

# Schumann's "Late Works"

## Interview with Hans-Joachim Kreutzer by Wolf-Dieter Seiffert

Summary of the Interview  
© 2010 by G. Henle Verlag

Question: Mr. Kreutzer, do you use the term "late works" in regards to Schumann at all? And if yes, why?

*Kreutzer: If I were able to use quotation marks in written language I would do so in the case of Schumann. Musicological research of the past 30 years has often proved that a "late style" does exist, just think of Beethoven late string quartets, for instance. But the phenomenon "late style" has nothing at all to do with biological criteria. And even less in Schumann's case. And yet, the case is different with Schumann; after a certain point in time things begin to change, (mostly) the harmony, the choice of genre and lastly also his attitude towards his audience.*

Question: When would you draw the time line?

*Kreutzer: From Schumann's Düsseldorf times on. In Dresden, before that time, he had been in a kind of sheltered place, possibly sought out deliberately. After 1850, in Düsseldorf, Schumann's compositions changed ([www.schumann-gesellschaft.de/schumann/werke.html](http://www.schumann-gesellschaft.de/schumann/werke.html)).*

Question: To what extent do you agree to the widespread opinion that Schumann's works in his last years of life were influenced by his illness?

*Kreutzer: In my estimation this opinion is frankly wrong and, thankfully, made obsolete by the most current Schumann researches. I could describe to you how the estimation of Schumann later works changed over time, from an initially great and positive acceptance moving gradually towards the increasing lack of understanding or willingness to view the works separate from the implications of Schumann's life story. This applies to almost all of these works. And then, you must also regard those people who, shortly after Schumann's death, wished to see the negative influence of the sick person Schumann on the works of the composer Schumann. You see, that was long before Lange-Eichbaum, "Genius and Madness" [1928], long before Thomas Mann who spoke of "health ambling on", incapable of greatness and artistic creation. Greatness needs "sensitivity". We know today that in many cases the highly gifted are often highly sensitive people. And, on the one hand, that helps to explain the shadow that falls on Schumann's late works, but it also explains the almost exaggerated current interest.*

Question: Which pieces are you referring to when you point out that they were initially popular with the audience? Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms even suppressed some of Schumann's later compositions and did not publish them.

*Kreutzer: It's mainly the religious music I am referring to. For the most part this music did not appear in print during his lifetime, but it was accepted with great success. And Schumann, like Brahms, arranged much of this music. Furthermore, many of Schumann's works that date from the time in Düsseldorf are a continuation of the great song cycles of 1840 ff. that made him famous. But of course now within a different framework, namely the large orchestra, choir and solo voices. I mentioned earlier his move towards news genres. Here they are. Today these works are easy (easier) for large broadcasting companies or record labels to organise and perform. In Schumann's time the effort and expenditures for performing these works were tremendous. That certainly also led to the fact that they were not often (enough) heard and consequently were sooner forgotten.*

Question: It's true, Schumann did write much fewer piano works or piano songs in Düsseldorf.

*Kreutzer: And, quite noticeably, among those that he did there are many fugues and contrapuntal pieces. This seems to reflect Schumann's renewed interest in studying Bach (together with Clara). These pieces stand very much alone if for in-*



Dr. Wolf-Dieter Seiffert and Prof. Hans-Joachim Kreutzer

stance you compare them to Mendelssohn Bartholdy who wrote six beautiful, excellent preludes and fugues [op. 35]. But they are more symphonic while Schumann's are throughout pianistic in concept and realization.

Question: What could have induced Schumann with his deep experience as a composer to revert to the fugue again in 1850, but also to turn to completely new genres, as you just explained.

Kreutzer: Great artists always have something of Proteus. As soon as they have mastered one thing and completed the creation, they feel an urge to move on, to set foot on new terrain. And, pardon me, there is also that factor of boredom. So Schumann in these years begins to seek out a new audience and writes, as I said, great choir and orchestra works. But Schumann also discovers – and this might come as a surprise to some of your readers – he discovers the child as a team player in music history. The child in music; not because it is as easy as child's play, no, because it is so different. Children are a completely different kind of people than adults. This musical discovery of Schumann's cannot be pinpointed to 1850/51, rather it was planned long before. And this aspect is currently surfacing more and more. I especially admire the collection "Album for the Young", most of all, however, the "Three Piano Sonatas for the Young" op. 118. These pieces are very significant. I will list only a few characteristics. They are composed within the upper ranges, not across the entire keyboard. You don't need Liszt fingers to play them, because the notes are close to each other. Nothing lasts too long, there is no room for boredom. Hardly anything is repeated. And if I may add, as someone with decades of experience playing the piano, these pieces are not all that easy to play, they do present a challenge. Ideal study material.

Question: You especially mentioned Schumann's "harmony" that noticeably changes in the "late works". Could you specify that?

Kreutzer: In short, what is novel is the following: within a very short space a very fast change in the progression of the harmony occurs. To provide evidence would go beyond the limits of this interview. But listen to each composition after 1850 with this in mind – this feature that so differs from the ingenious earlier works will reveal itself.

## The "Gesänge der Frühe" threaten to tear my hand apart. I simply cannot play that

Question: Allow me to ask you a personal question: do you prefer to play "Gesänge der Frühe" or "Davidsbündlertänze"?

Kreutzer: A personal question affords a personal answer. The "Gesänge der Frühe", especially the inner movements, threaten to tear my hand apart. I simply cannot play that, my fingers simply will not stretch that far. But I would not want to have to choose between the two pieces. My special interest in Schumann focuses on his chamber music with piano from his last years of creativity. These works seem in my opinion to continue the early piano compositions in a special and truly consequent way. For one you have the piano trios, of which the last is really a "late work", and then you have the many mixed instrumentations with "piano and ..." (with cello, viola, oboe, clarinet etc.)



Question: Are there any late compositions of Schumann that you would call "failed".

Kreutzer: No, not at all. To the contrary, I would like to add to the list of especially accomplished chamber music pieces with piano – don't be surprised – seven concert pieces, of which especially the late ones are worthy of mention. the violin concerto [WoO 1], the cello concerto [op. 129], the four concert pieces for piano and orchestra [op. 54, first, lost version in one movement; op. 92, 131, 134], and lastly my special favourite, the concerto for four horns and orchestra [op. 86]. This piece is the best example to show how Schumann was always ahead of his times, how he was revolutionary in opening new musical worlds and developing them. The valve horn has only just been invented, and he immediately writes piece not only for one valve horn, but for f o u r .

Question: My last question. Why is it, do you think, that many musicians seem to avoid Schumann's late works? And this despite the fact that musicologists have increased their work on them, and that important musicians have developed a much keener interest, as well (several pop up immediately, Abbado, Harnoncourt, Holliger, Rattle, Schiff).

*Kreutzer: The musicians suggest to the concert managers those pieces that they believe the audience wants to hear. And the audience is eager to hear music that it is familiar with. Recognition and reencounter are important, even central forms of experiencing and acknowledging art. So, you can hardly reproach the audience. You might want to ask, "why isn't the audience, why aren't the musicians more curious?" Of course, the effort is always greater when you are challenged with something new than when you stick to what is familiar. And any kind of effort is gladly avoided. But let us bank patience. Schumann's so called "late works" will yet become better known, of that I am strongly convinced.*

Dear Mr. Kreutzer, thank you very much for our rich and enlightening conversation.