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An Evening of Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

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*** program notes ***

Schumann's *Symphonische Etüden* (Symphonic Etudes) and its offspring pieces *Die Unvollendete Variation aus dem Autograph* (Unfinished variation from the autograph) and *Fünf Posthume Symphonische Etüden* (Five Posthumous Symphonic Etudes) have a complicated genesis laden with backstory, biography, intrigue, and intimate intertextual innuendoes intended for the cognoscenti within Schumann's set of friends, colleagues, and lovers.

During his early period of piano study with Frederick Wieck, Schumann fell in love with fellow student Ernestine von Fricken. Ernestine's father, Baron Ignaz von Fricken, was an amateur flautist and composer, and he approved of their subsequent wedding engagement. Baron von Fricken requested Schumann's help in developing his own set of variations on an original theme for solo flute; Schumann acquiesced in his role as compositional mentor and future son-in-law, and he simultaneously began composing a series of variations for piano solo based on von Fricken's theme. (Schumann never credited the Baron as the author of the theme; in only one edition of the *Symphonische Etudes* was the theme attributed to an author other than Schumann, and that author was described merely as a 'deceased amateur.') During a fateful visit to the von Fricken estate, Schumann learned from the domestic staff that Ernestine was not Baron von Fricken's daughter but was instead the adopted illegitimate daughter of his sister-in-law. Because Ernestine's birth status would prevent her eventual inheritance of her father's wealth, Schumann ended the engagement in the summer of 1835; he kept Baron von Fricken's theme. Ernestine died of typhoid in 1844 and was supposedly never fully aware of all of the reasons for her broken engagement.

Ernestine von Fricken was the inspiration for Schumann's piano cycle *Carnaval* as well as his *Symphonische Etudes*. Schumann's piano cycles (for lack of a better term for this instrumental genre) most closely resemble the vocal song cycle with its individual movement built around related poetic texts and united by musical motifs. Although the fluid structure of the song cycle was still in its infancy at this time, Schumann's piano collections were close in spirit and design to the intimacy and musical gestures found within that budding vocal genre. Schumann's piano cycles were sets of short pieces based upon brief musical cells, which carried some kind of extra-musical significance. (The basic coded thematic cell that motivates the pieces in *Carnaval* is a typically Schumannesque conflation of the name of Ernestine's hometown and a few letters from the composer's name: A-S-C-H). The pieces were often collected under the pretext of a masked ball; each miniature might represent the masqueraders as a portrait, pastiche, or parody of a real or imaginary character through whose voice Schumann might speak (much like the artifice of Schumann's twinned conflicting selves Eusebius and Florestan). Most of these guests were members of Schumann's social circle, the *Davidsbündler* (Band of David)—a collection of friends and colleagues mingled with imaginary characters and joined together to fight as 'Davids' against musical 'Philistines'. The piano cycles tended to conclude with the 'Grossvater' dance—a somewhat heraldic folk tune that Schumann assigned to the *Davidsbündler* to signify not only musical and social triumph, but also the midnight conclusion of the masked ball. Schumann's first version of the *Symphonische Etudes* was called *Twelve Davidsbündler Etudes*; this title implied that the work would continue in the masked ball spirit of the piano cycles *Carnaval* and *Davidsbündlertänze*. (Schumann had recently encountered the new piano etudes of Frédéric

Chopin. Chopin was the first composer to transform the utilitarian piano technical exercise into legitimate concert music; Schumann was most likely eager to keep up with what he sensed might be a popular genre). Schumann later adjusted a few elements of the work and changed its title to *Etudes in Orchestral Character by Florestan and Eusebius*; the inclusion of his authorial alter egos is further evidence that Schumann conceived this work as a piano cycle. (Florestan and Eusebius appear repeatedly in both Schumann's piano works and critical prose). Schumann's publisher was having none of this; he insisted that Schumann publish the work in 1837 under his own name with the simpler title *Twelve Etudes Symphoniques*.

Schumann was a constant reviser and ruthless editor of his own works. In 1852, he revised and re-titled the work *Etudes en forme de Variations*, thereby erasing any hints of the potential fantasy of the piano cycle and instead recasting this unique hybrid work as both virtuoso piano music and classical variation. (Schumann most likely wanted to align this work with the sober Bach-like variation tradition that had been continued and recently revived by his colleague Felix Mendelssohn in his *Variations Serieuses* of 1841). Schumann omitted various etudes and re-wrote the Finale as a tribute to the work's dedicatee, the British composer and pianist William Sterndale Bennett. (Sterndale Bennett's son insisted that Schumann's interest in the young British composer went beyond mentorship and professional encouragement into the realm of the obsessively romantic). While the musical embedding so far in the work consisted of the use of Baron von Fricken's theme and the prominent placement of the descending five-note 'Clara motive' heard in the lyric ninth variation, Schumann essentially ignored all of the previously-employed material and recast the Finale as a rondo-like palindromic tribute of Anglophilia to honor Sterndale Bennett. The Finale's main theme was borrowed from Heinrich Marschner's opera *Der Templar und die Jüdin*, based on the novel, *Ivanhoe*, by the Scottish author Sir Walter Scott. (*Ivanhoe* concerns itself with Saxon nobility in twelfth century England). The text, extolling Richard the Lionheart, contains phrases such as "Du stolzes England, freue dich!" (Proud England, rejoice!) and "Wer ist der Ritter hochgeehrt?" (Who is the highly-honored knight?). The character of the triumphant music is in alignment with the placement, spirit and intent of the concluding Grossvatertanz in the piano cycles.

