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Final Essay

Robert Schumann at the Organ: The Classic Romanticist

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) was simultaneously a Romanticist and Classicist. His music embodies the Romantic ideals in that it is expressive and individual; at the same time, his music has the Classical characteristics of historicism and polyphony. Throughout his life, Schumann was continually looking to the music of the past, particularly that of J.S. Bach, while at the same time creating highly original, forward-looking works. This dualistic view of Schumann has implications for the interpretation of his music, particularly those works for organ and pedal piano. This essay will focus on the following three sets of works by Schumann:

Studien für den Pedalflügel, Op. 56 (Studies for Pedal Piano)

Skizzen für den Pedalflügel, Op. 58 (Sketches for Pedal Piano)

Sechs Fugen über den Namen BACH, Op. 60 (Six Fugues on the Name of BACH)

The 19th century was a period of transition in organ performance. The shift away from the Baroque "ordinary touch" to the pure legato of the late 19th century complicates the interpretation of Schumann's works, which fall somewhere in the middle. In viewing Schumann as both a Romanticist and a Classicist, I will argue for an interpretation of his works that draws on both traditions of organ performance, while noting that this argument is further complicated by the fact that Schumann was primarily a pianist.

To understand Schumann as a Romantic, it may be helpful to review the meaning of the word, "Romantic." Put simply, Romanticism values emotion over logic. Burckholder's *A History of Western Music* says:

> The word *romantic* derived from the medieval romance, a poem or tale about heroic events or persons, such as King Arthur or Charlemagne. It connoted something distant, legendary, and fantastic, an imaginary or ideal world far from everyday reality. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, especially in German-speaking lands, writers applied the term to literature and then to art and music. Philosopher and critic Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) differentiated "classic" poetry - which he deemed objectively beautiful, limited in scope and theme, and universally valid - from the "romantic" poetry, which transgressed rules and limits, expressing insatiable longing and the richness of nature. Like political liberalism and idealist philosophy, Romantic art focused on the individual and on expression of the self. As the word gained currency, composers and artists who came of age in the 1820's, such as Berlioz, Chopin, Schumann, and Liszt, conceived of themselves as "romantics." By the mid-nineteenth century, Schlegel's dichotomy seemed to distinguish the elegant, natural, simple, clear, formally closed, and universally appealing (and therefore classic) music of Haydn and Mozart from the music the second quarter of the nineteenth century, marked as Romantic because of its search for the original, interesting, evocative, individual, expressive, or extreme.[1]

Beethoven can be seen as a stylistic bridge between the Classical and Romantic eras, sometimes chronologically divided at 1815 with Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo. The division by this date recalls the political circumstances leading up to the 19th century that had an effect on the development of Romanticism in music.

The French Revolutions of 1789-1815 brought about a new world order that emphasized citizenship, liberty, equality, and brotherhood. War and inflation impoverished the aristocracy, which led to the decline of patronage and therefore support for musicians. According to Burckholder, "The typical musician no longer served a prince or church but made a living as a free agent through public performance, teaching, composing on commission, or creating music for publication."[2] The 19th century also saw the rise of virtuosos, such as Franz Liszt and Nicolò Paganini, and specialization by instrument, as with Fryderyk Chopin and the piano. Burckholder continues, "While patrons had expected their employees to play several instruments and, like Bach and Haydn, compose in most genres, musicians were now competing in an open market and often found a niche through specialization."[3] As the aristocracy declined, the industrial revolution lowered prices and helped fueled the growth of the middle class, who now demanded music to play domestically, creating a boom in music publishing.[4] This newly empowered middle class had leisure time and money to devote to music, and the centerpiece of middle class music making was the piano.

The piano took on new prominence in the 19th century, and many innovations in piano design occurred from 1820-1850. An understanding of these changes effects the performance and registration of Schumann's piano works at the

