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Herbert F. Peyser**

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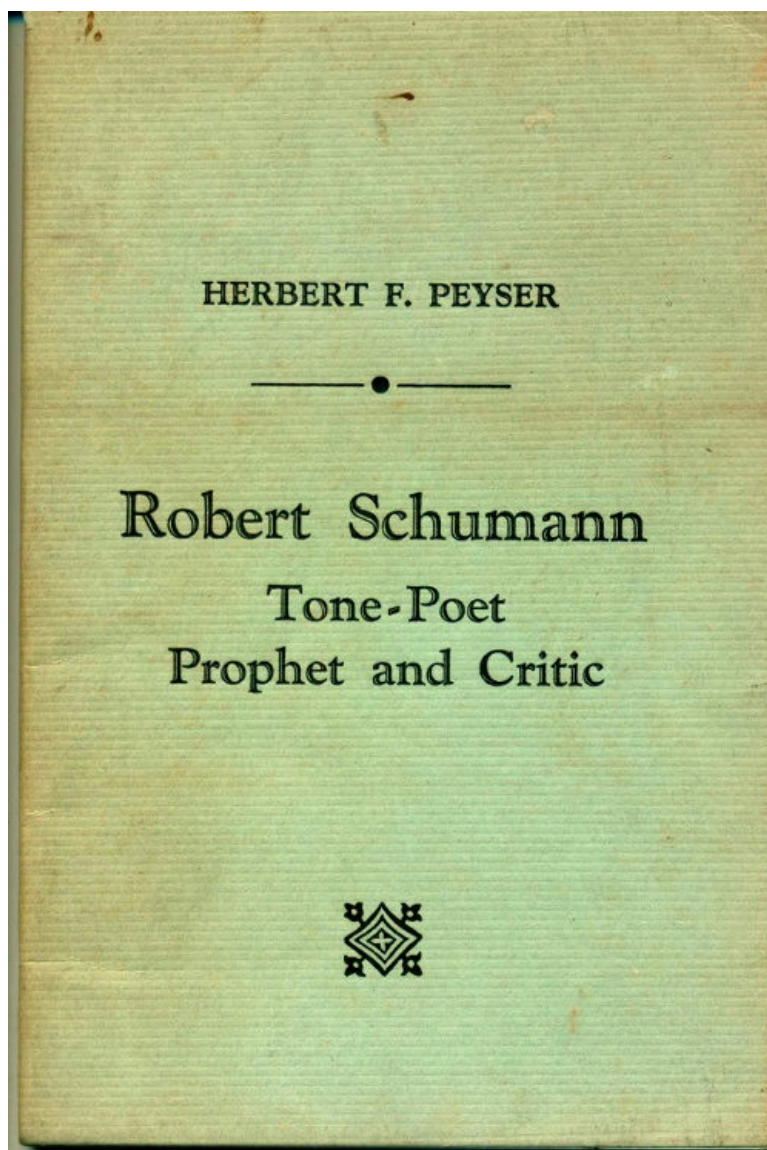
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ROBERT SCHUMANN, TONE-POET, PROPHET AND CRITIC



HERBERT F. PEYSER

**Robert Schumann
Tone-Poet
Prophet and Critic**



Written for and dedicated to
the
RADIO MEMBERS
of
THE PHILHARMONIC-SYMPHONY
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of NEW YORK

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A boyhood picture of Schumann.

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FOREWORD

It is obviously impossible in the brief space of the present booklet to offer more than the sketchiest outline of Robert Schumann's short life but amazingly rich achievement. Together with Haydn and Schubert he was, perhaps, the most completely lovable of the great masters. It is hard, moreover, to think of a composer more

strategically placed in his epoch or more perfectly timed in his coming. Tone poet, fantast, critic, visionary, prophet—he was all of these! And he passed through every phase, it seemed, of romantic experience. The great and even the semi-great of a fabulous period of music were his intimates—personages like Mendelssohn, Chopin, Liszt, Moscheles, Ferdinand David, Hiller, Joachim, Brahms. He won the woman he loved after a bitter struggle against a tyrannical father-in-law. He created much of the world's greatest piano music, many of its loveliest songs, four great symphonies, superb chamber compositions and a good deal else which, even today, is insufficiently known or valued. A poetic critic, if ever there was one, he proclaimed to a world, still indifferent or uncertain, the greatness of a Chopin and a Brahms. His physical and mental decline was a tragedy even more poignant than Beethoven's deafness or the madness of Hugo Wolf. His life story is, in point of fact, vastly more complex and many-sided than the following handful of unpretentious and unoriginal pages suggest. These will have served their purpose if they induce the reader to familiarize himself more fully with the colorful and endlessly romantic pattern of Schumann's vivid life and grand accomplishment.

H. F. P.

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ROBERT SCHUMANN

Tone-Poet

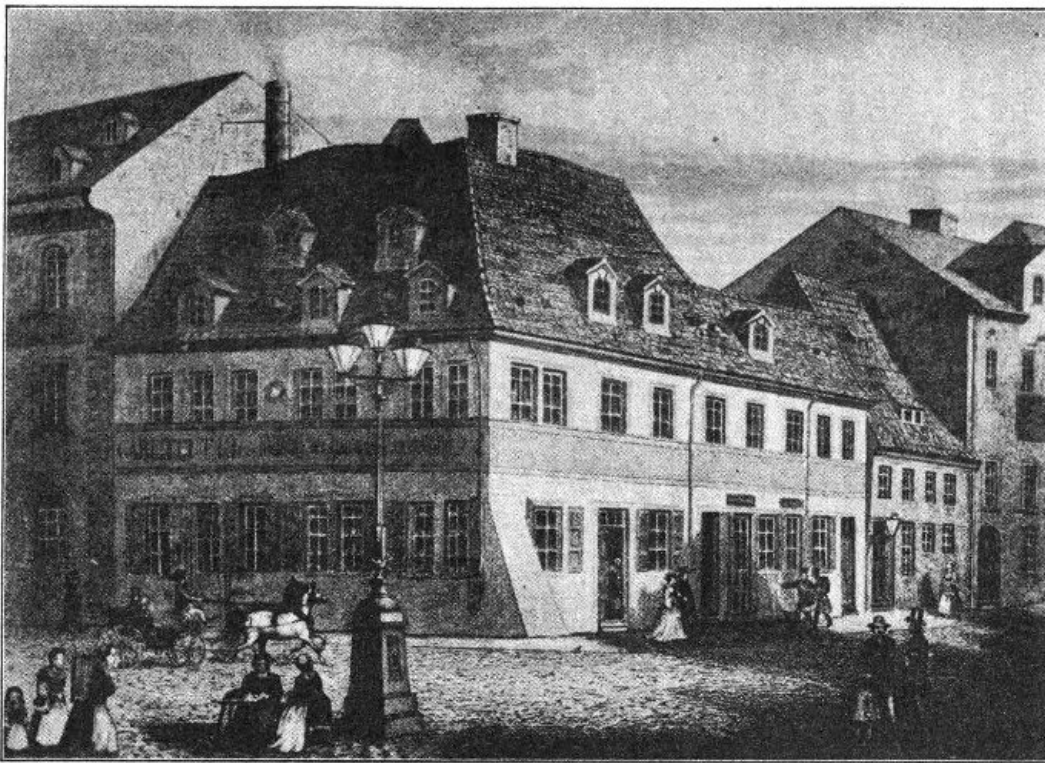
Prophet and Critic

By
HERBERT F. PEYSER

At 9:30 on the evening of June 8, 1810, (the same being Saint Medard's Day), the book publisher August Schumann and his wife Johanne Christiane, living in the Haus am Markt No. 5, Zwickau, Saxony, became the parents of a boy whom they determined to call Medardus, in honor of the saint of the occasion. Reasonably well to do if not precisely affluent they were pleased at the idea of another addition to their little brood of three boys and a girl—Eduard, Karl, Julius and Emilie, respectively. Over night they seem to have thought better of saddling the newcomer with such a name as Medardus and six days later the infant was carried to the local Church of Saint Mary's there to be christened Robert Alexander. In proper season the "Alexander" seems for all practical purposes to have vanished.

August Schumann had not always dwelt on easy street. Born in 1773 in the village of Entschütz, near Gera, he was the son of an impecunious country pastor who, despite his poverty, became a cleric of some eminence. Unwilling to see the youngster grow up as an object of charity the preacher gave him four years of high school education, then apprenticed him to a merchant. But the lad was not cut out for business; books were his world and in them he sought refuge from the misery of shopkeeping. Moreover, he soon developed literary aspirations of his own and, even though a well-meaning book-seller tried to discourage him, wrote a novel entitled "Scenes of Knighthood and Monkish Legends". The unremitting labor of study, writing and business chores told on his health and for the rest of his life he was never wholly a well man. Yet nothing could diminish his energies or dampen his ambitions to achieve the glories of authorship. When he eventually fell in love with a daughter of one Schnabel, official surgeon of the town of Zeitz, and met with a downright refusal from that hard-shelled individual to give his daughter to anyone but a merchant of independent means, August Schumann was equal to the challenge. For a year and a half he wrote day and night, saved up about \$750 (a respectable sum at the time) opened a shop in partnership with a friend in the town of Ronneberg, married Schnabel's daughter and was happy. A circulating library formed an adjunct to the store and the new Mrs. Schumann divided her time between handling books and selling goods. Her husband for his part combined the satisfactions of an extremely prolific authorship with the management of a bookshop, not to mention the direction of a prosperous business. In 1808 he moved to Zwickau where he founded the publishing house of Schumann Brothers, which lasted till 1840. The firm brought out among other things translations of the works of Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron. One of its showpieces was a so-called "Picture Gallery of the Most Famous Men of all Nations and Ages". At 14 Robert busily pattered around the place, reading proofs and performing many of the other odd jobs common to printing establishments.