After Schumann's death, his wife, Clara Wieck Schumann, edited all of his music for a collected works edition. She, too, altered the *Symphonic Etudes*; she changed a few notes and themes, added an introduction to a movement, and inserted previously-omitted etudes. (She re-titled the work simply *Symphonische Etüden*). However, her co-editor, Johannes Brahms, knew of the existence of extra etudes, some incomplete, which had not been included in Schumann's final edition; against Clara's wishes, he insisted and prevailed in the publication of the *Five Posthumous Variations* in 1893. The incomplete variation was published for the first time in 1984 and finally included in a new edition of Schumann's piano works published in 2010 by G. Henle Verlag. The pianist Alfred Brendel states that the omission of the posthumous variations from the work diminishes the presence of the dreamy Eusebius and concedes the work to the fiery Florestan.

Schumann's *Symphonic Etudes*, ostensibly a set of variations on a theme, behaves in ways that diverge from the traditional classical model. Schumann employs classical variation techniques, but, like the mercurial, motivically-governed miniatures of the piano cycles, each variation may also be considered as a character defined by a particular rhythmic demeanor yet still guided by the work's principal theme. Each variation becomes as much a masquerader as the characters who populate *Carnaval* and the *Davidsbündlertänze*. Schumann displaces expectations further by naming various movements not 'variation' but instead 'etude' or 'Finale.' At such moments, Schumann seems to relinquish his authorial control over the original thematic material—these alien pieces no longer speak the language of the theme and have deviated from thematic control; they break loose and introduce new characters with their own motives, ideas, and themes, tangentially clinging to the body of the work merely by a tenuous key relation. By admitting and indulging these compositional voices, Schumann creates in the *Symphonic Etudes* a crowded, multi-voiced, virtuoso piano cycle which hides behind the mask of the classic theme and variation. The ambiguities and ironies revealed in the examination of the genres of Schumann's piano cycles and themes with variations are not entirely unlike the impulses behind voices filtered through the masks of Florestan and Eusebius. Schumann takes the metaphor of his personal psychological mythology of conflicting voices within a single artist and extends it to the issue of form and genre.

— Brian Ray
Sources available upon request.

The oboe remained an essential part of the orchestra in the nineteenth century; however, there are only about 30 solo oboe works composed by the 1850s. The instrument itself was still in its Classical model, which had a much lighter and transparent sound compared with today's modern oboe. This light timbre in conjunction with the development of other instruments during this period may have contributed to the dearth of solo oboe music. The clarinet, with its darker timber and larger range, may have eclipsed the more nasal sound of the oboe. The invention of the valved horn, as confirmed by the Royal Prussian Patent Office on 12 April 1818, allowed hornists to play in all keys with a complete range of chromatic notes.

As the piano became the household orchestra in the nineteenth century, composers focused on *Hausmusik* (house music or chamber music), compositions of an intimate nature for a small number of performers. After a long hiatus of composing in general, Schumann began a larger output of *Hausmusik* compositions in 1849. The three works presented this evening's performance exhibit Schumann's compositional techniques, especially his ability to write contrapuntally and expressively for both instruments. Schumann's non-linear musical development begins with a cell of three or four notes, which spirals into a complete movement, a technique he learned through his studies of Bach and Beethoven.

Originally conceived for oboe, the *Drei Romanzen, Op. 94* (Three Romances) was completed in December 1849. Although the publisher asked him to change to instrumentation on the title page to the clarinet, Schumann refused; he did later consent to add "or violin or clarinet" on the title page in order to sell more copies. These three pieces, in binary and ternary forms, comprise a group akin to a Lieder cycle. The first Romance features Schumann's use of cryptographic writing; the coded message found in the first three notes, F-A-E, refers to "*Frei aber einsame*" (Free but alone), which is found in some of his other compositions as well.

Written over four days in September 1851, the outer movements of *Sonate, Op. 105* display Schumann's organic compositional process in his expansion of a sonata form; the first movement develops out of the first theme, while the *Lebhaft* an imitative texture in the development of the movement. The middle movement is similar to his shorter pieces, like the *Romanzen*, in its narrative nature. The expressive and lyrical nature of this *Sonate* does not necessarily exploit the capabilities of the violin, but does make it adaptable to the oboe. This arrangement maintains the integrity of Schumann's lyric lines; entire phrases have been reorchestrated for the oboe range, rather than individual notes or phrase segments. While idiomatic violin techniques, such as double stops, pizzicatos, and oscillations over two strings are not doable, the piece remains very close to the original, and becomes a virtuosic work for the oboe.

The *Adagio and Allegro, Op. 70* was written in just a few days during February 1849. One of the first important works for the valved horn, this composition displays the virtuosity of the new instrument. In this work, Schumann juxtaposes his two identities: the *Adagio* portrays Eusebius (the dreamer), while the *Allegro* corresponds to Florestan (the impetuous scamp). This work has also found its way into the violin and cello repertoire, much of the time as an encore selection.

– Courtenay L. Harter
Sources available upon request.