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Robert Schumann,  
the Romantic: Musician and Man of his Time.**

**Translated by Gratia Stryker-Härtel**

## Prologue

Exceptionally well-developed: carefulness; fear, to such a degree that it might at times stand in the way of my happiness; music; poeticism; noble pursuits; great artistic – but noble – ambitions; a deep love of truth; a great deal of loyalty; a large amount of good will; “thoroughly equable temperament”; a strong sense of form; modesty; staunchness (phrenological studies of my head carried out by Noël, June 1)

### Excerpt from Robert Schumann's Journal<sup>1</sup>

This journal entry by Schumann was penned on June 1, 1846, while Robert Schumann and his wife Clara were visiting a castle manor in Maxen near Dresden. The estate belonged to a certain Major a. D. Friedrich Serre, a man who possessed affluence and artistic aptitude in equal measure. An invitation to the dinner table was issued, and later that same evening, Schumann played Whist and became acquainted with “Captain Noël,” who proceeded to undertake a “curious phrenological examination” of his skull, an event noted in the household guestbook on that very same date.<sup>2</sup>

The “Captain” in question was English phrenologist Robert R. Noël, who was whiling away his time in Dresden both for the sake an exchange of ideas with doctor, painter and naturalist Carl Gustav Carus regarding their shared “field of research” and in order to prepare the second edition of *Phrenologie oder Anleitung zum Studium dieser Wissenschaft*, his work on the study of phrenology, in view of the latest research in the fields of physiology and psychology. This edition appeared a short time later in the Arnoldische Buchhandlung book shop in Dresden and Leipzig.

Phrenology – that is, the attempt to establish the character qualities of a person by examining the shape of his or her cranium – was in high fashion at the time. And, as the measurements typically taken in this pursuit were of no small interest to criminologists, it was highly likely that Schumann had his reservations in allowing the reputed man to inspect his head – though he also, admittedly, had the odd and yet not so odd desire for another to explain the mysteries of his being. And his desire was rewarded with an answer: From that point on, he was able to explain away the fearfulness attributed to him that evening – a fearfulness which really did plague him from day to day – as a “condition destined by fate.” All the other characteristics Noël

asserted were admirable: noble pursuits, noble artistic ambitions, a love of truth, but also a sense for form and staunchness.

Of course, the phrenologist knew who was sitting before him that second Whitsun in 1846; and certainly he also had enough worldly and professional experience not only to inspect Schumann's head but also to appraise him with the help of other indicators in such a way as to make it possible for his prominent client, though somewhat shaken, to return to the other guests with head still held high. In any case, this author is still stirred more than 150 years later by the character sketch drawn here. After all, although the profile is admittedly very vague, if it were to be used in a quiz, even the layperson with a passion for music history would be inclined to guess it belongs to Schumann rather than to Beethoven, Wagner or Meyerbeer. This is particularly true because of its characteristic ambivalence. On the one hand, we see a diagnosis of the carefulness and fearfulness that constantly afflicted Schumann, always leaving him with "weakened nerves" and making him appear to shy away from human company. In a positive sense, these traits led him to focus more on refining his own personality than to challenge others with envy, criticism or condescension. Schumann almost never directed a full-blown insult to musical colleagues in his *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (New Journal for Music) or made derisive statements in private about his contemporaries. He was not one to cherish verbal duels or cultivate a know-it-all critical spirit. Rather, he had enough greatness to enthusiastically celebrate the young Johannes Brahms as his intellectual successor and to acknowledge Hector Berlioz and his *Symphonie Fantastique* as a genius of Romantic realism à la française despite the fact that, at his core, he never liked the piece.

On the other hand, we see an admirable measure of bravery in the constant tenacity with which Schumann confronted the world. This is first seen in the years he contended for his bride Clara throughout court proceedings that eventually concluded in favor of the lovers. It continued with Robert's care and provision for his constantly growing family; although Clara was the main party responsible for nurturing the strong family bond, Robert himself also played no small role in this. What is more, he did not allow any of his fears to hinder him from accompanying Clara on journeys, paying visits to various associations, directing choirs and conducting orchestras. The fact that he assumed responsibility as music director of Dusseldorf in what clearly marks the high point of his career may admittedly have gone beyond his reserves of strength and, in the end, accelerated his final breakdown.