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Schumann's birthplace in Zwickau, Saxony.

For all his zeal and strength of character August Schumann paid the price of his unsparing toil in the shape of a nervous malady complicated by other ailments and attended by accessions of profound melancholy. He died on Aug. 10, 1826. His children without exception inherited the diseased strain. Curiously enough, about the only quality Robert could not regard as an outright heritage was his musical talent. His father had none of it and his mother only the most superficial trace. She was an excellent housewife and a tender soul but of wholly provincial mentality (which explains, perhaps, why her restlessly active husband chose her as his mate). Robert looked like his mother and loved her devotedly. But his features were about the sole birthright he owed her. From his father, on the other hand, he acquired virtually all of those qualities which were to fertilize his greatest inspirations—ambition, high principle, productive activity, imagination, poetic fantasy, whimsicality, the gift of literary expression and even to a certain degree that shrewd practical sense which marked some of his business dealings. Yet to none of his immediate forbears does he seem to have been indebted for his musical instincts as such. 7

Robert's early upbringing was chiefly the business of his mother. His father, swamped by literary and mercantile pursuits, had no time for nursery duties. Possibly the child would have been less spoiled if a paternal hand had more actively guided him. As it was, Robert became not only his mother's darling but the pet of every woman of her large acquaintance. He had his way in everything and in later years this error of his early training was reflected in the irritation he sometimes showed when crossed in his wishes. All the same, this female adulation did not soften the lad who, at the age of six, was sent to the private school run by an Archdeacon Döhner. In the games and sports of his comrades he was as wild and turbulent as the roughest of them. Nevertheless, he did not neglect his school work and exhibited a lively intelligence. Music fascinated him early. A pupil from a Latin school, one August Vollert, who obtained free board at the Schumann home in exchange for a bit of teaching, gave Robert a little elementary instruction in the art, though hardly systematic guidance. The spark was kindled, however. At seven the boy composed a few little dances. We need not say "wrote", for these trifles were chiefly improvised on the piano. One aspect of his gift manifested itself early—a knack for "characterizing" people in tone with a kind of delineative justness that both moved and amused listeners. The child was obviously father to 8 the man who composed the "Carnival"!

In Zwickau at the time there was no better musician than Johann Gottfried Kuntzsch, who long before Robert was born, had gained a certain distinction by conducting a performance of Haydn's "Creation". August Schumann, who secretly hoped that his youngest boy might become such a poet as he himself had always aspired to be, resolved to cultivate that musical talent which was beginning to flower. It was to the care of Kuntzsch, therefore, that he confided him. We know little of the kind of teaching Robert enjoyed at this stage. Frederick Niecks surmises that it may have consisted "in little more than telling the pupil what to practise and the first elementary rules of fingering ... in short, prescription without exemplification, happy-go-lucky chance without purposeful system". Niecks adds that Kuntzsch's pupils could never be sure of escaping a box on the ear and that "on one occasion Robert's bad timekeeping was even corrected by a stout blackthorn". Yet Robert preserved a good opinion of Kuntzsch all his life and as late as 1832 wrote asking permission to dedicate a composition to "the only one who recognized the predominating musical talent in me and indicated betimes the path along which, sooner or later, my good genius was to guide me".

In 1820 Robert entered the Zwickau Lyceum ("Gymnasium") to emerge, eight years later, with a certificate inscribed with a flattering *eximie dignus*. He was a personable youngster, blond, bright-eyed, sensitive, temperamental, prankish. The two subjects particularly dear to his heart were music and literature. His teachers thought kindly of his talent for languages. An uncommonly developed instinct for rhythm and meter expressed itself in effusions of poetry. At home he spent much time concocting "robber comedies" and producing them with the assistance of his schoolmates. Meanwhile, he was carrying on his musical studies with the son of a local

bandmaster. The two became fast friends, played overtures and symphonies in four hand arrangements and [9] even tackled compositions by Hummel and Czerny. Kuntzsch was anything but pleased by his pupil's displays of independence. Not having been consulted about the latter's music-making he suddenly declared that Robert could now shift for himself. Yet when Kuntzsch produced an oratorio by F. Schneider at Saint Mary's Church, young Schumann played the piano accompaniments while his father, though unmusical, beamed approvingly. Indeed, August Schumann did everything to further his son's musical inclinations. The paternal publishing firm obtained gratis quantities of music from which Robert was free to take his pick and choice. Father Schumann provided plenty of music stands for household concerts and bought a Streicher piano. With some of his musical comrades Robert produced at home a setting of the 150th Psalm he had composed. A little earlier he had heard a concert by the celebrated Ignaz Moscheles on a trip to Karlsbad in his father's company. For a long time he was fired with the ambition to study with this virtuoso. Nothing came of it but the youth preserved the program of that recital like a sacred relic.

Zwickau duly woke up to the accomplishments of the wonderchild in its midst. The more prominent citizens invited him to play at their homes. At the evening musicales of the "Gymnasium" he performed things like Moscheles' Variations on the Alexander March and showpieces by Herz, much in vogue at the time. August, who had no use for half-baked artists, thought of placing his boy under Karl Maria von Weber. But just about this time Weber embarked on the journey to London from which he was never to return alive. One person who was more pleased than grieved by the mischance was Mother Schumann, who harbored an insurmountable dread of the "breadless profession" for her idolized boy. Never did she tire of describing its miseries, the better to scare him off. Why not adopt a lucrative profession? The law, for instance. And so, for the time being, Robert remained in Zwickau, obtaining, as he used to say later, "an ordinary high school training, studying music on the side [10] and out of the fulness of his devotion"—but alone! In the broadest sense he was to grow up like his father—self-taught.

Adolescence subdued the wildness which had so often characterized the schoolboy. More and more Robert became a dreamer. He grew selective, too, in his choice of friends, of whom he had relatively few. One who stood closest to him was his sister-in-law, Therese, the wife of his brother Eduard. August Schumann, who had always hoped that this youngest son might inherit his own literary and poetic tastes, lived long enough to see the boy's talents developing along these lines. Robert kept diaries, note books, memoranda for verses and similar jottings. He was scrupulously honest with himself; in one scrapbook, for instance, he made this entry after some rhymed lines: "It was my dear mother who composed this lovely and simple poem". In another case he wrote: "By my father", and elsewhere: "Not by me". Once he made a timid effort to break into print and sent some of his effusions to Theodor Hell (otherwise Karl Winkler), of the Dresden *Abendzeitung*. He got them back.

A 17 he became acquainted with the writings of Jean Paul Richter, then at the peak of his romantic fame. Perhaps none of Robert's youthful encounters influenced him so profoundly. Jean Paul colored in one fashion or another everything he was to write or compose for years to come. They were kindred souls—both the poet of lyric sentimentalisms, fantastic humors, moonlight raptures, dawns, twilights, tender ecstasies and other stage settings and properties of romanticism, and his ardent and sensitive young worshipper. But if more than any other Jean Paul fired Robert's literary impulses it was Franz Schubert who lent wings to his musical fancy. His experience of Schubert began at the home of Dr. Ernst August Carus and his wife, Agnes, exceptionally cultured musical amateurs. Schubert was one of their particular enthusiasms and Robert, whom the couple quickly took to [11] their hearts (they nicknamed him "Fridolin", after a gentle page boy in one of Schiller's ballads), played four hand compositions with Mrs. Carus, heard her sing Schubert songs and became familiar with a good deal of other music, including that of Spohr. Robert would not have been himself had he not come to look upon the worthy lady with a kind of exalted devotion. Soon we find him expressing the state of his feelings in his best (or worst!) Jean Paul manner: "I feel now for the first time the pure, the highest love, which does not for ever sip from the intoxicating cup of sensual pleasures, but finds its happiness only in tender contemplation and in reverence.... Were I a smile, I would hover round her eyes; were I joy, I would skip softly through her pulses; were I a tear I would weep with her; and if she then smiled again, I would gladly die on her eyelash and gladly—yes, gladly—be no more".

* * *

Shortly after his father's death he had suffered two cases of calf love—one for a person called Liddy, the other for a certain Nanni. First he found them "glorious maidens", whom he longed to adore like the madonnas he felt sure they were. In the next moment they became "narrow-hearted souls", ignorant of the Utopia in which he lived.

