, such as when it was suggested that Robert had better refrain from conducting. This was in Dusseldorf, where he went as musical director and promptly ran the orchestra and chorus into the ground. She fought for him, but by then must have realized his problems.

In his own publication – the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* – which he used as a forum in which good music could be praised and bad music spanked, Schumann could indulge his fancy for romantic byplay. He invented a society (based on a concept proposed by Jean Paul) known as the *Davidsbund* – the Band, or League, of David – and gave pen names to the members who would discuss music and write reviews. Schumann himself had two names, Florestan (representing the exuberant side of his nature) and Eusebius (the reflective side). There were also Master Raro (a fusion of the last two letters of Clara’s name and first two letters of Robert’s), Chiara, Jonathan, and so on. All were real people. Chiara was Clara; Master Raro was Friedrich Wieck. All of the Davidites were leagued together to combat the Philistines, those unimaginative bourgeois or pedants or musical tricksters who immersed themselves in safe or meretricious music.

As a critic, Schumann was knowledgeable, conscientious, and open-minded. He was ready to praise a composer unreservedly if he detected any sign of talent. But he was merciless toward sham and pretentiousness in music and he was not afraid to engage those current heroes, Rossini and Meyerbeer, in combat. The test of a great critic, in any case, is not how many talents he overpraises, but how many geniuses he fails to recognize. On these grounds, Schumann’s record was near-perfect. One of his first reviews introduced Chopin, and his very last introduced Brahms. Berlioz, Mendelssohn, Liszt, and Wagner came in between, although he cited weaknesses in these that are still generally agreed upon today. He clarified the music of the later Beethoven and the virtually forgotten Schubert, and his many articles on Bach were a vital part of the Bach renaissance. *“It is not enough that a newspaper mirror the present,”* he wrote. *“The critic must be ahead of his times and ready armed to fight for the future.”* That was his credo as a critic, and he adhered to it, as he adhered to all of his principles.

Schumann’s last years were sad, and his illness must have left a permanent scar on Clara, who outlived him by forty years, surviving until 1896. As his mind became progressively unbalanced, Schumann withdrew into his own world. Toward the end, the Schumann family was in trouble. It was large (eight children, five of whom survived) and there was not much money around. Schumann was not able to work, and he started having hallucinations. Early in 1852 he attempted suicide by throwing himself off a bridge into the Rhine. At his own request he was placed in an asylum. There are harrowing accounts of Schumann’s last days, written by Clara and friends of the family, and also by Johannes

Brahms, who had been living with the Schumanns. At least there was the consolation that at the time of Schumann's death, on July 29, 1856, his music had started to make an international reputation.

Although Schumann, as a critic, could well understand and explain to the public the view of other composers, few could understand his. His message was too unconventional and too personal. Unconventionalities aside, what made his music hard to understand fully – and the same is true today – is the personal nature of the content. It is almost autobiographical. *"I am affected by everything that goes on in the world – politics, literature, people – I think it over in my own way, and then I long to express my feelings in music. That is why my compositions are sometimes difficult to understand, because they are connected with distant interest; and sometime unorthodox, because anything that happens impresses me and compels me to express it in music."* These are the words of a true romantic, and in writing them, Schumann was merely expressing a romantic article of faith.

Schumann's *Carnaval*, for example, is nearly universally loved, but it also has to be heard on a secondary level, with a knowledge of the vast extra-musical symbolism it contains. This has nothing to do with program music. It merely explains what was going on in the composer's mind. *Carnaval* cannot be fully understood without realizing that it is a picture gallery in which are painted the two sides of Schumann's own nature (Florestan and Eusebius), in which appear Clara, Chopin, Wieck, Paganini, Mendelssohn, and others; that the entire work is based on four notes (ASCH – in German, S = E-flat and H = B natural) – Asch being a city in which a lady friend of the composer lived and, and also a city whose name contained four letters that occur in the composer's last name; and that the finale (the *"March of the Davidsbund against the Philistines"*) is a musical illustration of Schumann's determination to lead his band of righteous musicians into the enemy camp of Meyerbeer, Herz, and Hüntten and demolish them. There are other symbols in *Carnaval*, but this is the general idea. Many of Schumann's works were conceived this way.

