

The Romantic Dialectic of Robert Schumann's *Davidsbündlertänze*

By turns exuberant and melancholy, steeped in Byron and Goethe, capable of broad dramatic gestures such as his extended pursuit of the sixteen-year-old Clara against her father's wishes, and his desperate suicidal plunge into the Rhine River two years before his descent into a final syphilis-induced madness (Grove), Robert Schumann embodies the Romantic personality, both in his life and in his music. The emphasis on intensely emotional expression, and his identification with the new "type" of artist that emerged in the early nineteenth century – that of the "rejected dreamer filled with eternal longing and indefinable discontent," the "misunderstood artist" fighting the lonely battle against incomprehension, intolerance, and philistinism (Machlis 282, 283) – these too place Schumann squarely in the Romantic genre. Moreover, and perhaps most evident in Schumann's musical ode of Romantic longing, conflict and love, the *Davidsbündlertänze*, Schumann achieves what Rowell calls the dialectical process of art (121). This eighteen-movement work is a spellbinding fusion of musical content and sensuousness in which form bows to idea, and a synthesis of opposing tensions realized through a conceptualization of two different temperamental characterizations, Florestan and Eusebius.

As much as any work from the Romantic repertoire, the *Davidsbündlertänze* reveals the debt Romantic music owes to elements outside the realm of sound, and the two imaginary characters Schumann conceptualizes bear similarity to types found in the Romantic literature of the day. Moreover, as Machlis observes, composers of this period turned not only to literature and painting but to dreams and passions as inspiration for profound meditations on life and death, on God and nature, on good and evil and human destiny, and perhaps most of all, on love. Like Romantic painters and writers, composers also strove for immediate emotional appeal which they achieved through melodies marked by lyricism and a harmony that was highly emotional and expressive. Most significantly, the Romantic artist, not least among them Schumann, strove to forge a link between his inner life and the outside world, a desire that in music was supported by the tendency to include a large number of expressive terms to serve as clues, not only to the character of the music but to the frame of mind behind it (Machlis 287, 288). Far exceeding the Classical use of tempi directives for traditional dynamic qualities, these expressions are a direct link both to the composer's emotional state and to the emotive effect he intended to achieve in his listeners.

A look at the descriptive information for the *Davidsbündlertänze* of 1837 reveals just such a use of expressive terms (Pianopedia). Named after Schumann's *Davidsbund*, or "League of David," the eighteen characteristic pieces for piano which make up this work include tempi directives which leave no doubt as to the mood Schumann wishes to convey as he alternates between the "extrovert and impetuous" Florestan and the "dreamy, melancholic and introverted" Eusebius (Wade-Matthews 362, 363). The contrasts between loud and soft, fast and slow, serve to conjure up, on the one hand, Schumann's fiery, assertive and agitated persona, and on the other, his sensitive, tentative and dreamy side.

The work is not, however, only a showcase for fluctuating emotional states. As Don Satz observes in his review of six different recordings of this work, the *Davidsbündlertänze* was conceived on a number of levels, a consideration of which is

helpful in identifying what Rowell refers to as the “causal principle” of the work (174). As its title suggests, the composition serves as a vehicle to further the mission of the *Davidsbund*, “Schumann’s imaginary and spiritual brotherhood of artists who combat the shallow nature of contemporary culture.” The eighteen pieces are also dances and outpourings of Schumann’s love for Clara. Finally the work is a mirror into the composer’s complex personality; indeed it has been suggested that Schumann suffered from bi-polar disorder (Krantz) and the contrasts represented by Florestan and Eusebius would seem to support this interpretation of the self-portrait Schumann presents here. Such an interpretation, however, is too cold and clinical a way to approach this lovely music. Satz is right when he says that this is “music for dancing, artistic elevation, romantic longing, and exploring the recesses and contradictions of one’s mind.”