This Utopia, by the way, was bathed in champagne. All his life champagne was his favorite beverage, even as it was of his great contemporary, Richard Wagner, though like Wagner he would modulate now and then to beer or a glass of wine. Both masters craved their champagne whether they had the price of it or not. And Robert in his student days only too often "had not". His biographer, Niecks, notes disapprovingly that Schumann's "worst failing" was: "He had no sense of the value of money and found it impossible to square his allowance with his expenditures". When his funds ran out he had a remedy for replenishing them. Again like Wagner, he seems to have been a virtuoso in the art of writing begging letters that generally brought results. If his mother, his [12] brothers, his sisters-in-law, his crusty old guardian, Rudel, ever hesitated a threat of the pawn-shop or the money-lender was always efficacious. No wonder Christiane Schumann was frightened by the idea that her Robert might, for all her efforts, land in the "breadless profession". Successful barristers might easily indulge their champagne tastes but certainly not musicians lacking even "beer pocketbooks"!

In Schneeberg, a town near Zwickau, Robert played publicly and with immense success a concerto movement by Kalkbrenner. Alone among his enthusiastic listeners his mother remained cool. Soon her wishes prevailed and, though both she and Rudel were aware of the youth's "eternal soul struggle" between music and the law, Robert made a promise of a sort to embrace jurisprudence. And so, at Easter, 1828, we find him enrolled at the University of Leipzig as a "studiosus juris". Scarcely arrived in Leipzig he struck up a warm friendship with

another law student, Gisbert Rosen, who shared Robert's poetic enthusiasms, particularly his devotion to Jean Paul. Rosen was on the point of removing to Heidelberg to continue his legal studies and Schumann quickly formed a plan to accompany his friend on his journey, with a few stopovers on the way. After a short visit to Zwickau the two made a pilgrimage to Bayreuth, where Jean Paul's widow still lived and where the young men visited every spot which had been sanctified by the presence of their idol. They continued to Munich by way of Nürnberg and Augsburg, where Robert obtained from a friend of his father a letter of introduction to Heinrich Heine, then in Munich. He had a lively conversation with the poet. Possibly if the latter had been able to foresee that the youth before him would become, some years later, one of the greatest musical interpreters of his lyrics he might have treated him with more warmth than he did.

The law was quite as chilling and distasteful as he had foreseen. In a few weeks he wrote to his mother telling, among other things, that "cold jurisprudence, which crushes one with its icy-cold definitions at the very beginning, cannot please me. Medicine I will not and theology I cannot study.... Yet there is no other way. I must tackle jurisprudence, however cold, however dry it may be.... All will go well and I won't look with anxious eyes into the future which can still be so happy if I do not falter". Actually, Robert's mind was made up from the start. He would continue with the law only as long as he had to. Before renouncing it altogether he would try the University of Heidelberg, where his friend Rosen was studying and the sympathetic and extremely musical jurist, Anton Friedrich Justus Thibaut, was lecturing. 13

* * *

The unromantic and featureless environment of Leipzig at first repelled the youth, who keenly missed the amiable surroundings of his native Zwickau. Neither was he happy among the rowdy, swashbuckling students, ever penniless, ever drunk, ever ridiculous in their notions of "patriotism". For a while Robert was a member of some of the "Burschenschaften", the student clubs, though he shunned his rough associates as much as he could. In one respect, however, he resembled them—he was continually poor and everlastingly driven to borrowing.

Unquestionably the circle of acquaintances Robert made during his first days in Leipzig was not large, though he was very happy to find his old friends from Zwickau, Dr. and Mrs. Carus. At their home he met some musicians of prominence—Heinrich Marschner, then conductor of the Leipzig Stadttheater; Gottlob Wiedebein, a song composer of some distinction at the time; and two people who, almost more than any others, were destined to play crucial roles in his life—the piano teacher, Friedrich Wieck, and his nine-year-old daughter, Clara, whom her father was assiduously grooming for a great artistic career.

* * *

Wieck, in particular, was a rather extraordinary if unsympathetic person. He had had a difficult and impecunious youth, kept body and soul together by giving music lessons for a few pennies a week and subsisted largely on the bounty of friendly families who invited him, now and then, to a dinner of roast mutton and string beans. He aspired to become a minister, studied theology but preached no more than a trial sermon. He was something of a traveler and had been to Vienna, where he met Beethoven. The privations and troubles of his youth hardened his character. His first wife stood his spectacular tantrums for eight years, then obtained a divorce and married a Berlin musician named Bargiel. By this second marriage the mother of Clara Wieck had a son, Woldemar, who later made a name for himself as a composer. 14

Though a hard-boiled martinet and, as time went on, a tyrant of the first order, Wieck was not wholly without good qualities. His unscrupulous treatment of Schumann and his own daughter has made him the object of much historical obloquy, in the main abundantly justified. Yet he was a good teacher, for all his irascible, disputatious ways and his devotion to the artistic causes he believed in could be very genuine. From the first he appreciated Schumann's creative talent and never concealed the fact, outrageously as he came to demean himself to the composer and Clara alike. Clara was, of course, her father's most famous pupil. Yet he had others, notably his daughter by his second marriage, Marie, and Hans von Bülow. The qualities he aimed to cultivate in his pupils were, according to Clara, "the finest taste, the profoundest feeling and the most delicate hearing". To this end he demanded that his students listen to great singers as much as possible and even learn to sing themselves.

Exactly a year after he had come to Leipzig Robert was off to Heidelberg there, ostensibly, to carry on his legal studies with Thibaut and another famous jurist, Mittermeier. Yet what chiefly busied him at Heidelberg was not jurisprudence but music. Under the teaching which, in Leipzig, he had begun to enjoy with Wieck he was developing into a first rate virtuoso and stirred all who heard him, especially by his fantastic skill in improvisation. Before long he was turning down invitations to concertize in places like Mannheim and Mainz. He practised tirelessly, played, composed, read, "poetized" and became one of the social lions of the neighborhood as well. Out of his old guardian, back in Zwickau, he wheedled money enough to defray the expenses of a summer jaunt to Italy. Shortly after his return he heard Paganini in Frankfort and reacted to the overwhelming impression in much the same manner as his contemporary, Liszt, and in an earlier day, Schubert. It was out of this revelation of diabolical virtuosity that his piano transcriptions of certain Paganini violin Caprices—overshadowed subsequently by those of Liszt—were to grow. 15

To his mother Robert confided little about his creative achievements in his Heidelberg days, the better to prepare her for the more remunerative plan he was forming of a virtuoso career. Yet in this period he conceived several works which were to become part of the foundations of his fame—things like the "Abegg" Variations, the "Papillons", the superb, vertiginous Toccata. To be sure, the "Papillons" were only begun in Heidelberg and the Toccata revised several years later. A word, however, about the "Abegg" Variations, the composer's Op. 1. The theme is one of those "alphabetical" inspirations he was to utilize even more imaginatively later on. That is to say it is based on the note succession A, B flat, E, G, G, and its inversion. Schumann had, indeed, known a flirtatious Meta Abegg in nearby Mannheim and had developed a tender feeling for her. Yet when he published the work he found it wiser to resort to mystification and so he dedicated it to an imaginary Countess Pauline von Abegg, who

served the purpose just as well. The “Abegg” Variations, though unmistakable Schumann, have rather less than their creator’s subsequent technical ingenuity and seem more like outgrowths of the virtuoso principles of Hummel and Weber.

But the elaborate dreamings and light-hearted pleasures of Heidelberg could not go on forever. On July 30, 1830, Robert took the bull by the horns and confided to his mother that music, not law, was for weal or woe to be his destiny. Wieck was invited to settle the question. That awesome pedagogue wrote to the widow Schumann a long and circumstantial letter, larded with many an “if” and “but”. Having considered the problem from every angle he urged the good woman to yield to her son’s wish. Robert, so Wieck assured her, could under his training become one of the foremost pianists of the time. If the plan misfired he could always return to his legal studies. 16

To every intent the youth’s course was now clear and, for all time, he was freed from his nightmare. Back in Leipzig Robert took up his residence in the Wieck home, the quicker to pursue his pianistic studies. But in one thing he was less moderate than his teacher could have wished; he obstinately declined to make haste slowly. He would become a great pianist, yet he wanted a short cut to that goal. The idea of practising dull finger exercises for hours on end every day revolted him. Already in Heidelberg he had discussed with his friend, Töpken, a project for overcoming the weakness of the fourth finger. He found an excuse for breaking off his lessons with Wieck a little while and, with his fourth finger held up by some home-made contrivance, he practised furiously in solitude. Precisely what happened we do not know. The first intimation that something was amiss emanated from a letter written to his brother, Eduard, on June 14, 1832. Eduard is instructed to show this passage to his mother: “Eduard will inform you of the strange misfortune that has befallen me. This is the reason of a journey to Dresden which I am going to take with Wieck. Although I undertake it on the advice of my doctor and also for distraction I must do a good deal of work as well there”. Soon afterwards he wrote that his room “looked like an apothecary’s shop”. For years to come letters to one person or another speak of treatments and cures, prospects of improvement or stubborn developments which promise to futilize all his virtuoso ambitions. The long and the short of it was that Robert had so incurably lamed his right hand that for purposes of a public career it was as good as useless. After a fashion he could still play piano; but the particular glory to which he aspired was nipped in the bud. 17

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Who shall say that the accident was an unmitigated misfortune? Would Schumann have bequeathed us the treasures he did had he wandered incessantly over the map of Europe to gain the transient rewards of an itinerant pianist? Would his characteristic style of piano writing have been what it is? It has been surmised that certain distinctive traits of it are, directly or indirectly, the products of his self-made physical disability. And can we be sure that the nervous instability associated with the inherited illness of the entire Schumann line might not have struck him down even earlier, precipitated by the worries and strains to which an executant is forever subject? If Robert still wished to be a musician it had to be in a creative sense.