But before that, he was by no means lacking in professional competence. He knew how to negotiate with publishers. His freehanded founding, as it were, of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (see p. 59ff) was a stroke of genius, both in an entrepreneurial and in a culturalpolitical sense. To say nothing of his boldness in all things artistic: Young Schumann, by and large self-educated, was wise enough to publicly dedicate his efforts first and foremost to the composition of piano music. At the time, he regarded “composing at the piano” as his destined profession; this genre was also the easiest to publish. At age thirty, he ventured even further, penning series after series of lieder that revealed his matured sense of selfawareness. This was followed by works scored for multiple instruments, chamber music and finally oratorios and an opera. With his “Rhenish” Symphony, Schumann created a work of such joy and release that it would have sufficed to bring renown even to a composer with a less careful soul than Schumann’s.

Thus we see that the circles in which Schumann moved were faced with much more than just ambivalence on his part. Even some among his very large public were witness to – and tolerated, to a large extent – the extreme tensions wrestling within him. In noting this, the educated nature of 19<sup>th</sup>-century society should not be underestimated. Who today would offer a Robert Schumann the position of Dusseldorf’s music director instead of realizing immediately that he would be bad for the city’s image? In 1960, Hungarian writer Béla Hamvas wrote the following about the 19th century with a distinct sense of affinity: “Centuries of lunatics: Hölderlin, Schumann, Gogol, Baudelaire, Maupassant, van Gogh, Nietzsche. We are no longer capable of lunacy today.”<sup>3</sup> Along the same lines, it might well be added that we are just as unable to bear lunatics that do not conform to our own peculiar sort of lunacy.

19 This is not meant as a dogged reiteration of the theory that gained so much ground in the 19<sup>th</sup> century regarding the relationship between genius and madness but only to cast a glance at a milieu in which artists could follow their own individual paths, even if those paths were at odds with broader society, and still emerge unscathed and without any loss of reputation. At the time, nonconformist behavior, which had not yet been pigeonholed into any given subculture, served as an embodiment of the bad conscience of the well-off citizen who still had an inkling what might result if the maximization of profits was treated as first priority.

Seen in such a way, this book is not written simply out of a sense of awe for an artist and musical intellectual who, though troubled, never dragged his tail in resignation before facing breakdown. No, this book is also written out of respect for a society that, while it did not grant royal treatment to such a personage, also did not unquestioningly measure him on the basis of his market value.

We could not cherish and enjoy the music of Schumann to the same depth today were it not for his contemporaries, who carved out the channels for his multitude of works to be passed on to the coming generations. The fact that the music of Robert Schumann is more popular today than that of, say, Arnold Schönberg is primarily due to the fact that Schönberg's music is more difficult to understand. But it is also because, in the case of Schönberg, both parties built up walls to fend off the other: the composer to stave off a public which, in his calculation from the ranks of the elite, had always played a diminutive role; and the public to defend itself from a composer who, in its eyes, had always been a crackpot.

It is fluke of history that everything in Schumann's case went fairly well. While there is enough of the popular in his music to grant him entry into broader society, there is also enough in it that curries favor with more elite musical circles, making him the father of a reflexively fractured strand of music and thus, even, of modern music itself: "modern" in the sense that it no longer allows itself to be reduced to a single common structural and narrative denominator – as with the music of the "heroic" middle period of Beethoven – but rather thrives in multiple contexts.

Schumann himself called for just such "re-creative" listeners<sup>4</sup>, that is, listeners who forge their own respective "significance" from the notes permeating their consciousness, a meaning in keeping with the musical context – a context partially revealed by explicit markings and partially undisclosed, as if written in an invisible ink that the listeners themselves must make visible.