organ: the damper pedal allowed greater resonance; the metal frame (introduced in England in the 1820's) allowed higher string tension and therefore greater volume, longer sustain and better legato; felt hammers enabled a wider dynamic range and better control; the range was extended to six octaves by 1820, and 7 octaves by 1850; the double-escapement action, introduced by Parisian builder Sébastian Erard in 1821, allowed rapid repetition of single notes and therefore greater virtuosity.[5] The pedal piano was invented around 1800 when Johann Gottlieb Wagner added a pedal keyboard to a square piano.[6] By the 1840's the instrument had developed and seemed to have a promising future.[7] According to Jon Laukvig, "The early pedal pianos were frequently only equipped with pulldowns, and the mechanism was arranged so the pedal notes sounded in the 16' range. The Pleyel firm developed independent ranks of strings in the 16' and 8' range for the pedal."[8] Concerning composition for pedal piano, Schumann wrote, "Wonderful effects can be achieved with it."[9] Clara Schumann also wrote, "On 24 April [1845] we received on loan a pedalboard for beneath the piano, which has given us much pleasure. Its primary purpose was to enable us to practise our organ playing, but Robert soon discovered a further interest in this instrument."[10] Laukvik also notes, "At first the Schumanns aimed at organ practice (surely the works of Johann Sebastian Bach), but the instrument's sound eventually inspired original compositions "[11] The piano was a truly modern machine, with thousands of moving parts, and was indispensible for home music making as well as public concerts (a concept pioneered by Franz Liszt). According to Burckholder, the design improvements of the 19th century piano allowed a pianist to "express a complete musical thought almost as well as an entire

orchestra, yet more personally."[12] The unique abilities of the piano contributed to the development of a new musical idiom.

Deemed the "early Romantic style," the new idiom featured, according to Burckholder, "tuneful melodies, attractive accompaniments, little counterpoint, relatively uniform rhythm and level of difficulty from measure to measure, strong musical and extra-musical imagery, evocative titles, national or exotic associations, familiar chords and progressions interspersed with dramatic or colorful harmonic contrasts, predictable four-bar phrasing, simple songlike forms, and idiomatic writing that exploited the textures, sonorities and dynamic contrasts available on the modern piano."[13] Schumann's character pieces, such as *Carnaval, Papillon, Lieder-Album für die Jugend,* fit neatly into this category. A key aspect of the early Romantic style, and of Romanticism in general, is that, according to Burckholder, "Originality was now marked, not by how one treated conventional material, as in the Classic era, but by the material itself."[14] This idea is critical to understanding Schumann's dual role as both Romanticist and Classicist - his compositions for organ fit both categories because they treat original material in conventional ways, such as the use of strict counterpoint.

If Romanticism values emotion over logic, Schumann is the archetype. He wrote, "I hate everything that does not come from innermost urge."[15] Like many Romantics, Schumann also loved nature. Upon returning to Leipzig after a poetic vacation in Southern Germany, he wrote, "Nature, where do I find it here... No valley, no mountain, no woodland, where I could so really muse."[16] Schumann also founded the secretive Davidsbund (David's Society), which met regularly in the Leipzig

"Kaffeebaum" to exchange ideas about the music. According to Georg Eismann, "Name-giver and ideal of the members of the society was the royal singer David. Just as he, ages ago, had fought against the Philistines and triumphed, so did the members of the society want to struggle against every manifestation of philistinism. Did not the maxim given out by Schumann run: 'Davidsbündler, that is, youths and men, you should slay the philistines, musical and other.'"[17] Eismann continues, "In genuinely Romantic fashion, Schumann personified the combative side of his being as 'Florestan,' whose name was taken from Beethoven's revolutionary opera 'Fidelio.' [...] But also the other aspect of Schumann's artistic double-nature: the enthusiastic 'Eusebius,' filled with yearning for the sublime, therewith expresses himself poetically."[18] These alter egos, which Schumann inhabited in his writings, are some of his most thoroughly Romantic creations.

Classicism ran concurrent to Romanticism during the 19th century, and was marked by an awareness of the past and a desire to continue its tradition, especially in the use of learned counterpoint. Jacques van Oormerssen says Romanticism, "gave rise to the two opposed musical trends which appeared in Germany after 1850. The *Neudeutsche Schule*, under the leadership of Franz Liszt, attempted to sever all links with the musical styles of past centuries, adopting a free approach to form and tempo and seeking to establish links with other cultural, philosophical and literary movements."[19] Schumann shares similarities with this school in his preference for free forms and evocative extra-musical titles, as in the character pieces. According to Oormerssen, the "Classicists," in contrast to the *Neudeutsche Schule*, "adhered to the classical ideas of Mendelssohn [...] and promoted 'absolute'

music, as opposed to the 'programme' music of the *Neudeutsche Schule*. Brahms and his followers devoted themselves to the exploration of traditional forms and techniques, including the study of counterpoint in particular."[20] Schumann also shares characteristics with the Classicists, especially "historicism," or awareness of the music of the past.

