

“We need to pay attention to what Schumann says!”

Christian Zacharias on Schumann’s piano oeuvre and tempi

Interview with Christian Zacharias

Summary of the Interview
© 2010 by G. Henle Verlag

Question: Mr. Zacharias, talking about Schumann’s Piano Concerto, you are one of the very few pianists who not only follow Schumann’s own metronome instructions and play it in the authentic tempo, but you choose also to break with the tradition of overly strong rubati. What are your reasons and what is your opinion on Schumann’s metronome instructions in his piano solo works?

Zacharias: When I made my first attempt at playing the opening movement of Schumann’s concerto several conductors, like Hans Zender and David Zinman were enthusiastic. Others were shocked, because they had been living the tradition so unquestioningly that they just couldn’t imagine anything different. Zender brought Bruno Walter’s book “Von der Musik und vom Musizieren” to my attention. Bruno Walter describes exactly how willfully, and consequently wrong, the tempo of Schumann’s concerto was and is dealt with. But I played the concerto the way that Bruno Walter had expressed his vision of how it should be played. Namely in the tempo that Schumann specifies and, for the most part, without that strange elastic changing from slower to faster to slower, back and forth.



Christian Zacharias and Wolf-Dieter Seiffert

“I must say, I find Schumann’s accuracy of tempo absolutely ingenious”

Question: And what is your opinion on the finale of the Schumann Concerto?

Zacharias: For me it’s a concerto-waltz, a quiet tempo. It’s usually played much too fast. Schumann’s metronome instructions are absolutely precise and perfect here (MM: dotted half note = 72), musicians must take that seriously! And especially so where Schumann is truly the master of the art; I am speaking of the way he interlocks the metres and rhythms, often giving a beat that isn’t really the “one” [he sings the famous passage from the third movement in A major, measures 569 ff.] – you can only do that up to a certain tempo.

And the “Intermezzo” (2nd movement) is most often tediously celebrated as if you were standing demurely at your picket fence in the front garden and exchanging niceties. It’s all to do with misunderstood “seriousness” and “depth”. I must say I find Schumann’s accuracy of tempo absolutely ingenious.

Admittedly, I am sometimes a bit at a loss in the solo piano pieces and think to myself, “am I good enough, am I capable?” And some things I am successful at, at some not. At some point you need to follow your own pulse; but: I am always extremely interested to know exactly what Schumann wrote down.

Question: Please tell us what you think is characteristic of and especial to Schumann’s piano settings?

Zacharias: It’s the body. Schumann’s piano is always exactly in line with your body. Mostly compact, very solid and steady, similar to the way he structures orchestral works. Everybody complains, “Schumann cannot orchestrate!” But once you have realized that his vision of the orchestra is also built on this compact physical feeling, then you will be able to hear how unbelievably rich it sounds – that is his secret.

What a difference to Chopin or even Liszt, whose compositional use of the overtones of the grand piano is incredibly artful. No wonder that already in his time, and till today, Schumann was accused of insufficient knowledge of sound. Basically Schumann does not need more than three and a half to four octaves on a piano. You will seldom (with some exceptions) ever experience the radiance that is virtually method with Chopin and Liszt. And that is what makes it so terribly difficult to play Schumann! You have to succeed in bringing the single voices forward, you must make them shine, otherwise it all sounds grey and, yes, mediocre.

Question: In Schumann's later works, are there any pieces that you especially enjoy?

Zacharias: I very much like to play and have recorded the two concert pieces (op. 92 and 134), whereas hardly anyone else performs the piece in d minor (= op. 134). I am especially keen on the Violin Concerto and as a conductor I put it to the programme as often as I can. It's a masterpiece, and completely underrated. It is one of the most moving pieces of the entirety of classical music. And by the way, here again Schumann's strange, but lastly perfect metronome instructions, are brought to bear. The metronome setting for the finale is extremely slow, but that reflects the basic sentiment of this movement.

“The Novelettes are incredibly hard to stage in one complete cycle”

Question: Did Schumann write any solo piano works that you deliberately avoid performing?

Zacharias: Yes, indeed. For example, I have my issues with the early opus numbers 4, 5 and 8. I find them difficult to comprehend and I have not succeeded in cracking them. And the “Nachtstücke” op. 23 are not all equally good. Some parts are repeated too often. The novelettes op. 21 are incredibly hard to stage in one complete cycle. In concerts I often divide them into two individual sets (for instance the first five pieces in the first part, numbers 6 – 8 after the break), or I only play a selection. As a youngster I often played the Sonata in f sharp minor (op. 11), a masterpiece, but the other two I have never performed (I definitely intend to study the sonata in g minor, but not so the sonata in f minor).

Question: How do you feel about the Piano Fugues and Fuguettes?

Zacharias: I love the canons for the pedal piano (op. 56, 58, 60). Beautiful!

Question: How do you feel about Schumann's late works?



Zacharias: I really have problems with “Gesänge der Frühe”. I almost feel inclined to orchestrate them. Rather than play them on the piano I would prefer to have the wind instruments set in with fervor, and harmonies.

Question: The pedal marks in Schumann's piano works are explicit in many cases. In most piano pieces he mostly only gives general instructions “pedal” ...

Zacharias: ... yes, yes, but at the same time you will encounter the most detailed and artful pedal instructions that were ever given. And, far beyond mere pedalling, I would like to point out the closing of “Papillon” op. 2, to name only one example. This fading away and disappearing, technically solved in the manner of a manual pedal ... here Schumann proves pianistic ingenuity like no one before him and hardly anyone after. Look here, pay attention to it, the pedal! With Schumann it serves a very important purpose.

Question: Thank you very much, Maestro, for sharing your truly instructional and positively rich thoughts with us.