In Schumann's Humoresque for Piano, Op. 20, there are 24 measures marked "hastily" in which an "inner voice" is notated on a third staff nestled between the right-and left-hand staves. It is clear that the notes of this third staff are not meant to be played. First of all, it is technically impossible to play them, and secondly, they are unnecessary in terms of sound, since the notes of the "inner voice" are also found one octave higher in the right hand. But why, then, did

Schumann notate this “inner voice”? What does he mean to say with it?

The only way we can gain a clearer understanding of this is to investigate Schumann's aesthetic views, particularly his veneration for Romantic poet Jean Paul. This means approaching the *person* of Schumann, who at many points in his life heard “inner voices.”

Does a biographer do wrong not to draw a clear division between a composer's works and life but instead to present the two as inseparably interwoven? As a whole, when taken to its logical end, this is not a question of guidelines and conventions but of style.

In the literature on music, there is a “high style” in which “pure” analysis wins the day. In this style, the inclusion of any “non-musical” or biographical considerations is considered tasteless or, at best, treated as the placement of mile markers pointing the way to the core of the music. No matter what you might think about such rigorousness, this approach appears limited in the case of Schumann simply because the composer himself did not hold much regard for this style. Analysis, of course, also had its place in Schumann's craft, but wherever he employed it, his imagination continually digressed in favor of pictures, metaphors and general aesthetic and historical discourses. He was intimately acquainted with the dual nature of music, which is both self-contained and yet also only able to be experienced within the framework of the multiple contexts that play out within our lives. It is for that reason that he could write to colleague Karl Koßmaly on May 5, 1843, “For me, Schumann the person and Schumann the musician have always tried to express themselves simultaneously.”<sup>5</sup>

By following in Schumann's footprints, this book takes a “middle-style” approach, neither shying away from what is written in the music itself nor shrinking back from a look at contexts that might shed light on the whole. (The “lower-style” approach – a label that does not by any means render it contemptible – can be seen in such works as Peter Härtling's novel, *Schumanns Schatten*.) While the term “middle style” might hint at compromise, it is just like any other spoken or written text on the subject of art; no approach that is employed, whether subtle structural analysis or the imagination of various contexts, can replace the actual experience of art.

The more we learn about composers, the less we can disregard their lives, even if it is their works alone that make them so well-loved. Although the life of a composer does not explain the works of that composer, there is still – as French philosopher Roland Barthes put it – “compounded value” in seeing the one juxtaposed against the background of the other. And

Barthes explains this, using as an example Marcel Proust's series of novels, *In Search of Lost Time*, in the following way: Of course it would be deceptive to believe one holds the keys to a poet's works just by examining the milieu of that poet; however, the "reader's projection onto the work," or the "lurid desire for decryption," congeals into an "imaginary fixation on the work."<sup>6</sup>

It is no accident, of course, that Roland Barthes develops his ideas in the form of a modern novel, and not one like Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. The closer the relationship between life and work is for artists of our own time, the more empathy we are able to feel toward them – at least that is our conjecture. Accompanying it is the converse: Generally, the more artists belong to modernity, the more they are convinced of an inability to keep their personal lives out of their artistic work – and of the inadmissibility of doing so. I contend that Schumann was the first composer whose life and work melded together in an almost symbiotic way, and it is primarily for that reason that I was moved to write this biography not just in a "middle style" but in a "mixed style." In contrast to my biographies of Bach and Mozart, the life and work of Schumann are not allotted their own discrete, subsequent chapters in this book but instead dovetail with each other in one. It seemed especially imperative to me in the case of Schumann to follow the line of reasoning sketched out by Barthes. Certainly, the "phrenological" research on Schumann's character – to circle back to the beginning of this chapter – does not authoritatively establish anything concerning his person, notwithstanding the fascination it held for him. Much less does it draw any hard and fast conclusions about his works. Still, it solicits a sense of empathy toward him and, when combined with numerous other manifestations of his life and person, the "lurid desire for decryption." As Barthes subtly suggested, the author, in an erotic desire to approach the object of his love – music – also seeks to access it via the person of the composer, but in vain. If the empirical and factual material available in such rich quantity in the case of Schumann is not twisted or blurred in this pursuit but instead used as an impetus for further reflection, then this "mixed style" is not less respectable than a pure analysis of form, which depends so heavily on a rarely challenged set of prejudices.