Historicism in the 19th century centered around the music of Bach. Schumann said Mendelssohn "first renewed Germany's awareness of Bach,"[21] and regarding the diverging trends of Romanticism and Classicism, that Mendelssohn "sees more clearly than others through the contradictions of our time and is the first to reconcile them."[22] Regarding Mendelssohn's revival of the *St. Matthew Passion*, William Little wrote that it "had not been performed since Bach's death, and the premiere on 11 March 1829, was an occasion of monumental importance."[23] Schumann shares many characteristics with Mendelssohn and the Classicists' school described by Oortmerssen.

Firstly, Schumann acknowledged Bach to be his most profound influence.[24] He wrote, "With regard to composition for organ and piano, obviously no one of [Bach's] century can measure up to him. Indeed, to me, everything else appears in comparison to the development of this giant figure as something conceived in childhood."[25] In 1850 Schumann founded the Bach-Gesellschaft (Bach Society) to mark the centenary of Bach's death, which was dedicated to publishing the complete edition of his works. Schumann also founded the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (New Journal of Music), which he edited from 1834 to 1844; its main purpose was to promote previously unpublished works, including music from the Baroque era.[26]

According to Eismann, "As an editor [Schumann] filled the journal with ingenious essays of a quite individual style. Their poetic content, rich metaphorical language with its inexhaustible wealth of thought and imagination, as well as the occasionally romantic-novelistic description, is of particular fascination."[27] Here is an example of Schumann's Romantic literary style in a quotation about Bach: "It is only at his organ that he appears to be at his most sublime, most audacious, in his own element. Here he knows neither limits nor goal and works for centuries to come."[28]

Schumann's knowledge of Bach included intense study of Bach's works. At age 21, Schumann worked through F.W. Marpurg's *Abhandlung von der Fuge,* a treatise in which seven different organ chorales by Bach are excerpted to illustrate various contrapuntal procedures. Two of these chorales employ canon, a technique utilized by Schumann in many of his own composition, including Op. 56.[29] Schumann also owned a collection titled *J.S. Bach's Choral-Vorspiele für die Orgel mit einem und zwey Klavieren und Pedal*; these four volumes were the most comprehensive print of Bach's organ chorales on the market, and one in four of its contents are canons (again, providing inspiration for Op. 56?). In the *Clavierübung* setting of "Vater unser im Himmelreich," Schumann bracketed every instance of canon, and in a letter drafted to Clara, Schumann wrote how he conceived of "almost everything canonically," and that "the canonic spirit" pervaded all of his "fantasizing."[30] Beginning in 1845, Schumann, together with Clara, embarked on an intensive course of contrapuntal studies. Schumann called his obsession with counterpoint his "fugenpassion."[31] According to Gerhard Weinberger, "It had long been his goal to obtain complete command of the polyphonic style, and he pursued this goal

tirelessly. His demand to apply the highest artistic standards in the creation of contrapuntal forms arose from a deep, lifelong veneration of Johann Sebastian Bach."[32]

Schumann was not an organist on the technical level of Mendelssohn, but according to Russel Stinson, he knew Bach's works better than most organist of his day.[33] Schumann had his first piano lessons with Johann Gottfried Kuntsch, who was organist in Zwichau. According to Hans Fagius, "Through [Kuntsch] [Schumann] got acquainted with the music of C.Ph.E Bach, Haydn and Mozart. Surely he also played the organ during this time. The area around Zwickau contains several beautiful Silbermann organs which possibly Schumann got to know in his youth."[34] Despite this assertion, a later diary entry in 1844 marks Schumann's first organ lesson. Perhaps 1844 marked the beginning of his organ studies in earnest? Regardless, would Schumann have written, "Lose no opportunity of practicing on the organ. There is no other instrument which takes a swifter revenge on anything unclear or sloppy in composition or playing,"[35] had he not spent considerable time practicing the organ? As mentioned earlier, Clara and Robert's initial reason for renting a pedalboard for their piano was to practice the organ, and a catalogue of Schumann's works collected after his death found 43 works by Bach, 12 of which were for the organ.[36] This at least implies familiarity with Bach's works for organ, although a contemporary account describes Schumann's pedagogical methods involving playing Bach's organ works at the piano. Alfred Dörffel, pupil of Schumann at Leipzig Conservatory wrote:

> Schumann once requested that at our next lesson I was to play organ chorales by Bach, for example, "Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme." I was initially anxious about how to play both the pedal and manual voices as notated. I leapt as deftly and quickly as possible from the pedal notes, which I handled like short grace notes, to the notes for the left hand, and I sustained the pedal notes with the damper pedal. After sufficient practice, my execution of everything had become quite polished... Schumann was pleased with my manipulation. Schumann himself was wont to perform organ chorales at the piano this way, and he was very adept at playing these leaps.[37]

Clearly, Schumann considered the organ and piano to be closely related, having specified that the Six Fugues, Op. 60, could be performed on either instrument. But does this relationship imply that Schumann intended the organ and the piano to share the same playing technique? This remains less certain, in part because the transition in playing style that occurred during the 19th century.