Compared to the movements of Classical symphonies, the four pieces here are very short, the longest among them just under two minutes. After the opening movement, which Beth Levin in her *La Folia* online review, “On Schumann’s *Davidsbündlertänze*,” characterizes as a sort of invitation to the entire work in which both imaginary voices are heard, the second movement or book is slow, soft, and dreamy. For Levin, this piece “turns inward and dark,” and “the melodic D resolving to a C-sharp in continual repetition pulls, tugs and resembles a human sigh. . . a sense of anguish.” While one might agree that, true to its tempo directive of *Innig* or “Heartfelt,” this lovely piece expresses a human sigh, it is more one of wistful longing, of poignancy and depth of feeling, than of anguish.

Florestan’s voice is heard next in Movement 3, a piece Schumann intended to be played and received *Mit Humor*. This piece is characteristically animated and assertive. Levin gets it right here when she says “The rhythmic élan of the opening chords suggests the sensation of a running leap with a sure landing onto a *sforzando* (accented) chord at the fourth measure.” Lively and vital, this piece reminds the listener that this music is inspired by dance; it has a physical exuberance and intensity that sets the head nodding and the heart pounding.

Book 4 is another Florestan piece, this time more agitated and dark. Whereas the third movement is in a major key, Movement 4 in D Minor evokes deep conflict, urgency and turmoil. Both of the Florestan movements here are showcases for virtuosity and what Rowell calls “athleticism” (165). Where Book 3 is lively and confident, however, and leads smoothly to the following piece, Book 4 evokes a sense of being carried headlong and against one’s will to a catastrophic end. This is achieved by the first strong base octave setting up “an unforgiving pattern of the treble bouncing off the low notes until the final few bars drive to a conclusion” (Levin). One is left breathless at the end of this piece, and ready for the respite offered by a return to Eusebius in Movement 5.

This next piece lives up to its tempo directive of *Einfach* or “Simple.” It is slow but displays the feeling of happiness and possibility characteristic of major keys. It is lilting; the repetition of the themes lulls one into a dream state where cares melt away. One feels a release of tension from the previous movement, encouraged by what Levin calls a “gentle musing of notes that endlessly turn and roam above a sparse but supportive left hand.” Just as one begins to relax, however, the melody spins itself out “like a music box that has run out of energy” (Levin) and one is left to reflect on Rowell’s notion of “transcendental simplicity.” The simple melody, the slow, periodic, regular motion, the

simple textures and pure timbres, the ambiguous ending - all speak of a simpler state of being beyond the here and now, and of an end to pain and tension (165,166).

This paper focuses on only four of the eighteen pieces, but even such a short slice prompts one to apply Suzanne Langer's perceptive words about music to Schumann; listening to the short but emotionally loaded pieces here one is left with a sharp poignancy at "the greatness and brevity and eternal passing of everything vitally felt" (qtd in Rowell 147). One also understands what Rowell is getting at when he writes about the "psychic symbolism" he finds in a successfully executed variation of theme and melody in music (178). Listening to the *Davidsbündlertänze*, one can indeed identify the thematic changes with the development, preservation, loss and reestablishment of identity through life. The poignancy of Schumann's personal story and of one's own struggles and joys is never lost in contemplation of form while listening to this music. One feels deeply at each moment. As Satz asserts, "Schumann was a master of injecting varied themes into very short musical pieces," and these four movements give one a taste for the richness and variety of moods that this composer evokes. They are also an excellent example of the way intrinsic emotion is conveyed extrinsically in a Romantic composition.

Rowell could be speaking of Schumann when he cites "the extreme compression of emotion and musical substance" as a prime value of Romanticism in music (177). So could he be speaking of this most ardent and introspective of composers when he characterizes the Romantic as "disordered. . . inner . . . the contemplation of essences . . . irrational . . . and transcendental" (118). The events of Schumann's life – his obsessive and unswerving pursuit of Clara; his brilliance as a critic and composer; his descents into melancholy and depression and his exuberant returns; his desperate plunge into the Rhine and final submission to madness – all bespeak the personality of the true Romantic and put him in league with Shelly, Goethe, and Byron. Like the Romantic poets, Schumann sought a reality infused with love and beauty, with feeling and passion. Like his spiritual brothers, he expressed through his art something that transcended the ordinary world and that transported the soul beyond the finite and limiting. If Rowell is right when he says that for the Romantics "music inhabits a higher plane than physical reality," then it is upon that plane that Schumann can be found. And it is there that the listener can eternally join him.

Works Cited

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