Hans-Georg Gadamer gives earnest thought to the question if perhaps the only scholarly aspect of the humanities is its necessary "psychological tactfulness," which presents itself as a "function of aesthetic and historical learnedness."<sup>7</sup> While this belies the expectation that art allows itself to be explained, it still places great demands on any who venture to write about art and artists. On

the one hand, it compels the writer to comply with the motto Robert Schumann placed in the preface of his *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in 1835: “All geniuses must be studied according to what they themselves want.” On the other hand, it allows the writer no other choice than to examine the numerous telltale contexts providing the only answers as to why Schumann can rightly be called a “universally representative embodiment of the spirit of the Romantic age.”<sup>8</sup> “Finish the intermezzi already – so as to pacify the critics.”  
Journal entry by Robert Schumann on June 1, 1832

Nine intermezzi are interspersed between the twelve main sections of this book. The term “intermezzi” is reminiscent not only of Schumann’s Op. 4 but also of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century opera intermezzi, which directed the attention of the public to the apron of the stage, where the antics of two actors, unrelated to the main plotline, provided diversion. While the intermezzi of this book are meant neither as jokes nor as asides from the main text, they, too, serve to shine the spotlight on single moments of achievement or single movements from Schumann’s oeuvre. It is possible to ignore them – but only at the risk that the reader, just like opera visitors, will miss the juiciest parts.

1 Tb II, 401

2 Tb III, 1, 281

3 Hamvas 2009, p. 65

4 NZfM Vol. 12, 1840, 82

5 BNF 227

6 Barthes 2008, p. 472

7 Gadamer 1975, p. 145

8 Cp. Alf/Kruse 1981

#### Intermezzo V

##### A magical relationship

Like the shot of a starting gun, the tutti chord from the orchestra triggers a three-measure cascade of forte piano sound. The opening gesture is that of a traditional Baroque overture, while the minor second pushing into the foreground brings our attention to an interval reminiscent since time immemorial of a sigh. The lyrical main motive is delineated by the winds and horns in the following eight measures, with the piano’s subsequent eight measures rounding it out into a 16-measure period. Without pause, a sort of *Fortspinnung* propels the music forward as the baritone register of the piano takes over, surrounded by the filigree quintuplets of the right



hand. More than just being *Fortspinnung*, however, this is also an “answer” in its own right, with its own thematic significance. As the “answer” unfurls, it is accompanied increasingly by the orchestra until the piano temporarily hands over the melody to the orchestra in order to assume the functions of the bass line. The voices continue to braid through the depths of the music until we reach the liberating six-four chord above G, sounding for all the world as if the heavens have been torn open and the main theme freed to dance about the axis of C major ...

It is impossible in such a limited space to describe the exquisite subtleties of sound and meter that make the first movement what it is: a piano-symphonic marvel of an opus poised between the standards of Beethoven and Brahms, whose concertos, though arguably more cohesive, lack the musical poetry of Schumann’s. If terms such as “opening ritornello,” “solo exposition,” “primary theme,” “transition,” “secondary theme,” “exposition,” “development” and “recapitulation” are already problematic in an analysis of traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century works, they are like a solid boxing around the ears when examining the compositional approach of Schumann. The greatness of the Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra in A Minor – only later was the piece reworked to serve as the first movement of the Piano Concerto, Op. 54 – rests in the very way it masterfully eludes the conventional structural requirements of the time. Without dissolving into impressionism, this “concert fantasy” defies categorization according to its musical architecture, insisting instead that it be weighed on the merits of its narrative qualities.

The term “narrative” is not meant to imply that a story is being told. Schumann held nothing of the symphonic poem à la Liszt. Instead, the term connotes a comparison between narratives and the flow of the music. The word also has nothing to do with symmetry; even in real life, a river is unimaginable without the alternation of strong and weak currents, mighty waves and small gyrating eddies, passageways both halcyon and tumultuous – to say nothing of the ceaseless changes of landscape along its banks while riding its currents. Rather, the word serves to elucidate Schumann’s compositional procedure of taking an initial thought and, over the course of an entire movement, allowing himself to be carried away by it, like the conversational flow surrounding a topic – not in the sense of planned-out motivic development but rather as a sort of free drift.