The playing style after 1800 underwent a slow change to a more thoroughly *legato* touch. Hans Fagius writes,

> This was because of the musical demands of the early Romantic style, following the orchestra style and the *bel canto* ideal in singing. Otherwise Baroque ideas about articulation and touch continued to prevail among classically trained organists during the beginning of the 19th century, as they had done in the second half of the previous century. The means that the normal way of playing was what Marpurg

> (1765) called the ordinary touch (*Ordentliches Fortgehen*) - a very slight silence between the notes when nothing else was indicated. There could be *staccato*, marked with dots or wedges, *legato*, marked with slurs above certain notes to be played together without any articulation in between (the *staccato* and *legato* signs can be found in the preludes by Kittel), and *legatissimo*, which means overlapping notes, especially in broken chords. This way of playing seems to have been the normal way of playing by the foremost organists of the day like Rinck, Adolf Friedrich Hesse, and Mendelssohn, even if the *legato* touch must have become more and more the norm even to them.[38]

Oortmerssen continues along this vein: "Recent [20th century] generations of organists have been educated with a false idea concerning the performance practice of 19th century music. The perfect *legato* was supposed to be the only correct way of playing this repertoire. Careful studies of contemporary sources, the repertoire, and many 19th century organ methods during the last years have confirmed that this approach is incomplete, one-sided and incorrect."[39] Therefore, given that Schumann considered himself more of a pianist than an organist, which style of performance is more appropriate to his organ works? Concerning the Canonic Studies, Op. 56, Fagius writes, "They are playable on the organ and sound marvelous, but the texture is highly pianistic, and the demands are of a kind more common in the beginning of the 20th century and far from what was normal in organ music in Germany in the middle of the 19th century. While realizing that Schumann obviously did not think of these pieces as organ music, we gratefully

include them in our organ repertoire as charming music in a style which we do not often get the chance to explore."[40] Fagius notes that the same is the case with the *Four Sketches,* Op. 58, also written in 1845. These pieces are even more pianistic in texture. They have a relationship to the studies, Op. 56, and the fugues, Op. 60, but the polyphonic elements are not as prominent. Instead they form character pieces.[41] Fagius asserts that the only real organ pieces by Schumann are the *Six Fugues on BACH,* and that:

> In the BACH fugues Schumann demonstrates the highest skill in contrapuntal writing, using all sorts of complicated polyphony culminating in the concluding double fugue. But at the same time he produced expressive compositions which he himself termed 'character pieces, but in a strict style.'[42] Wonderful examples of this are found in the virtuosic second fugue, the meditative third, the scherzo-like, witty fifth, and the splendid symphonic ending of the sixth." [...] You can also see that the first, fourth and sixth fugues are more in the Baroque inspired style, even in *stile antico*; nevertheless, *crescendi* and *accelerandi* are found in the second half of the pieces with *c* and *a.* The other three fugues are more in the style of character pieces. The dynamic increase in several of the fugues could possibly be inspired by Mendelssohn's A Major Sonata, but it is also a sign of pianistic thinking. [...] The normal touch seems here without doubt to be *legato*. In the theme of the second fugue there are no articulation markings, but the sixteenth notes in the second bar are indicated *non-legato*.

Laukvik contradicts Fagius on this account, writing, "In the end op. 60 is more clearly a piano work. Of course, the title page reads 'for organ or pianoforte with pedal,' but in the second fugue, the 'poco a poco cresc.' from m. 86 speaks with more affinity with the piano."[43] Regardless of whether the Schumann's works are better suited for the organ or the piano, the consensus between the previously sited authors seems to be that the default touch for Schumann's works is the pure legato unless marked otherwise, while making slight adjustments for reverberant rooms and very fast passages, both of which may require the clarity of a slight separation.

