

Schumann's Piano Music – Inspired and Unconventional

Interview with András Schiff

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Question: Mr Schiff, does Schumann's music have a specific sound, something you can point to and say "that is unmistakably Schumann", and if so, can you describe it?

Schiff: Yes, there is a definite Schumann sound and it is there throughout his entire output. You can detect it even after a couple of measures of a piece, something completely new to the world of music, especially in his piano music, which we are discussing today. There are several aspects we need to look at in order to describe this "sound".

It is vital to know that in his youth Schumann wanted to be a piano virtuoso, but for well-known reasons this did not happen. And because of this, in the majority of the piano works, Schumann "performed" his own music "through" Clara Wieck. She was one of the greatest piano virtuosos of the 19th century and was a sympathetic interpreter of her husband's music. She was also his muse.

His genius was of course evident in his years before he knew Clara. Take for example "Papillons", op. 2, which I regard as a key work of German Romanticism. Such a cycle of individual vignettes had never been conceived before: quite short, discrete pieces, each different in style and expression, follow on from each other as if unconnected. Chameleon-like they change in sound and expression.

And then, it is of the greatest importance that Schumann was a lyrical song composer. He can make the piano sing as no other. And he achieves this in a highly individual manner, quite unlike Chopin and Mendelssohn, the greatest of his contemporaries.

"It must sound improvised and never »manufactured«"

Question: How would you describe these piano works?

Schiff: Now, on the surface they do not seem to be much different from the other composers: a singing line, often very cantabile, with a bass-line with middle voices filling out the texture. But the difference is HOW it is done. In relation to this, I would like to point out the unusual nature of these middle parts, especially the figuration between the upper and lower voices. With Schumann, these textures are always unusual and exciting. Schumann's upper parts are often firm and resolute above a fast-moving, often almost nervous-sounding middle voice, which seems to come from the very centre of things. Take the opening of the C major Fantasie op. 17. That needs to be played in a way that you can hear the detail of the fantastic rushing sounds, but if you articulate the many chromatic notes too exactly and too prominently, it will sound risible. These roaring middle voices are the basis over which the melodic lines rise and soar. It must sound improvised and never "manufactured". That is one of the deep secrets of Schumann's piano works. And sadly, you don't often hear them well played.

Question: What other features of the special Schumann Sound can you describe?

Schiff: Another truly remarkable feature is his effort to disguise the metric pulse. Schumann enjoys concealing the first beat in the bar. He delights in the irregular and in misleading the listener. This creates a quite exceptional tension. In this, I find Schumann quite revolutionary.

And then, in his use of the pedal, he is also quite unique. Of course, I do not mean the many places, where he simply writes "Pedal" and the performer must resort to his own imagination and skill to decide what sounds effective and comprehensible to the listener. Rather, I mean the many special passages which require a type of expressive pedalling. A few



András Schiff and Wolf-Dieter Seiffert

weeks ago in your Schumann Forum 2010 [1 May] you posted an article on the "Prophet Bird" and on the issue of pedaling, I could not agree more. The piece must be played to the letter of Schumann's instructions and I for one follow his lead. Only then can one create that distinctive, tumultuous piano sound.

Question: What other features would you describe as typical of Schumann?

Schiff: Let's take the endings of many piano works of Schumann. How do they end? Softly. To take one example, the "Kreisleriana" op. 16. It concludes, after all the earlier tumult, quietly. Kapellmeister Kreisler takes off and disappears from the scene. That is so typical of Schumann. Pianists don't like to play pieces with quiet endings as they don't please audiences so much. All the more reason to perform them then.

And you must not forget the tremendous influence of poetry on the piano works, which is plainly evident in the titles and movement headings of the pieces, as well as in the tempo markings and other instructions. Especially characteristic is his use of mottoes. Think of the Motto of the C-major Fantasie, of the "Waldszenen" op. 82 or the "Davidsbündler-Tänze" op. 6, which I am very fond of. The first edition of the "Davidsbündlertänze" contains many extra-musical instructions for "E" [Eusebius] and "F" [Florestan], and you can even find concealed stage instructions. All of these must be taken into account for an inspiring and good performance.

Schumann's Late Works

Question: Now we should turn to Schumann's late works. You are a steadfast admirer of the late piano pieces and you often play the "Gesänge der Frühe" and the "Variations on a Theme in E flat major". Is the Schumann sound different here?

Schiff: You are right. These works have a quite different piano style from the earlier music. In particular, the outer movements of the "Gesänge der Frühe" which do not seem very pianistic any more. A choir could perform them a cappella. Wonderful. The numerous canonic passages (as also in the "E flat Variations") could easily be performed well by singers. But on the piano it is unbelievably difficult. It could even be described as "anti-pianistic". Many pianists don't play it for that reason. But it fascinates me for the real challenge that it is. It is a kind of music that will not bring you much applause, rather the opposite. But is that a reason not to play it? Hardly.

Question: You mentioned the problem of different versions of the "Davidsbündler-Tänze". What is your view? Should a pianist know and play early versions of pieces and why?



Schiff: In answer to this question, one should always remember that Schumann was a very changeable and insecure person. As we all are, he too was split between a Eusebius and Florestan, but to a greater and deeper extent than us normal beings. This self-doubt is reflected in the fact that he returned and reworked many of his compositions, sometimes for the better (for example, in the "Symphonic Etudes" op. 13), but often, also for the worse. In the "Davidsbündler-Tänze" or "Kreisleriana", I find the original version much more inspired and unconventional.

Question: Inspired and unconventional. That seems to summarise very well many of your remarks on Schumann's individual piano sound. Thank you very much, Mr Schiff, for your time and your opinion.