It becomes clear, however – at the very latest upon reaching the slow middle section of the movement, marked *Andante espressivo* – that this free drift is in no way unplanned. The *Andante espressivo* section marks the point at which we reach the spiritual center of the composition, as short as that may be. We find ourselves in Ab major, light-years away from the home key, and from this point on, the main motive appears in swaying 6/4 time, while shortened by one-and-a-half measures. We see Schumann using one of his favorite techniques, namely, that of shifting between “narrative modes” (for example, we find the words “Im Legendenton,” lit.

“In the Tone of a Legend,” in one comparable spot in his Fantasy in C major, Op. 17). In the original version – which, incidentally, can be only partially reconstructed from the original source material – this technique is even more readily apparent, as the original version lacks the 22 measures of blaring transition that Schumann later decided to include in the definitive version of the three-movement piano concerto, having become more interested in “architectonic” stability.

“Narrativity”: For the uninitiated listener, this word suggests delving into an intriguing, finely nuanced progression of ideas that cannot be understood until the very end – one that does not even have to be understood, as the piece convinces more through its charm and organic flow of thoughts than anything else. And, given familiarity with the Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra, the aficionado, too, readily associates the term “narrativity” with a specific *story* – namely, the real-life story of Clara and Robert, a story that can be read straight from the pages of the music like a book.

The story begins as Robert “answers” Clara’s Piano Concerto in A Minor, Op. 7, composed between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, within his fantasy – also penned in A minor. Robert, who had helped Clara at the time with the instrumentation of the concerto’s finale, takes up one of its motives. Except for this brief moment of recollection, however, the fantasy is primarily a *reply* to Clara’s Op. 7. The adept and well-practiced way young Clara cut her virtuoso concerto to fit the established patterns of musical structure so prevalent at the time does call for admiration. In comparison to the particular magic inherent to Robert’s composition, however, Clara’s concerto seems to be a mere backdrop, designed simply to showcase her own artistic appearance.

She would have been the last to see the matter differently and never performed her piano concerto again after the wedding. But Robert’s creation compensates for this, paying her honor: The falling-third motive, C-Bb-A-A, pervading Robert’s fantasy from beginning to end is a cipher for “Chiara,” Clara’s nickname among Davidsbündler society members. What is more, Robert’s sketch for a duet based on the following poem by Rückert was also recently discovered: “[Woman:] “I am your tree, oh gardener, whose faithfulness holds me in loving care and sweet cultivation” – [Man:] “I am your gardener, oh tree of faithfulness; I covet no other happiness.”<sup>1</sup> Robert had first planned to use this duet in *Liebesfrühling*, Op. 37, to be composed collaboratively with Clara. But in the end, the duet was not included in the work after all, since Robert’s main motive had already found its place within the piano fantasy, nested within the

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<sup>1</sup> [Frau:] “Ich bin dein Baum, o Gärtner, dessen Treue mich hält in Liebespfleg’ und Zucht.” – “[Mann:] “Ich bin dein Gärtner, o du Baum der Treue, auf andres Glück fühl ich nicht Eifersucht.”

section marked *Andante espressivo*, the above-discussed spiritual center of the work. The words “I am your tree, oh gardener, whose faithfulness...” fit tacitly, snugly, like a hand in a glove, beneath the motive, which is presented first by the piano and then repeated by the clarinet – in the transposition of a second, just as in the duet. The *Andante espressivo* of the piano fantasy and the sketched-out duet are also both written in triple meter and in Ab major; it is as if Schumann perceived this key as an exterritorial realm of holiness, “composing around it a concerto in A minor.”

