
From the Writings of Schumann

Criticism, according to Matthew Arnold, is “a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world.” Elsewhere he says it is an attempt “to see the object as in itself it really is.” Schumann’s poetic—sometimes even purposely mystifying—approach to musical journalism may mislead a casual reader into not taking him quite seriously. That would be a mistake, for Schumann, more than any other composer-writer, fulfilled Arnold’s high requirements: he was disinterested, idealistic, deeply intuitive, and, as it has turned out, rarely wrong. In 1852, not long

before his final illness, Schumann set to work collecting his criticisms (most of which had appeared in his own journal, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, from 1834 to 1844) into a more permanent shape, “as a remembrance of that time and also of myself; for they present a living mirror-image of those stirring days and may give many a younger artist some instructive hints on things I’ve learnt and experienced” (letter of 3 June 1852). Elsewhere (letter of 11 July 1853) he says, “I do not care to earn a fortune with [this book]; I should like to leave behind me a remembrance of myself—if I may say so, the text (as it were) to my creative work.” And, considering how autobiographical much of his music is, Schumann’s critical writings do bear some such relationship to his musical compositions.

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of the year 1833, a number of musicians—most of them young—met together almost as if by accident every evening in Leipzig; they met for convivial reasons, but at least as much, too, for the exchange of ideas on the Art that was meat and drink to them—music. It cannot be said that Germany's musical situation at the time was very satisfactory. The stage was still dominated by Rossini, the piano nearly exclusively by [the fashionable composers] Herz and Hünten. And yet but a few years had passed since Beethoven, Weber, and Schubert had dwelt among us. True, Mendelssohn's star was in the ascendant, and wondrous things were being said of a young Pole, Chopin—but their influence was not deeply felt till later. Then, one day, a thought occurred to the young hotheads: "Let us not look idly on, let us take matters in hand, so that the situation may improve, so that the poetry of art may once again be held in high esteem!" Thus were born the first numbers of a new musical periodical. But the joy of close collaboration did not last long in this society of young talents. Death robbed it of one of its most valuable members, Ludwig Schunke. Some of the others left Leipzig altogether at different times. The undertaking was on the point of being dissolved. Then one of them, in fact the group's musical dreamer, who until then had whiled his life away at the piano far more than among books, decided to assume the editorship himself and led the journal for upwards of ten years, to 1844. This was the origin of a series of essays, a selection from which is collected here. The majority of the opinions given there are still held by him today. What, in hope and fear, he expressed regarding many an artist and artistic event has come true in the course of time.

There remains to be mentioned a League that was a more than secret one, since it only existed in the head of its founder: the *League of David* [*Davidsbund*]. It appeared not unsuitable to imagine contrasting artistic personalities in order to express different views of art; the principal figures were *Florestan* and *Eusebius*, between whom Master *Raro* stood as mediator. This Davidite society wound like a red thread through the periodical, binding together fact and fiction in a fanciful way. Later these comrades, who had been received not unkindly by the paper's readers, disappeared altogether from its pages.

Robert Schumann, *Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker* (Leipzig, 1854), I, iii–v. Trans. P. W.

Schumann's first published article appeared in the leading German musical periodical, the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, in 1831—three years, that is, before he founded his own periodical. The article is famous for having introduced the then-unknown Chopin to the German public; and it marks the first appearance of Schumann's

imaginary Davidites, chief among them Eusebius, Florestan, and Master Raro. It should be pointed out, for the benefit of those who are not acquainted with these characters' musical incarnations (as in Schumann's *Carnaval*, op. 9), that the League of David's ultimate mission was to slay the Philistines. Who were the Philistines? Why, the fashionable mass producers of trivial music and the thousands upon thousands of unthinking concert and opera goers who applauded their efforts. Against such overwhelming numbers only a secret League could hope to prevail.

AN OPUS 2

Eusebius recently came softly into the room. You know the ironic smile on that pale face; it is meant to awaken your curiosity. I was sitting at the piano with Florestan. Florestan, as you know, is one of those rare musical natures who seem to anticipate all that is imminent, new, or out of the ordinary. Yet today there was a surprise in store for him. With the words, "Hats off, gentlemen, a genius!" Eusebius produced a piece of music. He would not let us see the title. I turned the pages idly; this veiled enjoyment of soundless music has something magical about it. Besides, it seems to me that each composer has his own individual note-patterns, recognizable to the eye: Beethoven looks different from Mozart, on paper. But now it seemed to me as if strange eyes, flower eyes, basilisk eyes, peacock eyes, maiden eyes were peeping up at me most wondrously; some parts seemed clearer—I thought I could detect Mozart's "Là ci darem la mano" [from *Don Giovanni*] entwined through a hundred chords. "Now play it," said Florestan.—Eusebius obliged; and we listened, huddled in the recesses of a window. Eusebius played as in a rapture and conjured forth countless images drawn from palpitating life; it was as if the rapture of the moment had lent his fingers powers beyond the ordinary. Florestan's approval, of course, consisted (apart from a blissful smile) of nothing more than the remark that the variations might have been composed by Beethoven or Franz Schubert, had they been piano virtuosos. But then he turned to the title page and read nothing but:

"Là ci darem la mano, Variations for the Piano
by Frédéric Chopin, Opus 2."

