

With Schumann at the Piano

PIANO Magazine Mar/April 2002

Q. Is Schumann one of the more elusive composers when it comes to performance?

KUERTI. Just as Schumann himself tottered at (and sometimes beyond) the edge of sanity, both in his music and his personality, the interpreter needs to approach that same edge and enter a world of utter whimsy, spontaneity, and nearly maniacal poetry and passion. Daring extravagance is needed, and yet there's a relatively small space that needs to be excavated between, on the one hand, playing which is highly competent and thoroughly sensitive but doesn't truly take flight on the wings of inspiration, and on the other, playing which is so exaggerated and arbitrary that it becomes phony or even ridiculous.

Q. How important is knowledge of his life to the performance of his music?

KUERTI. In general, fascinating as it is to know a great deal about a composer's life, I've always been skeptical as to how relevant it really is to performance; after all, the composer's genius lies in his ability to put his life into the curious black marks of the manuscript. However, it may be that in Schumann's case it can play more of a role than with other composers. Knowing and feeling his overwhelming love for Clara and its long frustration, and the tragic circumstances of his mental deterioration, can certainly add a special poignancy to many of his works, even if it doesn't particularly pinpoint or elucidate any concrete elements of the interpretation.

Q. What can the Schumann player gain from reading the literary works which inspired him?

KUERTI. There doesn't actually seem to *me* to be any tangible correlation between Hoffman's Kapellmeister and Schumann's *Kreisleriana*. The unifying element in both is the fervent depth of expression, the richness of the contrasts, the absolute spontaneity, the extremes of characterization and the unbridled flights of fancy. And Hoffman's descriptions of transcendental, ecstatic musical experiences are astonishing in that they anticipate a type of music and an attitude *toward* music which hardly existed yet (he died in 1822, after all, when Schumann was only 12-years-old).

Q. Do Schumann's many sudden mood changes pose any special problems for the interpreter?

KUERTI. One really has to play this music from within, not just as a connoisseur delighting in it. The connoisseur may be stunned and thrown off balance by its astonishing whims. But once these have been fully absorbed by the performer, the unexpected twists and turns are a strong stimulant that can help players to actually transcend themselves and allow their own spontaneous extravagance to emerge.

Q. His sometimes very unconventional structures have apparently been a problem for audiences, certainly in his own time. Is his approach to structure problematical for the performer?

KUERTI. Notwithstanding the apparently anarchic disarray in many of Schumann's works, especially the ones strung together like a string of Christmas lights, like *Carnaval* or the *Davidsbündler*, I would claim – without any possibility of proof! – that the whole is not arbitrary, but balanced and coherent, through invisible aesthetic bonds, that can neither be heard, seen nor understood, only felt – perhaps akin to the massless, mostly undetectable 'virtual' particles that physicists believe transfer forces between 'real' particles. Instinctive, primordial judgments of the heart, not of the mind, determine what fits where. And since these are so personal and intangible, they need to be even more powerful than the more rational elements that bind together pre-romantic music.

I think the most obvious possible criticism of Schumann's larger forms is the frequently occurring division of movements into two halves, in which large portions of the work are heard twice, with little alteration. Actually, this occurs in each movement of the *Fantasy*, but there are factors which sustain the form and justify the work's reputation as one of the highpoints of the romantic literature.

In the first movement an important factor is its extraordinary harmonic overview. Although the work is in C Major, no significant C Major chord is heard until we're almost at the end. This means that the restless dissonance of the foaming accompaniment which begins the piece isn't truly resolved until the end, thus helping to stretch our perceptions across this giant arc. The second movement is held together by its ceaseless energy, its rhythmic impetus, and its clear overall build-up. This movement could hardly survive – or rather, we couldn't survive *it* – without the refreshing halfway break, where we momentarily leave the heroics and the nervy breathlessness, for a peaceful, songful interlude whose resemblance to Liszt's *Les Préludes* may be intentional, since the work was dedicated to Liszt. And the last movement's midway split is mitigated by the ceaseless searching of its impassioned tenderness, by the unbelievably sensuous and improvisatory harmonic wandering that follows the half-time pause, and by the heartfelt fervor of the coda, which wraps it up in a way that makes us feel it really has taken us somewhere. There are a multitude of different ways of looking at form, and we shouldn't get stuck on insisting that everyone must compose with the logic of a Beethoven or a Brahms.

Q. What governs your choice of editions when preparing his works for performance? And is Clara to be trusted?

KUERTI. There are two editions that Clara had a hand in; the complete works edition, as in the Dover reprints, which Brahms helped to oversee, is very trustworthy, even if the occasional detail may be superior in the Henle edition, which applies more modern musicological standards. Clara's practical edition, as for example reprinted in the Kalmus edition, is scandalously distorted. Articulations, phrasings, dynamics, tempo marking and pedal indications and

even notes are tampered with. To give a few examples: typically Schumann rarely writes 'a tempo' after a ritardando, leaving it to the performer to find the right place or even to decide whether it should be sudden or gradual. Clara takes this freedom away from us, by adding innumerable 'a tempos'. Schumann rarely indicated specific pedal markings, but preferred to simply write 'Pedal' in the first bar of the piece, to indicate that pianists should use pedal as they deem fit; Clara adds a great deal of pedaling – in one case, the second Variation in the slow movement of the F minor Sonata, she even openly contradicts her husband, who had put, as usual, 'Pedal' in the first measure, by writing in a footnote: 'Contrary to Robert Schumann's instructions, the editor plays this Variation entirely without pedal.'

Q. Do you have a favourite Schumann work?

KUERTI. It's impossible to pick favourites, but some neglected masterpieces stand out for me, including most of the *Novelettes*, the *Konzertstück*, Op. 92, for Piano and Orchestra, the *Bilder aus Osten* for piano 4 hands, and the string quartets, especially the F Major.