But the telltale elements of the singular magic that permeated the Schumanns’ relationship do not end there. Following the musical citation of “I am your tree,” the piece transports us back to an Ab major passage from Beethoven’s *Fidelio*, namely, the first lines of Florestan’s aria, “In des Lebens Frühlingstagen” (“In the spring days of life”), which push ahead into his vision of “ein Engel sich tröstend zur Seite mir stellet, Leonoren, der Gattin, so gleich” (“a consoling angel at my side, so reminiscent of my noble wife Leonore”). During the trying time of their engagement, Robert and Clara lived out the roles of Florestan and Fidelio/Leonore; we read in a letter from Robert to Clara in Vienna dated November 29, 1837, “I kiss you in the deeps of love. – Adieu, my Fidelio in the guise of Julius Kraus; remain as true as Leonore to her Florestan,” his reference to “Julius Kraus” indicating the alias under which Clara collected her mail – taking on the persona of a man, just as Leonore did with the name Fidelio.

Peter Gülke’s remark that Schumann, in his music, alludes to Clara in a well-nigh insistent way is particularly applicable to the Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra in A Minor. Besides the musical quotations already mentioned above, the piece also quotes Clara’s *Soirées musicales*, Op. 6, and her *Romance*, Op. 11, No. 2, in addition to the *Grande Sonate*, Op. 3, by Ludwig Schunke, a dear friend who died at a young age. Schumann also negotiates chronology within the piece; in the middle of the fantasy, that is, in the *Andante espressivo*, the material suddenly develops into a form we recognize from the past, “divulging” the *urgestalt* of the piece’s opening motif: Schumann is invoking Beethoven – and, with that, of the life-changing early years shared by the Schumanns.

It is not necessary to know all this in order to love Schumann’s Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra. But you can only love it all the more if you *do* know it; for, rather than extrinsic to the work, these small mysteries are tied up with it so closely that they form the main thread interwoven throughout its tapestry. As a composer of piano concertos, Schumann cannot be compared with Beethoven and Brahms, whose works are set upon the foundation stone of a core structural concept, atop which the constructions of individual musical motives are wrought. Rather, Schumann and the other Romantics shared the idea that, in and of themselves, the raw materials of an artwork are too impoverished to accomplish their ultimate purpose, namely, to

provide a glimpse of the transcendental. It was with this thought in mind that Romantic artists continually contemplated and sought possible new means of transcending material reality and individual temporality in order to reach a new plane of existence beyond themselves.

However, the Romantics held, this could only be attained when artists used their own existence as a starting point, channeling the flow of the narrative from their unique perspective. Beethoven and Brahms would have regarded this as a hybrid as, for them, the quintessence of a piano concerto consisted of the interplay between orchestra and soloist, with the orchestra representative of “public” interests, the soloist of “private” interests and both together forming a microcosm of societal order. Schumann, on the other hand, undermined that idea, thinking wholly from the perspective of the piano, with the orchestra absorbing the piano to such an extent that a unified body of amalgamated sound emerges like that of a *single* instrument – *his* instrument.

If the bon mot traditionally attributed to Franz Liszt that Schumann wrote a “concerto without piano” has its basis in truth, this can be interpreted de facto as a compliment (even without recalling Liszt’s unmistakable allusion to Schumann’s “Concert sans orchestra”). Schumann did not create a concerto for a piano virtuoso but instead one in which the ubiquitous sound of the piano merges with that of the orchestra in consummate oneness – mirroring the desire of the composer to be one with “his” soloist, the virtuoso who had even helped pen the score.

For her part, this soloist was more than simply a virtuoso; she was also a deeply artistic individual in her own right. And because of that, she knew how to appreciate the intricate compositional handicraft that emerged from her husband’s in-depth ruminations on form and frequent consultations with her. Anyone who is not only a feminist but also an artist can envision the intense happiness that must have welled up within her upon seeing the finished work – and afresh each time she played it.

At the time, critics praised the “energy and passionate strength” of the music and spoke of its “heartfelt intimacy and trueness of feeling.” The most well-known of them, Eduard Hanslick, compared the Ab major episode with a “small, mirror-bright lake between dark crags and trees.” Such pictures do not serve to clarify anything, but they are like a love letter addressed to the work itself; and what could be more beautiful than a love letter? – The more seldom we write them in reality, the more readily we can direct them to the music.