Under the circumstances he would require a fuller training than he had yet enjoyed in the technic of composition. Wieck had recommended for a master in theory none other than Cantor Weinlig, the teacher of his own daughter, Clara, and of a certain irresponsible young firebrand named Richard Wagner. Robert did not accept the suggestion. Instead he became a pupil of Heinrich Dorn, recently come to Leipzig, who promised to be a more progressive person. Schumann esteemed Dorn personally and long remained his friend. But soon he was writing to Wieck and his daughter, then off on a concert tour: “I shall never be able to amalgamate with Dorn; he wishes to get me to believe that music is fugue—heavens! how different men are....” Nevertheless he slaved away at his exercises in double counterpoint and when the study became too intolerably dry he moistened it with draughts of champagne! His best lessons in counterpoint he obtained from Bach, who was to remain his supreme divinity all his life. The fugues of the Well Tempered Clavier he analyzed “down to the smallest detail.” When in his melancholy late days he received a visit from the young Czech, Bedrich Smetana, with a plea to advise him about musical studies, the taciturn master said no more than: “Study Bach”. “But I have studied Bach”, protested Smetana. “Study him again”, replied the declining composer and relapsed into moody silence. 18

It was at Dorn’s home, incidentally, that Schumann made his first acquaintance with Wagner, to whom he played the “Abegg” Variations. Wagner did not care for them on account of their “excess of figuration”. Nevertheless, they soon found a publisher. When the firm of Probst brought out the work the composer was in the highest measure elated, promised each of his Heidelberg acquaintances a free copy and wrote that “his first marriage with the wide world” made him feel as proud as the Doge of Venice at his ceremonial wedding with the Adriatic! The critics were, on the whole, encouraging, though the notorious Rellstab in his review “Iris” deplored the lack in it of any canon or fugue and made fun of “a name one can compose”.

* * *

With the children in the Wieck home Robert was a great favorite. What the youngsters especially enjoyed were the charades he was in the habit of devising for their pleasure, the frightening ghost stories he improvised for them day after day and his shivery enactment of the various spooks. Riddles, fairy tales—there was seemingly no end of the parlor tricks he knew how to provide on the spur of the moment for the tots. This deep understanding of children and their psychology was bound, sooner or later, to find artistic expression and lovely embodiment in music like the “Kinderscenen” and the “Album for the Young”, the one with its “Träumerei”, the other with its “Happy Farmer”.



The first sketch for The Happy Farmer, from the "Album for the Young," Op. 68.

His grown-up friends he endeavored to choose only among people who genuinely interested him and who shared his tastes. Persons who could not partake his high-flown enthusiasm for Jean Paul or for Bach amounted almost to mortal enemies! As for Clara, his early feelings toward the talented daughter of Wieck were scarcely more than a brother-and-sister affection, even though some of his more extravagant biographers have written nonsense about him worshipping her "like a pilgrim from afar some holy altar-piece". In his diaries one can find such entries as: "Clara was silly and scared", "With Clara arm in arm", "Clara was stubborn and wild", "Clara plays gloriously", "She plays like a cavalry rider", "The 'Papillons' she plays uncertainly and without understanding"! And so it goes in continual contradiction. We must bear in mind, however, that Clara was then only about 12 and, however artistically precocious, hardly more than a child. Her father had seen to it that she studied violin and singing and had stiff courses in theory and composition. But it was only after she had been in Paris in Wieck's company and known Chopin, Mendelssohn, Kalkbrenner, Herz and other great personages of the day that she matured into a young woman who, as Robert said, "could give orders like a Leonore". 20

For his part Schumann was composing industriously. It is necessary to bear in mind that his early work, which comprises some of his greatest, is almost exclusively for the piano. Songs form his second creative stage, then chamber, then orchestral music. To be sure, choral works, an opera and miscellaneous creations sometimes cut athwart the other categories. But his works can be easily arranged in their respective classifications. The "Papillons" is probably the first masterpiece which achieved what might be called universality. Doubtless Schumann would have been grieved that anyone should think of the fantastic little dance movements and mood pictures which constitute the set without appreciating their relationship to Jean Paul and his "Flegeljahre". But the whirligig of time has quite reversed the position of Schumann's enamoring miniatures and the faded romantic work which inspired them. Today we remember the "Flegeljahre" chiefly because the "Papillons", after a fashion, recalls it to our attention. But it would be erroneous to imagine that Jean Paul exclusively, accounts for those captivating musical fancies that we meet in this Op. 2—the clock which strikes six at the close, indicating that the imaginary throng of revelers is dispersing; the chord which dissolves, bit by bit, till only a single note remains; the "Grandfathers' March", typifying the old fogies and Philistines generally (an ancient tune of folk character, which Bach had introduced into his "Peasant Cantata" many years earlier). Not without reason could Schumann claim "that Bach and Jean Paul exercised the greatest influence on me in my early days". 21

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Let us at this point enumerate a few of the men and women who were gradually coming into Schumann's orbit, who became, more or less, fixtures in his circle, or else grazed its circumference and went their different ways. Among one of the first names we encounter are those of Henriette Voigt, a lady whom Robert was presently to call "his A flat soul", and Ernestine von Fricken, from the town of Asch, just across the Czech border. Ernestine was a lively and coquettish young person, an adopted illegitimate child, who fascinated Robert, to whom she briefly became engaged, and who passed out of his life as breezily as she had come into it. But if Ernestine was hardly more than a butterfly Robert nevertheless immortalized her. She is the Estrella of the "Carnival" for one thing; and, for another, it was on her account that he utilized in a diversity of ways the musical motto embodied in the letters of her home town, Asch. These "Sphinxes" as the composer called the series of long-held notes (A flat, C, B natural, E flat, C, B, and A, E flat, C and B) are combinations which constitute the basis of numerous pieces in the "Carnival". They are not only letters which form the name of "Asch" but are also common to that of "Schumann". Robert was plainly indulging in some more of his little romantic whimsies, mystifications or epigrams!

Other names we must mention—irrespective of chronology—include Ludwig Schunke, an uncommonly sympathetic young pianist, who succumbed early to consumption; Carl Banck, Julius Knorr, A. W. F. Zuccalmaglio, Felix Mendelssohn, Frédéric Francois Chopin, Hector Berlioz, Franz Liszt, Richard Wagner, Ferdinand Hiller, Robert Franz. The list might run on indefinitely! 22

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These individuals were, for the most part, Davidsbündler. Let us briefly explain: The "League of the Davidites" was an imaginary company, a creation of Schumann's fancy, composed of many of his friends who appeared to think as he did and were moved by fresh musical and poetic impulses. Their sworn duty was to war on those stodgy traditionalists who harbored principles which impeded artistic progress. Imaginary apostles of the biblical David, the giant killer, they were sworn to smite the Philistines of music, defend and uphold novel, adventurous and worthy trends, publicize or advance indubitable merit and, each after his own fashion, promote the vital and the soundly revolutionary. Schumann enhanced the play-acting spirit of the movement by investing various members of the fraternity with fanciful names. He himself, in true Jean Paul spirit, gave distinctive labels to the opposing aspects of his own creative soul. Thus his fiery, soaring, active personality he called "Florestan"; the tender, dreamy, passive part of his nature he identified as "Eusebius". When, as sometimes happened, these two irrepressible Davidites threatened to get out of hand, there was called in a moderator to re-establish sanity and balance—one Master Raro, whose model in real life seems to have been Friedrich Wieck. The cast of characters further included "Chiara", "Chiarina" and "Zilia"—otherwise Clara Wieck; "Felix Meritis", a thin disguise for Felix Mendelssohn; "Julius", in actuality Knorr; "Serpentinus", Carl Banck; "Eleanore", Henriette Voigt; "St. Diamond", Zuccalmaglio, and so on for quantity!

As a mouthpiece for his idealistic band Schumann founded, in April 1834, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*—a 23 periodical which endured for over a century. Part of the time he was its acting editor and in any case certain of its most penetrating and prophetic criticisms were his own contributions. Possibly the most famous of these was the jubilant salutation of Chopin's early Variations on Mozart's "La ci darem". This is the article entitled "An Opus 2", which begins with the excited entrance of "Florestan" shouting to his fellow Davidites those words that have become something like a household expression: "Hats off, gentlemen, a genius!" The other is that greeting to the youthful Brahms, a kind of visionary glorification entitled "New Paths", written for the *Neue Zeitschrift* almost on the threshold of Schumann's last illness and including that pathetic cry: "How I should like to be at the side of the young eagle in his flight over the world!"

