

Robert Schumann

Symphony No. 2 in C, Opus 61

ROBERT ALEXANDER SCHUMANN WAS BORN AT ZWICKAU, SAXONY, ON JUNE 8, 1810, AND DIED AT ENDENICH, NEAR BONN, ON JULY 29, 1856. HE BEGAN WORKING ON THE SYMPHONY NO. 2 IN THE LATTER PART OF 1845 AND COMPLETED IT THE FOLLOWING YEAR. FELIX MENDELSSOHN CONDUCTED THE FIRST PERFORMANCE ON NOVEMBER 5, 1846, AT THE GEWANDHAUS IN LEIPZIG.

THE SYMPHONY IS SCORED FOR TWO EACH OF FLUTES, OBOES, CLARINETS, AND BASSOONS, TWO HORNS, TWO TRUMPETS, THREE TROMBONES, TIMPANI, AND STRINGS.

“For several days, there has been much trumpeting and drumming within me (trumpet in C). I don’t know what will come of it.” What came of the inner tumult that Robert Schumann reported to his friend and colleague Felix Mendelssohn, in a letter of September 1845, was a symphony: the third of the four he would complete, though it was published as Symphony No. 2 in C major, Opus 61, in 1847. (The discrepancy in numbering is a result of Schumann’s decision to subject his Symphony in D minor, the second in order of composition, to thorough revision before approving its publication in the early 1850s. By that time, three other symphonies had already appeared in print: No. 1 in B-flat, Opus 38; No. 2 in C; and No. 3 in E-flat, the *Rhenish*, Opus 97.) The principal catalyst for Schumann’s concentrated efforts on the symphony in C major was almost surely a performance of Franz Schubert’s C major symphony (D.944) on December 9, 1845, with the Dresden orchestra under Ferdinand Hiller.

Schumann’s association with Schubert’s so-called Great C major symphony dated back to the winter of 1838-39, when, during a trip to Vienna, he was introduced to the practically forgotten work by the composer’s brother, and quickly arranged for Mendelssohn to lead the Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestra in the long overdue premiere. The newly excavated masterpiece had a lasting impact on Schumann, revealing to him that it was indeed possible to make an original contribution in a realm where Beethoven reigned supreme. In his celebrated 1839 review, Schumann described Schubert’s symphony in superlatives the likes of which he had never before bestowed on a piece of instrumental music: “Here, apart from the consummate mastery of compositional technique, we find life in every vein, the finest shades of coloring, expressive significance in every detail, and the all-pervasive romanticism to which Schubert’s other works have already accustomed us.” While marveling at the symphony’s “heavenly length” and “rich abundance,” Schumann also praised Schubert’s uncanny ability to “emulate the human voice in his treatment of the instruments.” Schumann would adopt both qualities as articles of aesthetic faith in his own C major symphony, especially in the magnificent valedictory hymn that crowns the finale.

When Schumann began writing for the orchestra in earnest in his so-called “Symphonic Year,” 1841, he fell into a two-stage method of composition whereby rapid sketching was followed by more cautious elaboration. This strategy served for most of his large-scale projects of the ensuing decade, the Second Symphony among them, though in this case the process extended over nearly a year. Although Schumann completed the sketches for the symphony in a mere two weeks toward the end of December 1845, he took the better part of the following year to fill in the details. Indeed, he was still touching up the orchestration of the draft not long before the premiere, given by the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra under Mendelssohn’s direction on November 5, 1846. As indicated by several entries in Schumann’s household account books—a remarkable chronicle in which he tabulated his daily expenditures, indicated the progress he was making on his various creative projects, and even described his fluctuating mental and physical condition—his labor on the symphony was frequently interrupted by recurrent bouts of poor health. During the winter and spring months of 1846, Schumann made reference to severe headaches, fits of depression, anxiety attacks, and auditory disturbances—complaints for which he sought relief, though without much success, by undergoing a regimen of mineral bath treatments on the East Frisian island of Norderney, at the time a popular vacation spot.

As with so many of Schumann’s compositions, the Second Symphony lends itself to interpretation as an essay in musical autobiography. Schumann himself encouraged a reading of this kind. In a note to the composer and critic J.C. Lobe written just after the repeat performance of the symphony in Leipzig on

November 16, 1846, he claimed that the new work “told a tale of many joys and sorrows.” Schumann offered a more detailed account of the symphony’s personal connotations in a letter of April 1849 to D.G. Otten, founder of the Hamburg Musical Association: “I wrote the C major Symphony in December 1845 while I was still half sick, and it seems to me that one can hear this in the music. Although I began to feel like myself while working on the last movement, I recovered totally only after completing the entire piece.” Above all, Schumann confided to Otten, the symphony reminded him of a “dark time,” symbolized musically “by the melancholy bassoon in the Adagio.”