Chapter 10  
Music director in Düsseldorf  
(1850–1854)

For relocation and journey:

Cargo load of all belongings shipped here from Dresden by train, 132. 7. –

3 persons for packing here à 20 Groschen. 2. 16. –

Düsseldorf guesthouse, Mr. Disch. 55. 15. –

Hired worker. 1. 15. –

Out-of-pocket expenses. – 28. –

Passenger monies for 4 1/2 tickets 58. 15. –

From the Schumanns' "Haushaltbuch," September 1850, after the move to Düsseldorf

Schumann's new position as the city's musical director brought him 700 Thalers. At the time, Düsseldorf had a population of about 45,000, a large number of them proud of the city's large Prussian garrison, the remaining proud of the city's academy of fine arts. Schumann, of course, was to dedicate himself to the academy of fine arts – the "Kunstakademie" – and quickly became member of the "Malkasten" artists' consortium as well, founded in 1848 by members of the academy and freelance artists. Originally meant to encourage the republican endeavors behind the citizens' revolution of 1848-49, the consortium found a new strategy following its failure, regarding itself from that point on as the artistic avant-garde at work against both an antiquated Romanticism and a bloodless Classicism and dubbing its approach "realism." This term was just celebrating its advent at the time and had adherents within the field of politics who denounced social inequality in keeping with the activism of French painter Gustave Courbet as well as a non-political following, which aimed to portray nature and people without overdone pathos and thus gain insight into things often regarded as insignificant.

Over the years, Schumann was to take on many of the ideas that coursed their way through the Düsseldorf school of painting. Initially, however, he found himself absorbed with the day-to-day musical activities that had largely been spared him in Dresden – directing the choir association weekly and putting on ten concerts per year with the city orchestra as well as organizing four major performances of sacred music in the main city churches of St. Lambertus and St. Maximilian.

The choir, consisting of some 120 members but often enlarged for special occasions, was made up of lay musicians; the string section, comprising about 30 members, was a pastiche of professional and lay musicians; and the wind section was primarily made up of military musicians from the garrison, complemented by a few music enthusiasts. The position of second oboe, for example, was played by deputy mayor and later mayor Wilhelm Wortmann.

Such circumstances were typical at the time; only in Leipzig were things better. It was the task of the respective music director to take the motley band on hand and unify it as best he could to

make the most of the situation. All things considered, the fact that Schumann was greeted in Düsseldorf by an existing music scene at all made him among the more fortunate of his day – not to mention that this music scene had been cultivated quite successfully by his predecessors Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Julius Rietz and Ferdinand Hiller.

Upon his move to Cologne, Hiller made a recommendation to the Allgemeine Musikverein, the music society that held the reins of power in terms of Düsseldorf's musical future, that they appoint Schumann as his successor. Schumann initially hesitated to accept, unable to release vague hopes of being appointed as Wagner's successor at the Hofoper in Dresden. Gradually, however, he came to the conclusion that he would do better to shake the dust of Dresden from his feet and that Düsseldorf was his new place of promise. At forty, Schumann became the musical director of a city for the first time in his career – and, also for the first time, salaried. For Clara, who was to bring another daughter, Eugenie, into the world on December 1, 1851, the latter spelled security.

And lo and behold: Where previously the Schumanns' move to Dresden was a quiet affair that proceeded without much fanfare, a sizeable greeting committee made an appearance at 7:00 in the evening on September 2, 1850, to receive the family as they arrived at the Düsseldorf train stop via the new Cologne-Minden train line. The Liedertafel singing club then serenaded the Schumanns in the exclusive Hotel Breidenbach, and five days later, the official opening concert was held in Geislerschen Hall – with 370 singers participating, if the musical material still available today is to be trusted on this point. The composer was surprised with the overture to "Genoveva" and the second part of "Peri." At the closing dinner, according to Clara's diary, the speeches were plentiful and long, the food scarce and scanty.