A stronghold of conservatism such as Leipzig was not the most fertile ground for a journal like the *Zeitschrift*. More than once Schumann thought very seriously of transferring it to Vienna, which had had such resplendent musical associations and promised much. But when he went there and considered the prospects his heart sank. What chance had such a paper in a city where the iron hand of Metternich unmercifully crushed the life out of every vestige of liberalism and progress? Still, Schumann's various trips to Vienna were not wholly unproductive. The city provided the inspiration for one of his most treasurable piano works, the buoyant "Faschingschwank aus Wien". In the first movement of this Robert gave his sly humor and spirit of mockery momentary play by incorporating into the texture of the exuberant music a phrase from the "Marseillaise", which Metternich's henchmen had sternly forbidden in the Austrian Empire. Then, too, in Vienna he made the acquaintance of Schubert's brother, Ferdinand, in whose home countless musical treasures were gathering dust. One of those which he was able to rescue from oblivion was Schubert's great C major Symphony, which he dispatched to 24 Mendelssohn in Leipzig, who in turn conducted it at a concert of the Gewandhaus.

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But we are anticipating! What should concern us now is the courtship of Clara by Robert which, though it ended happily, was actually a long martyrdom for both and in the best traditions of romantic melodrama. To be sure it left a deep imprint on Schumann's creative fancy and for this, if for no other reason, the soul struggle was a cloud lined with shining silver. Almost all the piano works of the composer's early period—in some ways the most yeasty and influential music he gave the world—are in one way or another the fruits of his love.

Clara was nine years younger than her future husband. Their first relationship was, as he had remarked, a thoroughgoing brother and sister one. Robert always admired the pianistic talents of Wieck's daughter though he never hesitated to criticise defects that came to his attention. But there was hardly a serious love angle to the familiarity. It had been different with the shallow but provocative Ernestine von Fricken, who for some time made her home at the Wieck residence as a piano pupil, and applied her coquetries so successfully to Robert's susceptible heart that before a year was out he had bought her an engagement ring.

Clara, though she made no complaints, doubtless suspected with her feminine intuition how matters were shaping themselves. At one time Schumann's mother had said to her: "Some day you must marry my Robert". Clara never forgot the remark which seemed to be dictated by a kind of presentiment. Somewhat later he told Clara that she was "his oldest love"; and he added: "Ernestine had to come on the scene the better to unite us". But at this stage Clara's father gave her little time for brooding even if she had been disposed to indulge in any. He worked her hard, took her on concert tours, culminating in the one to Paris. When she returned home from one of the longest of these absences, Robert was the first caller at the Wiecks'. What impressed her most was what she 25 considered Robert's coolness; he gave her "hardly so much as a passing greeting", she later complained to a woman friend. Actually, it was shyness at his sudden realization that Clara was no longer a child but a lovely girl which struck him dumb.

Not till she had gone off on another tour was he a little more explicit. In a letter he wrote her from Zwickau he said: "Through all the joys and heavenly glories of autumn there gazes out an angel's face, a perfect likeness of a certain Clara whom I well know"; and he ended with "you know how dear you are to me". Even at that there was no question on either side of outspoken love. There was much music-making to absorb the pair, and musical friends were thronging Leipzig. Mendelssohn arrived and the Davidsbündler jubilated at his coming. Chopin, whom Clara had already met in Paris, was steered by Mendelssohn directly to the Wieck home, where Clara was made to play something of Schumann's—in this case the F sharp minor Sonata—and then some Chopin Etudes and a concerto movement. Chopin in his turn performed some of his Nocturnes. The fanciful Robert wrote: "Chopin has been here. Florestan rushed upon him. I saw them arm in arm, floating rather than walking—Eusebius"!

Then, one November night, on the eve of another of Clara's concert trips with her father, Robert called to say farewell for some weeks. At the foot of the stairs down which she lighted him he turned and impulsively took her in his arms. The lightning had struck. "When you gave me the first kiss", Clara wrote later, "a faintness came over me; everything went black before my eyes; I could scarcely hold the light which was to show you the way". He went over to Zwickau to hear her. She kissed him again and during the recital he sat in the audience thinking: "There she sits, dainty and lovable in her blue dress, loved and applauded by all, and yet she is mine alone. She knows I am here but must pretend to be unaware of me. You cannot give me so much as one look, you, Clara, in your blue dress!"

For a short time they kept their secret, but Wieck was not long in ferreting out the truth. And now began a conflict which might easily have wrecked the happiness, not to say the lives, of any two sensitive young people less determined and fundamentally hard-headed than this pair. For Robert things were complicated at the outset by the death of his mother, following shortly that of his brother, Julius, and his sister-in-law, Rosalie. The sadistic hate and the almost psychopathic villainy with which Wieck now over a space of years persecuted his daughter and her beloved have been variously explained. It has been claimed—perhaps not wholly without reason—that he was fully aware of the malady which lurked in the Schumann family. Instability and morbid depression had assailed Robert's sensitive spirit as early as 1833 and he became afflicted with a fear of insanity which was to grow on him and, in the end, to destroy him. Moreover, Wieck, though he prized Schumann's creative gift highly, questioned the solidity of his material position and the brightness of his prospects. But not even these considerations could really justify such elaborate meanness and robustious fury. There was literally nothing at which he would stop. He threatened at one stage to shoot Robert if ever he crossed the Wieck threshold. He forbade all correspondence between the two lovers. He intrigued against the pair ceaselessly, intercepted letters, lied, conspired. More than once Schumann was driven to desperation by Clara's long periods of apparent silence. Wieck encouraged Carl Banck to visit his house, then circulated rumors that his daughter had fallen in love with that friend of Robert's. On one of her visits to Vienna with her father poor Clara, wishing to write to Robert but fearing that the removal of an inkstand for a few minutes might arouse Wieck's suspicions, found it necessary to tiptoe endlessly from one room to another in order to dip her pen. Her faithful maid, Nanny, abetted her in all her ruses and when, in Leipzig, Clara exchanged a few hurried words with Robert on a dark street corner Nanny stood guard to make sure the coast was clear. 26

Clara, planning another concert trip to Paris where a smashing artistic success might bring her independence, was horrified to learn that her father washed his hands of the whole scheme and bade her go alone, taking care of all the complicated arrangements of concertizing as best she could. It was a harrowing experience, for the first thing she did was almost to succumb to the wiles of an impostor in Stuttgart. Then, when she reached Paris (her French, incidentally, was very imperfect), she learned to her dismay that all of her more influential friends and colleagues—Mendelssohn, Chopin, Liszt, Paganini among them—were not there as she had expected. Having inherited not a little of her father's obstinacy Clara stuck it out and, without conquering the French capital, broadened her experience in many ways, even to the extent of learning to cook, and cementing new and valuable friendships, such as one with the singer, Pauline Garcia, which was to endure for a lifetime. 27

Despite the machinations of Wieck Clara, back in Germany, found a means of making her feelings known to Robert. A devoted friend, Ernst Adolf Becker, suggested that she perform at a Leipzig concert one of Robert's works. She chose the "Symphonic Studies" (the theme of which the composer had obtained from the Baron von Fricken, the adoptive father of Ernestine). Wieck approved. Tyrant as he was he still kept a soft spot in his heart for Schumann's music. The composer came to the hall, sat inconspicuously at the rear, listened and—knew! In a flash he understood that when she had lately returned him a package of his letters un-opened she had been acting under duress.

They still had much to bear, but greatly as it revolted them they realized that the only solution of their difficulties lay in a legal decision. To law, accordingly, they went. Bit by bit Wieck's case disintegrated. With the help of a friendly advocate Robert was able to show that his means were ample to support a family. Then Wieck played what he believed would be his trump card. He maintained that Schumann was a drunkard! Instantly Robert's friends rallied to his support, Mendelssohn even declaring himself ready to testify in court that the accusation was outrageously false. On August 12, 1840, the decision was handed down in favor of the sorely tried couple and their marriage received judicial sanction. 28

On Sept. 5, she gave a concert in Weimar, "my last as Clara Wieck". One week later (and a day before Clara's twenty-first birthday), they were married at Schönefeld, a tiny suburb of Leipzig. On the previous evening Robert had brought her a bridal offering richer than fine gold—the song cycle, "Myrthen", inclosing such deathless blooms as "Die Lotosblume", "Der Nussbaum", "Du bist wie eine Blume", "Widmung". And when they returned from church next morning Clara wrote in her diary: "A period of my life is now closed.... Now a new life is beginning, a beautiful life, a life in him whom I love above all, above myself. But grave duties rest with me, too...".

