



Pletnev Plays Schumann

Pletnev Plays Schumann centers on two of Robert Schumann's best-loved major works, the *Études symphoniques*, Op. 13 and the *Fantasy in C major*, Op. 17. The *Albumblätter* (from *Bunte Blätter*, Op. 99) and the *Arabeske*, Op. 18, complete the disc. Mikhail Pletnev, one of today's most inspirational pianists, adopts a quasi-improvisational style that suits Schumann's arch-Romanticism to perfection, enabling him to get right under the composer's skin and bring out the intensely personal qualities of the *Fantasy*, the imaginative beauties of the short works and the vividly contrasted characters of the variations in the *Études symphoniques*. This essay by Jessica Duchen accompanies the CD.



Schumann's *Symphonic Études* have become such a favorite among pianists and listeners alike that it is easy to forget the work's startling originality and its unique place in the composer's output. It stretches the pianist's technique — the "étude" element — while also stretching the instrument and its range of sonority and color in ways that far surpass Schumann's earlier effort in variation form (his Op. 1 "Abegg" Variations) — the "symphonic" element, suggesting the transformation of a solo piano into a full orchestra. Although the influence of Schumann's idol, Beethoven, makes a powerful contribution, no keyboard work before had explicitly set out to bring these elements together.

Its relatively strict form — a theme and variations crowned by a celebratory finale — is not typical of Schumann, much of whose piano music is intimately bound up with literary associations from the writings of E. T. A. Hoffmann and Jean Paul. The contrasting alter-egos Schumann had invented for himself, representing opposing forces in his music — the dreamily introvert "Eusebius" and the tumultuously extrovert "Florestan" — are nevertheless present, lurking in the piece's earlier history. Its original title, in the first edition (1837), was "Etüden im Orchestercharakter für Pianoforte von Florestan und Eusebius", and the character of each variation can easily be linked to these two distinct personalities. The work is tied in other ways, too, to Schumann's emotional life, since the theme itself was apparently written by the father of Ernestine von Fricken, who was briefly Schumann's fiancée.

The work continued to haunt Schumann long after its publication, and in 1852 he reworked it into a second, more concise version under a new title, *Études en formes de variations*: this has become the more frequently performed and recorded of its two incarnations. To complicate matters still further, the 1834 manuscript also includes five variations which Schumann eventually decided to excise from the piece; they were not published until 1873. Inevitably a dilemma for pianists exists over whether or not to include those "extra" variations. For this recording Mikhail Pletnev has elected to add two of them, Nos. 5 and 1, placing them after Variation VII in place of Variation VIII, a sequence that he finds musically particularly convincing.

"Yesterday I received your wonderful *Fantasy*," wrote Clara Wieck to Robert Schumann on 23 May 1839. "Today I am still half ill with rapture." Few works by even such an arch-Romantic as Schumann are capable of eliciting so intense an emotional impact as the

Op.17 *Fantasy*. Written at the time when Clara's father, Friedrich Wieck, was determined to keep his daughter — who already had a flourishing career as a teen-aged piano prodigy — away from the unstable, erratic composer who was in love with her, it represented a direct form of communication of Schumann's passion for Clara. Forbidden to see her, he could assure her of his feelings only through music. The couple eventually married on 12 September 1840, the day before Clara's 21st birthday.

The *Fantasy* is packed with references both musical and extra-musical. Schumann envisaged this major three-movement creation as a tribute to Beethoven — whose two Op. 27 sonatas, marked "quasi una fantasia", are, along with Schubert's "*Wanderer*" *Fantasy*, its most obvious predecessors. There is a direct quotation from Beethoven at the end of the first movement, which returns at the end of the work - appropriately enough, a melody from the song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte* ("To the distant beloved"). Schumann had also created a musical "cipher" to stand for Clara herself - the melody of five falling stepwise notes that opens the *Fantasy* — which he embedded in countless works.

Turning traditional sonata form virtually inside out, Schumann's *Fantasy* parts company with earlier models. The rhapsodic opening movement, marked "to be played with real imagination and passion" ("Durchaus phantastisch und leidenschaftlich vorzutragen"), is full of tempo shifts, fragmentations, and silences that create an entirely personal world of emotions. The second movement, in ternary form, is a triumphant march. Coming last, the slow movement is a love song, among the most beautiful that Schumann ever created (and there were many), drawing the work to a rapt, ecstatic conclusion.

The five *Albumblätter* (*Album Leaves*) form part of a series of short pieces entitled *Bunte Blätter*, published as Schumann's Op. 99. The volume brings together a number of pieces for piano that Schumann composed at different times: of the *Albumblätter*, the first dates from 1841, Nos. 2 and 5 from 1838 and No. 3 from 1836, and No. 4 from 1839. The first piece, a simple, somber work that bears a strong resemblance to the theme of the *Symphonic Études*, was used by both Clara Schumann and the Schumanns' devoted young disciple Johannes Brahms as the basis for sets of variations — Brahms wrote his Op. 9 set as a tribute and birthday gift to Schumann while the older composer was confined to the mental hospital at Eindhoven near Bonn, where he later died. The second piece is a wild, witch-like snippet originally named "Fata Morgana"; and the waltz-like character of the third betrays its origin as part of *Carnaval*, in which Schumann decided ultimately not to include it. No. 4 originally carried the title "Jugendschmerz" — the pain of youth — something Schumann knew a thing or two about; and the last piece has a wistful, songlike character that brings to mind Schumann's *Kinderszenen* and many of his *Lieder*.

Schumann's *Arabesque* is one of his finest examples of "Hausmusik" — pieces intended to be performed in the home. It dates, like the *Fantasy* and *Kreisleriana*, from 1838, but in place of the tempestuous emotions evident in those larger and more virtuosic works, it inhabits a calm, more domesticated world. Schumann appears to have been the first composer to use "arabesque" as a title — it was later taken up by Debussy, among others — and the music amply mirrors the word's suggestion of visual ornamentation: its main theme is characteristically decorated by grace notes and its texture is richly layered. The gracious, steadily rhythmic opening theme is contrasted with a more playful episode before returning via a passage of exceptional exploratory beauty. But perhaps the most enthralling moment is an extraordinary coda that lifts this otherwise rather cozy piece into those visionary, otherworldly realms in which Schumann was habitually at his finest.

By Jessica Duchon. ©2004 Deutsche Grammophon. Reproduced on iClassics.com by permission.