Surprised, we both exclaimed, "An Opus 2!" And everyone's face fairly glowed with astonishment. Apart from sundry and various exclamations, little could be made out but: "Well, here's something worthwhile again—Chopin—I've never heard of him—in any case a genius."—I cannot describe the scene. Heated by the wine, by Chopin, by our discussion, we repaired to Master Raro, who burst out laughing and displayed very little curiosity concerning the Opus 2, "for," said he, "I know you well enough, and your enthusiasm for the latest fashions; well, well, bring your Chopin to me." We promised to do so the next day. Eusebius soon bade us quietly good-night, and I remained with Master Raro for a while; Florestan, who has been homeless recently, flew through the moonlit street towards my house. At about midnight I found him in my room, lying on the sofa with his eyes shut. "Chopin's variations," he began, as if in a trance, "are still running through my head; to be sure," he went on, "it is all very dramatic and altogether Chopin-like ..." [Here follows a detailed, though very fanciful, appreciation of this very early work, which, today, is rarely performed.]

“My very dear Florestan,” said I, “these private feelings may be praiseworthy, though they are somewhat subjective; but though Chopin hardly needs to exert himself to follow his inspiration, I nevertheless bow to his genius, his aspiration, his mastery!”

Ibid., 3–5, 7.

Schumann was not inclined by temperament to organize his views on the aesthetics—and ethics—of music into a formal system. Yet a perfectly coherent outlook emerges, cumulatively, from a reading of his collected writings. Schumann’s nearest approach to a direct statement of his views will be found, characteristically enough, in some sets of unrelated aphorisms he published occasionally, from which the following have been selected.

APHORISMS

I have no liking for those whose life is not in unison with their works.

Fl.[orcstan]

Music speaks the most universal of languages, one by which the soul is freely, yet *indefinably* moved; but it is then at home.

Reviewers: Music extracts love-calls from nightingales, yelps from pug-dogs.

It is a sign of the extraordinary that it is not always grasped at once; the majority are inclined to superficial things, such as virtuoso music.

E.[uscbius]

Let the artist preserve his balance in life; else his position becomes difficult.

In every child there is a wondrous depth.

Genius: We forgive the diamond its sharp edges; it is very costly to round them off.

Fl.

It is not a good thing to have acquired too great a facility in any skill.

Raro

There is spirit in all new things.

Euscbius

The first conception is always the most natural one and the best. Reason errs, feeling does not.

Raro

Talent labors, genius creates.

Fl.

The educated musician may study a Madonna by Raphael, the painter a Mozart symphony with equal advantage. Yet more: to the sculptor every actor is a motionless statue, to the actor the sculptor’s works come alive; the painter sees a poem as a picture, the musician transforms paintings into tones.

E.

The aesthetics of one art is that of the others too; only the materials differ.

Fl.

That a distinct Romantic school can form itself in music, which is itself Romantic, is difficult to believe.

Fl.

People say, "It pleased," or "It did not please." As if there were nothing higher than to please people!

To cast light into the depths of the human heart—the artist's mission!

The laws of morality are also those of art.

Ibid., 29–43, *passim*; IV, 278, 303.

Schumann withdrew as editor of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in 1844 and only seldom contributed to its pages thereafter. But his last contribution, which was printed on its front page late in 1853, caused a tremendous stir. Apart from its bold tone of prophecy concerning a totally unknown young composer, Johannes Brahms, the article came at a moment when Germany's musicians were splitting over the issue of the "music of the future" (see p. 324), towards which Schumann was known to be cool. Hence the intense reactions, both friendly and skeptical, that greeted the article. Brahms's name became well known overnight, and, as it happened, Brahms himself eventually became the titular, if inactive, leader of the opponents of the "musicians of the future."

NEW PATHS

Years have gone by—nearly as many as I devoted to editing these pages, namely ten—since I last let myself be heard on this terrain so rich in memories. Often, in spite of strenuous productive activity, have I felt so impelled: several new, remarkable talents have appeared, a new force in music seemed to announce itself, manifested by many of the upward-striving artists of recent times, even if their productions are only known to a narrower circle. In following the paths of these elect with the greatest sympathy, I felt that, after such a beginning, there should and would suddenly appear one destined to give utterance to the highest expression of our time in an ideal way, one who should reveal to us his mastery not gradually, but who should spring, like Minerva, fully armed from the head of Jupiter. And he has come, a youth at whose cradle graces and heroes kept watch. His name is *Johannes Brahms*, he has come from Hamburg, working there in tranquil obscurity but instructed by an outstanding, enthusiastic teacher in the most difficult statutes of the art, and recommended to me shortly before by a respected, celebrated Master [the violinist Joseph Joachim]. He possessed, even in outward appearance, all the signs that announce: he is a chosen one. Sitting at the piano he began to unveil wondrous regions. We were drawn into ever more enchanted circles. To this was added an inspired way of playing that transformed the piano into an orchestra of lamenting and rejoicing voices. He played sonatas, or rather disguised symphonies, songs whose poetry would be understood without knowing their words, although a profound vocal melody threads through them all, single piano pieces, some of demonic nature and in the shapeliest form, then sonatas for violin and piano, string quartets—each so different from the others that they appeared to gush from different sources. And then it seemed as if he united them all as a stream pouring down a waterfall, bearing a serene rainbow above its plunging waves; and butterflies played along its banks accompanied by the voices of nightingales.

If he will plant his magic wand where the massed forces of chorus and orchestra will lend him their power, then even more wondrous glimpses into the world of the spirit still await us. May the highest genius prompt him where expectation waits for him, for another genius, that of modesty, lives in him. His colleagues greet him upon his entry into the world, where wounds perhaps await him, but also laurels and palms; we welcome him as a doughty contender.

At all times there rules a sacred bond of kindred spirits. Tighten your circle, ye who belong together, that the truth of art may shine ever brighter, spreading joy and abundance everywhere.

R. S.

Robert Schumann, *Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker*, ed. Martin Kreisig (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1914), II, 301–302. Trans. P. W.