While a composer’s view of his own work obviously lays claim to a special sort of authority, Schumann’s words do not do justice to the fundamentally affirmative character of his Second Symphony, which projects just about as much sorrow as most other symphonic compositions of comparable scope in a major key, that is to say: rather little. Even the melancholy mood of the Adagio is relatively short-lived, confined as it is to the deeply affective opening phrase and to fleeting shadows in a movement that strives for—and achieves—an over-arching quality of consolation. Heard in the context of the broader symphonic narrative, the somber hues of the Adagio are rather like passing storm clouds: ominous but quickly dispelled. In the final analysis, these darker tints serve as a foil to the brighter moods of the music that precedes and follows: the dignified jubilation of the first movement, the witty repartee between strings and winds in the scherzo, and the serene, hymnic apotheosis of the finale.

The initial reaction to Schumann’s Second Symphony was not entirely positive. According to reliable reports, the November 1846 premiere fell considerably short of the success that the composer had hoped for, despite concertmaster Ferdinand David’s assiduous drilling of the Gewandhaus violins on the finger-twisting passage-work in the scherzo and the perilously high trills in the Adagio. Before long, however, the critics were making the expected obeisances, comparing Schumann’s symphony to Mozart’s *Jupiter* and Beethoven’s Fifth.

In their eagerness to situate the work within the classical symphonic repertory, nineteenth-century journalists tended to overlook an inspirational source in the even more distant musical past: the art of J. S. Bach. The initial phase of work on the Second Symphony marked the culmination of a nearly year-long period during which Schumann was in the throes of what he called “*Fugenpassion*”—a veritable “fugal frenzy” that led both Schumanns—Robert and his wife Clara—to undertake a self-designed course of contrapuntal study whose chief texts were Luigi Cherubini’s esteemed counterpoint manual of 1835 and the fugues of Bach’s *Well-tempered Clavier*. The creative yield of this erudite pastime included Clara’s Three Preludes and Fugues for piano (Opus 16)—some on themes by her husband—and Robert’s Four Fugues for piano (Opus 72), Six Studies, in canonic form, for pedal-piano (Opus 56), and Six Fugues on the Name BACH for organ (Opus 60).

While this was not the first time that Schumann had immersed himself in the mysteries of counterpoint (nor would it be the last), his exploration in the mid-1840s of the contrapuntal genres—not to mention the steady diet of Bach—had a particularly decisive influence on the subsequent direction of his compositional style. In a diary entry dating from these years, Schumann called attention to his adoption of a “completely new manner of composing” that ran parallel with his refresher course in counterpoint. Characterized by a more reflective approach to the invention and elaboration of musical ideas, the “new manner” is much in evidence in the Second Symphony. For Schumann at this stage of his career, the “musical idea” is no longer conceived as a primal motive—like the famous four-note motto of Beethoven’s Fifth—but rather as a contrapuntal combination of two distinct melodic lines. The Second Symphony begins with a “meta-motive” of precisely this kind: a solemn chorale-like melody, stated quietly by the horns, trumpets, and trombones, is supported by a flowing counterpoint in the strings. Presented simultaneously at the outset, these melodic strands are developed independently as the music unfolds, a process that Schumann invokes across the entire four-movement span of the symphony.

While the “new manner” was inspired by an apparently old-fashioned compositional technique, it lives up to its name in the Second Symphony. Generally speaking, symphonic architecture tends toward one of two poles: the highly articulated designs of Haydn and Mozart; and the rhapsodic, continuously evolving forms of Liszt and Richard Strauss. Schumann’s Second Symphony lies squarely between these extremes, spinning out a web of ideas whose musical potential is not fully realized within the confines of a single movement. The initial motto in the brass (whose interval of a rising perfect fifth has been linked by some

listeners to the opening of Haydn's *London* Symphony, No. 104) puts in an unexpected appearance at the conclusion of the scherzo, and comes in for spectacular treatment in the closing phase of the last movement. Similarly, the plaintive Adagio theme is swept up in the propulsive march rhythms of the first part of the finale. In a surprising turn of events, Schumann then transforms the march music into a gentler, more lyrical idea that he proceeds to combine with the first movement's brass chorale. The expressive aim of this contrapuntal tour de force is unmistakable: in fusing "secular" song and "sacred" chorale melody, Schumann demonstrated how it might be possible to transcend both spheres, the mundane and the religious, through the medium of the symphony orchestra. Therefore, the message of the symphony is an eminently "modern" one, and indeed, it was not lost on later composers as diverse in stylistic orientation as Bruckner, Dvorák, and Tchaikovsky. While deeply rooted in the musical past, Schumann's Second Symphony pointed confidently toward the future.

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