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The period through which we have passed witnessed the birth of many of Schumann's greatest piano compositions—the "Davidsbündler Tänze", the "Carnival", the F sharp minor Sonata, the "Kinderscenen", the "Symphonic Studies", the "Kreisleriana", the C major Fantasie, the "Fantasiestücke"—things which along with others scarcely less great, were to become what might be called daily bread of pianists. His circle of musical friends was steadily widening. Those he esteemed most highly, perhaps, were Mendelssohn and Chopin. Mendelssohn was to both Robert and Clara nothing less than a god. The strange thing about this friendship is that, much as the Schumanns worshipped Mendelssohn's music, Mendelssohn, to the end of his days, had virtually nothing to say on the subject of Schumann's. No doubt its novelty, its bold fantasy, its unprecedented imaginative qualities were in a measure alien to Mendelssohn's ideals of formal logic, clarity, order. It was not in his artistic nature to enjoy the work of a composer who, like Schumann, "dreamed with the pedal down". By the same token it was the fluency, technical ease and polished workmanship in Mendelssohn's scores 29

which Robert held in such envious admiration. Yet with all his skill it is certain that Mendelssohn could never, for one thing, have painted so unapproachable a portrait in tones of his friend Chopin as Schumann achieved in one of the most extraordinary pages of the "Carnival".

Liszt was another master with whom Schumann's relations were, to put it mildly, singular and paradoxical. For a long time both Robert and Clara were captivated by Liszt's phenomenal virtuosity and amazing musicianship. Liszt preached Schumann's greatness both in word and deed. He played his works inimitably and with an originality that brought to light beauties which Schumann, by his own admission, did not even suspect in his own creations. When Clara first played Liszt the "Carnival" he exclaimed that it was one of the greatest pieces of music he knew, vastly to Clara's delight. Robert impulsively dedicated to Liszt the C major Fantasy (in later years Clara removed the dedication) but as time went on a coolness developed between the two masters, which led to at least one highly embarrassing scene when, on a certain occasion, Liszt, possibly in a spirit of irony, praised the arch-vulgarian, Meyerbeer, at the expense of the recently deceased Mendelssohn. Schumann left the room, fiercely slamming the door behind him. The breach was eventually healed and Liszt championed Schumann quite as he had done earlier. But the friendship had been troubled and, as Schumann's mental condition worsened, the old relation was never quite restored. Clara, who developed into a good hater in the years of her widowhood, came to harbor an implacable enmity for Robert's one time friend.

Yet in the early days of their married life things were on the whole, ideal. Robert aspired to deepen Clara's musical understanding and the pair undertook a systematic study of Bach's Well Tempered Clavier, he "pointing out the places where the fugue subject reappears" and giving her an insight into technical mysteries which she had hitherto lacked. He himself was inspired by his new found happiness to a perfect deluge of songs—master lyrics which rank with those of Schubert as among the greatest treasures of song literature. The year 1840 was Schumann's "song year". Even before they were married Robert delighted his prospective bride with the information: "Since yesterday morning I have written nearly 27 pages of music, of which I can tell you no more than that I laughed and cried for joy of it.... All this music nearly kills me now, it could drown me completely. Oh, Clara, what bliss to write songs! Too long have I been a stranger to it". And a little later: "I have again composed so much that it sometimes seems quite uncanny. Oh, I can't help it, I should like to sing myself to death like a nightingale. Twelve Eichendorff songs! But I have already forgotten them and begun something new"! So it runs on, more extravagantly in letter after letter, as he enriches the world quite effortlessly with the "Lieder und Gesänge", Op. 27, the Chamisso songs, Op. 31, the "Liederreihe", Op. 35, the Eichendorff "Liederkreis", Op. 39, the wonderfully psychological "Frauenliebe und Leben" cycle, the incomparable "Dichterliebe", the Eichendorff and Heine "Romanzen und Balladen", and so on—a lyric inundation, seemingly without end. And just because Schumann had developed in his piano works such an individuality of style, and such new phases of keyboard technic the accompaniments he supplied for many of these Lieder made the songs artistic creations of an entirely unprecedented order.

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Robert and Clara found out before long, no doubt, that married people sometimes get in one another's way. For instance, Robert needed hours and sometimes days and weeks of quiet for his creative work. On such occasions Clara had to put a stop to her practising. The two realized that they were rather more hampered than was agreeable and Robert felt keenly how needful it is for an artist appearing in public to keep up his technical practice. Nevertheless she did manage somehow to get in her necessary hours of practice. Her husband found that "as she lives in nothing but good music her playing is now certainly the wholesomer and also more delicate and intelligent than it was before. But sometimes she has not the necessary time to bring mechanical sureness to the point of infallibility and that is my fault and cannot be helped.... Well, that is the way of artist marriages—one cannot have everything at once."

The Schumanns would have been glad to see Robert occupied with some regular work outside his compositions and his writings for the *Neue Zeitschrift*. Clara felt that her husband ought to be occupying an important conductor position. She would like to have seen him in such a post at the Leipzig Gewandhaus concerts, which his friend Mendelssohn had raised to such a level of distinction. "Don't be too ambitious for me", gently chided Robert, who realized that he was not cut out for a conductor. Yet this ambition was one of Clara's tragic failings. We have to thank it for Schumann's later misfortunes when he let himself be stampeded into accepting a batonist's post at Düsseldorf which probably accelerated his final breakdown. "I wish no better place for myself than a pianoforte and you near me", he had said not long after they were married. But Clara was to be incorrigible. She was one of those typical ambitious wives who drive their husbands into careers for which they know themselves to be totally unfitted. Yet the greater the inroads made by Robert's deep-seated malady on his nervous system the more incapable he seemed of resisting Clara's urging.

What promised to be a solid and permanent position for Schumann materialized in the spring of 1843 when Mendelssohn founded the Leipzig Conservatory. Robert was given charge of the classes in piano playing; and he taught private composition. His colleagues were men like the theorist Hauptmann, the violinist, Ferdinand David, Moscheles, Plaidy, Richter, Klengel and others of distinguished standing. But it does not appear that Schumann's actual teaching can have amounted to much. For he was growing more and more uncommunicative and the fitness as a pedagogue of such a silent teacher may be doubted. In 1844 his duties at the Conservatory were interrupted for four months when he accompanied Clara on a concert tour to Russia and finally ceased in the autumn when he suffered a severe nervous breakdown which led to his removal to Dresden. Some months earlier he had renounced the editorship of the *Zeitschrift*. To his friend, Verhulst, he wrote in June, 1844: "I have given up the paper for this year and hardly think I shall ever resume it. I should like to live entirely for composition". Shortly afterwards the *Zeitschrift* passed into the hands of Liszt's friend, Franz Brendel.

Schumann was now definitely a sick man. Clara wrote in her diary that she feared he would not survive the journey to the Harz mountains and to Dresden which they had planned in the hope of restoring him; "Robert did not sleep a single night, his imagination painted the most terrible pictures, in the early morning I generally found

him bathed in tears, he gave himself up completely". The change of scene and society helped him, however, and they resolved to settle permanently in Dresden, whither they moved in the last days of 1844.

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A period of fertile productivity lay behind him. If 1840 was Robert's "song year", 1841 was his "symphony year" and 1842 his "chamber music year", though this should not be taken as meaning that his creations at this time were limited to a few works in these genres exclusively. First of all came the B flat Symphony—the "Spring" Symphony—which Schumann wrote down with a steel pen he had found in Vienna in the Währinger Cemetery, on Beethoven's grave. The "Spring Symphony", though it had its detractors, put Schumann on the map, so to speak, more almost than anything else he had written heretofore. Immediately after the symphony came two other large-scale works—the so-called "Overture, Scherzo and Finale" (which modern conductors have singularly neglected) and a Phantasie in A minor, for orchestra and piano, which was to become the first movement of the glorious Piano Concerto—for not a few musicians the greatest of its kind in existence! 33

On the heels of this soaring masterpiece Schumann embarked on another symphony. "As yet I have heard nothing about it", wrote Clara in her diary, "but from Robert's way of going on and the D minor sounding wildly in the distance, I know that another work is being created in the depth of his soul". Less than four months later Robert handed his wife as a birthday gift the score of the D minor Symphony. It was not to see the light of publicity for some time, however. Before Schumann had put the finishing touches on it his thoughts began to be occupied with the subject of "Paradise and the Peri", from Thomas Moore's "Lalla Rookh", and he opined that "perhaps something fine can be made out of it for music". He was right, though the beautiful oratorio—one of the finest yet (in America) least familiar of Schumann's major works—was not completed for nearly two years more. When it finally appeared the composer described it as "an oratorio for cheerful people, not for the place of prayer".

In the spring of 1842 Robert and Clara had been occupied with the study of the string quartets of Haydn and Mozart. The following October he wrote to the publisher, Haertel: "During the summer months I worked with great zeal at three quartets.... We played them several times at David's and they seemed to please players and listeners alike, in particular Mendelssohn...." They are the Quartets in A minor, F major and A major, Op. 41. For one thing, they contain some of the most unusual effects of syncopated rhythm to be found in the entire range of Schumann's compositions. On the heels of the quartets came the most popular sample of Schumann's chamber music, the E flat Piano Quintet, Op. 44, the first movement of which is perhaps as fine a thing as its creator ever achieved. Other chamber works followed—the E flat Piano Quartet, Op. 47, the so-called Phantasiestücke, for piano, violin and cello, Op. 88, none of them, however, rising above the level of the Quintet.