A central difficulty in performing Schumann at the organ is the interpretation of slurs. Laukvig believes slurs can be interpreted in three ways in the early and late Romantic style: "1. legato (a group of notes within a slur are to be played legato), 2. accent (the first note under the slur is accented), 3. grouping or phrasing (the notes under a slur comprise a unified structural entity). Points 1 and 2 are the older function, whereas point 3 indicates a more recent usage."[44] Laukvig also notes that a slur might share simultaneous meanings, such as legato and accent. He continues, "We should recognize as misleading, at least in most cases, the common assertion that composers like Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy and Robert Schumann notated slurs recklessly, inconsistently, or even incorrectly. (Naturally, carelessly placed slurs do sometimes appear, but they are the exceptions rather than the rule.)"[45] Laukvik also says we should assume correctness in the notation of Op. 60 in particular, since Schumann worked on these fugues with remarkable care over a long period of time. Schumann wrote to his publisher, "This [Op. 60] is a work which occupied me for the whole of the previous year in an effort to make it worthy of the

lofty name it bears. It is also a work which, I believe, is likely to outlive my other creations the longest."[46]

Regarding the use of rubato, Laukvik argues for greater rhythmic precision. He compares piano technique to organ technique, saying that contemporary descriptions of Mozart playing piano with the hands not sounds precisely together would not sound idiomatic to the organ.[47] He also writes that, "the sources that address the early romantic composers, Mendelssohn and Schumann, speak of considerable precision in rhythm. [...] By contrast, the sources around the later composers, such as Brahms, Liszt, and Reger, describe a stark and emotion-laden rubato."[48]

Metronome markings are given in Op. 56, but not Op. 58 or Op. 60. Laukvik remarks that, "Schumann's markings in the *Studien für den Pedalflügel* [Op. 56] show brisk tempi, for instance in No. 3 in E major (*Andantino)*, where q = 80 appears. Schumann then writes *Etwas schneller* [Somewhat faster], q = 100. For our ears this is surely quite rushed. For No. 1 in C major, Schumann writes *Nicht zu schnell* [Not too fast] and q = 88. But for us this metronome indication tends to seem too fast."[49]

Registration is of primary concern when playing these works on the organ. There are of course no registration indications given for Op. 56 or Op. 58, and Op. 60 only contains general indications like ***p***, ***f***, *cresc., "*nach und nach schneller und stärker," ("gradually faster and louder," No. 1, m. 34), "Mit sanften Stimmen," ("with soft voices,") and so on.[50] Laukvik suggests that registration after m.34 in the first fugue is "rather unproblematic: for example, stops could be added in mm. 37, 41, 48,

51, 56, 60, and 63," and a similar strategy could be employed in the fourth fugue.[51] Regarding the sixth fugue, he says "the beginning registration should apparently be retained until m. 58, where Schumann writes 'più f.' The ***f*** in m. 95 may be reached by a crescendo in the foregoing measures, stops may be added first in m. 95 itself. The same observation applies to the ***ff*** in m. 116. The fugue ends in a triumphant, orchestral manner (observe how the basses enter robustly in m. 151). The *tutti* is therefore appropriate for the close."[52] Laukvik has similarly useful suggestions for Op. 56:

> The baroque structure of the *Studie* No. 1 in C major suggests a realization as a trio with an overtone-rich registration. The *Studie* No. 4 can be orchestrated beautifully. The upper voices may be registered with flutes, while it makes sense to assign the left-hand chords to another manual registered with strings. If the organist has access to an oboe of precise speech, but not too loud, it might be employed for the *Studie* No. 5 in B minor, combined with a few soft 8' stops. To bring out the canon a little the 'tenor voice' may be played with the left hand on the main manual (Gedeckt 8', Flöte 4', and Swell to Great).[53]

Given Schumann's regard for Bach, one wonders if perhaps Baroque registrational practices might be employed in some his works, such as principle choruses, terraced dynamics, less doubling of 8' pitch, use of gap registrations.

Lastly, regarding the fourth canon, Op. 56, Laukvik says that in acoustically dry rooms, the lowest note of the left hand chords should be tied, "but only in three- and four-part chords, and not, for instance, in m.11, where the texture reduces to

two parts."[54] The objective here is a gentle *portato*, which imitates a string section (recall that Laukvik suggests this manual be registered with string stops as well).

Robert Schumann as a Romantic is expressive and evocative, while Schumann as a Classicist honors the polyphonic tradition of Bach. This dualistic view can inform the interpretation of his works, where the Romantic legato can be treated as the rule, but with the possibility to employ a more detached touch in certain cases. The absence of conclusive answers regarding interpretation requires us to summon Schumann the Romantic, and view his works with an eye toward new possibilities of expression.

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