He himself often did not know what his music meant. Some of it was written in what amounted to a trance. First he wrote it. Then he looked it over, giving the work a title. That was his standard practice, and nearly all of his pieces were named after they were written. Schumann's rich, complicated harmony did indeed have a strong polyphonic texture, a fact not generally appreciated, and his careful indications of secondary and inner voices often pass largely unnoticed. The *Traumerei* from his *Kinderscenen* being a classic example: far from being uncomplicated, as a casual listening might suggest, it is actually a strict piece of four-part writing, so rich in its polyphony that it *"could easily be given to a string quartet, or wind ensemble, or even to the four singing voices"* wrote Alban Berg decades later.

Like Chopin, Schumann started as a composer of piano music, and his first twenty-three works are for solo piano. In this series are the three sonatas and the three-movement Fantasy in C major, which can loosely be called a sonata. The rest are, for the most part, small pieces bundled together under a name. Sometimes, as in the *Symphonic Etudes* or *Carnaval*, a unifying structural idea runs through the work, but more often there is no pretense at unity. Unlike the glittering music of Liszt, Thalberg and Henselt, the bravura element of Schumann's piano music is dictated by the content. Schumann had nothing but scorn for virtuosity as an end in itself.

The Fantasy, Schumann's greatest and largest work for solo piano, is with Chopin's B-flat minor Sonata and Liszt's B minor Sonata, one of the trinity of pieces upon which all romantic piano music rests.

Schumann's piano works – his most successful idiom – are exuberant, poetic, introspective, grand, and intimate in turn. Schumann's particular musical charm is hard to describe, even with its pronounced idiosyncrasies – those syncopations, those altered seventh chords, that thick texture. It is a soaring kind of music, imbued with the romantic ideal, out to do for music what Jean Paul did for literature: “*So life fades and withers behind us, and of our sacred and vanished past, only one thing remains immortal – music*”, wrote Jean Paul. Schumann had the same feeling. Music was the mysterious art, the art that picked up after poetry and, indeed, life itself had ceased. Schumann therefore approached mysticism, a vision always before him. This was not merely sentimental to Schumann. It was what made him go.

From piano music, Schumann turned to song, and the sixteen songs of *Dichterliebe* rank with Schubert's *Winterreise* in the hierarchy of song cycles. Schumann took up where Schubert left off, broadening the concept of the art song. In all, he composed over 250 songs throughout his career, including a series of ravishing vocal duets. When Schumann started to explore a new form of writing, he dropped everything else. Thus, after piano and song, came symphony, and the year was 1841. Clara's dearest wish came true. And then came his A-minor piano concerto, among his most popular works. Next came other symphonies and chamber music, including his three string quartets, the piano quartet, and the radiant piano quintet.

There is no disputing that Schumann was a weak orchestrator; he thought pianistically rather than in terms of the orchestra. It is also conceded that he was unhappy working within the strictures of classic sonata form. Yet – like Chopin – he was full of ideas within the confines of these forms. This was carried to its ultimate in the one-movement fourth symphony, in D minor, in which four movements are packaged into one, and in which a kind of thematic transformation is used that foreshadows the Liszt B minor sonata. Interestingly, Schumann's greatest piano work – the Fantasy – would be dedicated to Liszt, and Liszt's monumental B minor sonata would in turn be dedicated to Schumann. What keeps the Schumann symphonies alive is their special glow, and the high quality of musical ideas, which make them – despite certain shortcomings – among the most inspired creations of the nineteenth century.

Schumann achieved success in all musical forms except one, opera, and his large quantity of choral music is largely ignored. A surprisingly large amount of Schumann's music is no longer played.

As the arch-romantic, the most personal and least objective of the great composers, his message ran counter to the aesthetic that dominated the Western world after 1918. To many of the intellectuals in the period from 1920-40, Schumann was a rather embarrassing relic of the early romantic period: he was considered sentimental and self-indulgent. But the whole point of his music was missed – that perfect weld of form and content in his shorter works, that overwhelming daring and originality, that basic purity even in moments of extravagance. Purity is not a word normally used in association with Schumann, but everything about him was pure – his life, his love, his dedication, his integrity, his mind, his music.