34



Robert and Clara Schumann a few years after their marriage.



The Schumann children, Ludwig, Maria, Felix, Elsie, Ferdinand, Eugenie, from a photograph taken in 1854.

The first of the Schumann children, Marie and Elise, were born in 1841 and 1843, respectively. The succeeding ones were Julie, Emil, Ludwig, Ferdinand, Eugenie and Felix. Alone, Marie and Eugenie lived to what one can call a ripe old age. The hereditary Schumann illness passed on to another generation.

35

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Dresden promised to be a pleasant home for the Schumanns and their growing family. The town was a center of art and literature. Painters, sculptors, architects, writers, musicians assembled there, lured by an art-loving Court. Among the prominent musical figures of the town were Ferdinand Hiller, Karl Gottlieb Reissiger and Richard Wagner. Reissiger was, of course, a mediocrity of the sorriest kind. Hiller, on the other hand, was a pupil of Hummel and a friend of Berlioz, Liszt and Mendelssohn and the Schumanns were thoroughly at home in his company. Wagner was a horse of another color! It is everlastingly to be regretted that temperamental differences kept him and Schumann from amalgamating, for their liberal artistic slants and their incorruptible idealism should have made them fellow fighters in the cause of musical progress. Unfortunately the pair seemed almost to bristle at each other's approach. Had Wagner matured in his art as early as Schumann in his, or could they have known one another in the fine frenzy of Schumann's early *Davidsbündler* days the story might have been of an inspiring artistic relationship.

Wagner had been a contributor to Schumann's *Zeitschrift* and had entertained a flattering idea of some of Robert's earlier music. Rightly enough, he noted in it "much ferment but also much originality". He continued to like "Paradise and the Peri" and the Piano Quintet and, afterwards, during his Swiss exile, he went so far as to entreat Clara to play at one of her Zurich concerts the "Symphonic Studies". But thrown frequently together in Dresden the two repelled rather than attracted each other. Wagner, who talked incessantly, complained that one could get nowhere with a person who refused to open his mouth; Schumann, that one could not possibly exchange ideas with a man who never allowed one the opportunity to say a word. Moreover, Wagner's far-darting and flamboyant ideas were unintelligible to poor Schumann and even frightened him. And so the two seemed everlastingly at cross purposes.

36

Wagner gave Schumann a score of his "Tannhäuser" as soon as it appeared in a lithographed form. Writing to Mendelssohn Robert repudiated the music as weak, forced, amateurish, deficient in melody and wanting in form. Not long afterwards he went to hear the work and took back much of what he had said, declaring that the impression created by a stage performance was very different and that, though the score did not radiate the "pure sunlight of genius" the opera, nevertheless, exercised on the hearer "a mysterious magic which held one captive". He had been deeply moved by much of it; and he praised the technical effects and above all the instrumentation (a thing for which Schumann himself had always been reproved). Yet in another missive he declared that Wagner could not write four consecutive bars of "correct" music, that he was, all in all, a "bad musician". From the viewpoint of his own art Robert was to a certain degree logical in his claims. But his prophetic vision and artist's conscience refused to let him reject the work outright. Nor should we judge him too severely for his conclusions.

After “Tannhäuser” he never heard a note of Wagner’s music. However he might have reacted to “Tristan” it is hardly possible that Schumann could have brought himself to dismiss Wagner as a “bad musician” if he had been spared to hear “Die Meistersinger”!

Schumann was present when Wagner read one evening to an assemblage of acquaintances his “Lohengrin” libretto. Like a number of other listeners he could not grasp just what method Wagner could employ in setting such a text to music. Furthermore he was upset that another had beat him to the subject of the swan knight, which he had half a mind to utilize for an opera himself. 37

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Ill health pursued Schumann more and more implacably during the six odd years of his Dresden sojourn. He had moments when things seemed to brighten. At other times the slightest mental effort produced sleepless nights, auricular delusions, new and terrifying symptoms which came to haunt him as others disappeared. He was morbid, irritable, had visions of “dark demons” and was assailed by “melancholy bats”.

Music sometimes helped and sometimes hindered. Nevertheless the Dresden period saw the creation of some of his greatest works—the completion in 1845, of the A minor Piano Concerto, by the addition of the Intermezzo and the Finale to the Phantasie written in 1841; the magnificent C major Symphony, with its melting Adagio, its breathless scherzo, its resplendent finale; the “Scenes from Faust”, the Overture and incidental music to Byron’s “Manfred” and the opera, “Genoveva”.

Limitations of space forbid us to consider in any detail works like the Piano Concerto, the C major Symphony and the rugged “Manfred” Overture—so different in its sombre, moody character from the romantic effusions of Schumann’s earlier day. But the opera, “Genoveva” though branded a failure contains superb music, beginning with the overture which, in its different fashion, ranks with the one to “Manfred”. The prayer of the fated Genoveva in the last act is a long *scena* comparing in its far-flung lyric line with the noblest vocal pieces Schumann ever wrote.

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Clara cared tenderly for her ailing husband and left nothing undone to comfort him. She would use all her culinary skill to make it certain that his meals would be bright spots in his often troubled days. A friend who met her returning from market in one instance inquired what she was carrying in a strange-looking packing. 38 “Something to tempt my poor husband’s appetite—mixed pickles”, she answered. They had friends in a certain Major Serre and his wife who had a country estate at a place called Maxen, near Dresden, and she took Robert there from time to time to benefit by the pleasant country surroundings. But his stay in Maxen was spoiled by the view from one of the windows of a lunatic asylum nearby. And as the years passed and his condition deteriorated the sight of an asylum brought his melancholy to an almost intolerable stage.

It was to Maxen that Clara brought him and her children when, during the revolutionary uprising in May, 1849, they found it necessary to flee from Dresden till order was restored. Pretending to take her husband for a walk she picked her way at sundown through the fields and hills surrounding the city and reached the Serre estate in the small hours of the morning, terrified by the armed mobs they continually met and the sounds of shooting in the distance. Then, without waiting to rest or refresh herself, Clara had to set out for Dresden once more to bring the children to a place of safety. Back in Maxen she restrained her feelings with difficulty when she was met by contemptuous allusions from her aristocratic hosts to “canaille” and “rabble”. “How men have to fight for a little freedom!” she confided in her diary. “When will the time come when all men will have equal justice? How is it possible that the belief can so long have been rooted among the nobles that they are of a different species from the bourgeois?”

In the fall of 1849 Schumann received a letter from Ferdinand Hiller, on the point of leaving Düsseldorf, inquiring whether he would be disposed to succeed him as Musical Director in that Rhenish town. The salary was good, the duties heavy but stimulating. Schumann reflected that Dresden had never shown itself in the least inclined to give the illustrious artist couple within its gates the faintest official recognition. Hiller’s offer seemed promising. 39 Robert started to look up information about Düsseldorf. In an old geography book he found that the town’s attractions included “three convents and a lunatic asylum”. Nevertheless, they decided in its favor.

They took a cool farewell from Dresden and arrived in Düsseldorf on Sept. 2, 1850. They were greeted with extreme cordiality, wined and dined, serenaded and threatened with the exhausting honors of dances, picnics and excursions. Until they could find a suitable house and garden they were lodged in the best (and most expensive!) hotel. The Music Committee turned itself inside out to make life pleasant for its new conductor and his illustrious artist-wife. Robert was forty, seemingly in the prime of life but actually past his best creative period, and glad that an apparently desirable opportunity was opening up to him at last.

* * *

Tragic deception! Whether or not Schumann realized it from the first, the Düsseldorf period was the beginning of the end. It quickly became obvious that Robert had no ability whatever as a conductor, none of the dominating qualities to impose his wishes on orchestras or choral masses. He could think of no better methods of correcting a defect of execution than to ask his players or singers to repeat a passage over and over, without ever making plain to them what he wanted. The performers became listless, inattentive or downright rebellious. Things grew progressively worse and the decline of musical standards in Düsseldorf became town talk. The worry and physical strain involved told sorely in Schumann’s afflicted nervous constitution. He developed an embarrassing habit of dropping his baton at rehearsals, till he hit on the scheme of fastening it to his wrist with a piece of string! “There, now it can’t fall again!”, he sheepishly told a friend who gazed at his arm in questioning wonder. His

mental ailment bit by bit robbed him of the alertness, concentration, presence of mind, “even the ability to speak audibly”. Clara, unable apparently to recognize the truth, suspected intrigues on every hand. Her blood “boiled” over the “disrespectful behaviour of some of the choir” at a rehearsal of the “St. Matthew Passion” and she developed a particular enmity against the well-meaning if uninspired conductor, Julius Tausch, who gradually took over some of Schumann’s most taxing labors. 40

Robert’s taciturnity had been growing on him for years but it finally took utterly fantastic forms. We are told that in Düsseldorf he could not say: “Ladies and gentlemen, our next rehearsal will be tomorrow at seven”, without breaking down once or twice. In another case a certain Carl Witting was commissioned to visit Schumann in order to settle a debated point about the tempi in the “Manfred” Overture. After putting his question to the composer who was smoking a cigar (Robert had been an inveterate smoker from his youth) he received for all answer only the query: “Do you smoke?” Witting said he did and waited respectfully. Schumann neither offered a cigar nor gave a reply. Two more inquiries brought only another “Do you smoke?” The persistent silence finally impelled Witting to take his leave, thinking one knows not what. Still another idiosyncrasy of Robert’s later days was to frequent a restaurant, order a glass of wine or beer and leave without attempting to pay. The proprietor was not disturbed, but simply gave Schumann what amounted to a charge account and sent the bills to Clara.

One of the first excursions Robert and Clara took after their arrival in Düsseldorf was to Cologne. Schumann was charmed by the surrounding countryside and deeply impressed by an ecclesiastical ceremony he witnessed in the Cologne Cathedral. The visit provided the inspiration for the Symphony in E flat, the so-called “Rhenish”, published as the third, actually the fourth in date of composition (if we except the 1851 revision of the earlier D minor). The resplendent work has a freshness and a youthful ardor which seem to belie the composer’s encroaching mental impairment. The climax of the symphony is its monumentally conceived fourth movement in which Schumann strove to picture the solemnity he had witnessed in that stately fane. The other movements abound in those shifted accents and other rhythmic surprises which were always a hallmark of the composer’s style. 41

One marvels at the quantity if not always at the quality of Schumann’s Düsseldorf compositions. These include overtures to Shakespeare’s “Julius Caesar”, Goethe’s “Hermann und Dorothea” and Schiller’s “Braut von Messina”; the “Pilgrimage of the Rose”, the “Peri”; a fine Cello Concerto in A minor, and a violin concerto in D minor, written for Joseph Joachim, but secreted for years in the Berlin State Library and, though once tried out by Joachim, never played or published till recent years on the plea that it might by its weakness diminish Schumann’s reputation. As a matter of fact the concerto, which is typical late Schumann, seems to have been much too severely judged by Joachim and even Clara herself.

* * *

The impossible situation in Düsseldorf could not continue. At first the Schumanns resolved to leave and settle down in Vienna. But that scheme proved impractical. The sorry conductorship came to its inevitable end. The Schumanns, much relieved, set out on a tour of Holland which had triumphal results for Clara. Back in Düsseldorf, though no longer in an official capacity, Robert on Sept. 30, 1853, was handed a card inscribed “Herr Brahms from Hamburg”. Next day he scribbled in a diary: “Visit from Brahms (a genius)”. And there began one of the most touching friendships in musical history, one that long survived the mortal Schumann and continued for the duration of Clara’s years on earth.

To Joseph Joachim, who had armed the twenty year old North German with the introduction he presented, Robert instantly wrote “in prophetic style” the words: “This is he who should come”. And only a few days later, another concerning “Johannes the true Apostle—the young eagle that has flown so suddenly and unexpectedly from the hills to Düsseldorf...” Then snatching his long unused editorial pen he began that famous essay, “New Paths”, published on Oct. 28, 1853, in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, and which definitely started Brahms on the path of glory leading to deathlessness. 42

Brahms, Joachim, Albert Dietrich, J. O. Grimm—these perhaps more than any others were the men whose friendship was the chief solace of Schumann in his now rapid decline. He still took his walks with Clara and the children. With his lips pursed as if whistling and his hands clasped behind him he was a familiar figure as he wandered in a kind of abstraction through the parks of Düsseldorf. New and alarming symptoms steadily manifested themselves. In 1854 he had “marked and painful auditory sensations”, including a maddening affliction that took the shape of hearing melodies in two conflicting keys at once. His speech was heavier and his demeanor grew more and more apathetic. With increasing hallucinations he developed a morbid enthusiasm for spiritism and table rappings. He had dreams in which the spirits of Schubert and Mendelssohn dictated musical themes to him; or else he heard angelic voices which presently changed to the howling of demons threatening him with torments. On Feb. 26, 1854, he rose in a state of terrible melancholy, begged to be sent to an asylum and began to pack up the things he wished to take with him. Clara, wishing to speak to their friend and physician, Dr. Hasenclever, left the room for a moment. Suddenly Schumann opened his bedroom door and—vanished! A few minutes later he was brought back, dripping with water. Half clad, he had gone out, thrown himself into the Rhine but was saved from drowning by some fishermen who had seen the suicidal leap. On March 4 he was taken at his own wish to the private asylum of Dr. Richarz at Endenich, near Bonn. He left in a carriage accompanied by two doctors. Clara, from whom he took only a perfunctory leave, stayed behind, crushed. Someone had handed Schumann flowers as he drove away. He gave a few of them to Dr. Hasenclever, who afterwards took them to Clara. For a while his condition seemed to improve. He worked now and then at his music, composed a few variations on the theme he claimed to have received from the spirit of Schubert and wrote a piano accompaniment for some of the Paganini Capriccios. But by 1855 all hope was abandoned and in 1856 Clara, on a concert tour in England, was informed that Robert was “irretrievably lost”. Soon a telegram summoned her to Endenich “if she still wanted to see her husband alive”. With Brahms, who for nearly two years had watched over Robert and the sorely tried Clara with unexampled devotion, she went to the sanatorium, saw Robert and believed that, though he seemed to converse with spirits, he recognized and welcomed her after the long separation. On 43

July 29, 1856, he was, in Clara's words "to be freed from his troubles; at four in the afternoon he passed gently away. His last hours were peaceful and so he passed in sleep, unnoticed—nobody was with him at the moment. I saw him half an hour later. Joachim had come from Heidelberg on receiving our telegram...."

* * *

Two days afterwards Schumann was laid to rest in the lovely Old Cemetery at Bonn. Members of the Düsseldorf "Concordia", which had serenaded the Schumanns on their arrival from Dresden six years earlier, were the pallbearers. Hiller, Joachim and Brahms walked in front, Clara, alone and unobserved, far behind—"certainly as he would have wished". Forty years later, on Whit-Sunday, 1896, she was reunited with him in the same tomb, in the presence of her surviving children and a few friends, chief of these the faithful Brahms, himself barely a year from his end.

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MOZART—Cosi fan Tutti—Overture
MOZART—Symphony No. 41 in C major ("Jupiter"), K. 551
SCHUBERT—Symphony No. 9 in C major
SCHUMANN, R.—Symphony No. 3 in E-flat major ("Rhenish")
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MOUSSORGSKY-RAVEL—Pictures at an Exhibition
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TSCHAIKOWSKY—Suite "Mozartiana"
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WAGNER—Tristan und Isolde—Excerpts (with Helen Traubel, soprano)
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DEBUSSY—Petite Suite: Ballet
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MOZART—Symphony No. 25 in G minor, K. 183
RAVEL—La Valse
RIMSKY-KORSAKOV—Capriccio Espagnol
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SIBELIUS—Symphony No. 2, in D major
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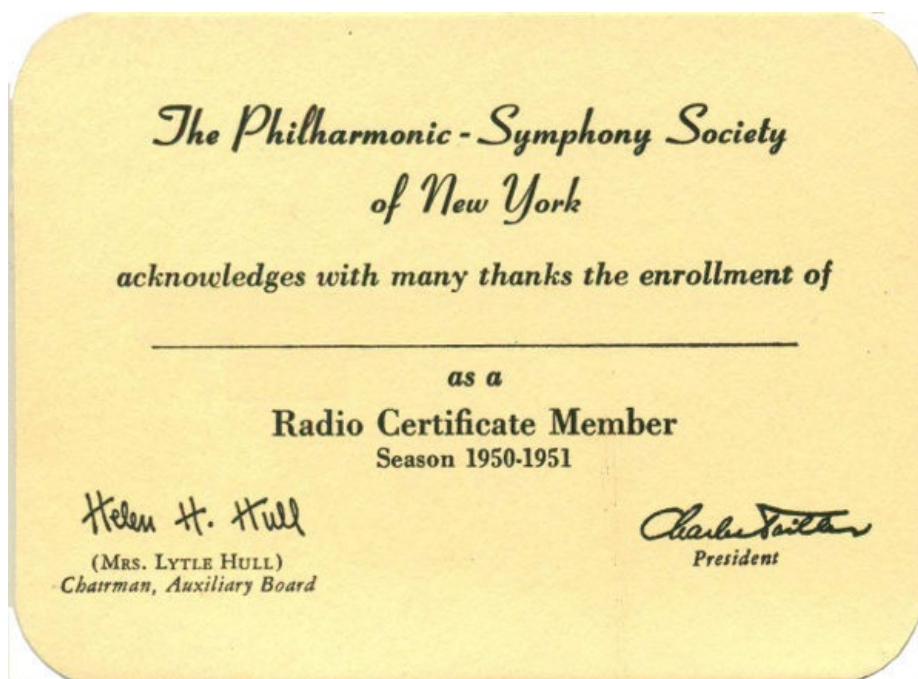
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