The difficulties, however, began already the very next day – not least of all due to acute financial need. The move had been expensive and the hotel bill so high that the family quickly secured accommodations with a certain Fräulein Schön, located on Alleestraße at the intersection of Grabenstraße. This, however, proved just as quickly to be the wrong decision. Robert, "due to the constant noise from the street – hurdy-gurdies, yelling boys, carriages, etc. – [fell] into an extremely nervous, high-strung, testy mood." Clara could "not play for the multitude of household tasks; furthermore, I cannot in the least find my place here among the lower class of people, nearly all of whom are coarse, overly high-spirited and pretentious." She concludes, "I just feel like crying all day long!"

But, though Clara feels that their chipper, cavalier mannerisms "at times cross the boundaries of femininity and decorum," the women within the community, thank goodness, prove friendly and helpful. "Married life here is reputedly of a more French, lighthearted nature," Clara informs us in

her diary, noting with favor the example of doctor, poet and musical author Wolfgang Müller von Königswinter and his wife, whose genteel manners provide a laudable exception to this rule. The Schumanns also go on to cultivate closer contact with doctor and aesthete Richard Hasenclever and with painter Theodor Hildebrandt, Eugenie's godfather. Artists Carl Sohn, Christian Köhler and Carl Friedrich Lessing were in this closer circle of friends as well, as were Wilhelm von Schadow, director of the academy of fine arts and already a longstanding friend of Mendelssohn, and notary and music enthusiast Joseph Euler. Additionally, on September 15, young violinist (and later Schumann biographer) Wilhelm Joseph von Wasielewski arrived from Leipzig to assume the position of Schumann's right-hand man in the orchestra, serving as concertmaster and as such responsible for all solo performances.

Robert Schumann's first appearance as conductor in a subscription concert on October 24, 1850, was a resounding success. Clara, too, played a role in it with her brilliant performance of Mendelssohn's Piano Concerto in G Minor, which she had not played from memory for a good number of years prior. Upon subsequently opening the front door to a flower basket instead of an honorarium, she wrote indignantly to Hiller, "It is incomprehensible to me that these men would assume I would give my debut concert here gratis. Even more, the absolute indelicacy of demanding such a thing is beyond my comprehension! Do they take us for wealthy people or something?"

The overall success of the first season's ten subscription concerts was due not in small part to Schumann's ambitious programming, which included Handel's *Israel in Egypt*, Bach's *St. John Passion*, numerous orchestral works by Beethoven and, of course, a large number of Robert's own compositions – last but not least his "Rhenish" Symphony, which was promptly repeated following its splendid debut on February 6, 1851. His *Cello Concerto in A Minor, Op. 129*, composed in October 1850, was not premiered at first, however, as Robert Emil Bockmühl, the soloist for whom it was written, voiced ongoing – and rather small-minded – criticism of his solo part.

The eighth concert of the season consisted almost entirely of compositions by Robert, and the cool reception given it by the public – despite the participation of both Clara Schumann and much-loved singer Sophie Schloß – was certainly the first felt symptom stemming from the disagreements that began afflicting the Schumanns early on. Robert felt harassed, and Clara shared his view on things to a large extent as well. Of course, as in any situation, there were two sides to the story, and it must also be mentioned that Schumann had little experience as a conductor and certainly no Midas touch. When he was relieved of the duty to actually rehearse works – a situation commonly encountered by guest conductors – he could hold his own. But if he himself had to provide the disciplined framework for a rehearsal and inspire what was

typically a listless and halfhearted ensemble, his natural tendency was much more to withdraw than to enliven the musicians. When conducting his own compositions, too, Schumann sometimes seemed more to follow them with his inner ear than listen to how the respective ensemble was actually performing them.

Singer Friederike Altgelt wrote shortly after Schumann took office, “He is an original but sweet-tempered and quiet; one often does not know whether to laugh or be annoyed by him. She is an angel, with charming allure, endearingly amicable, with a childlike sense of humor [ . . . ] He is an exacting director and has keen ears, but he swings his baton rather irregularly. She conducts the whole; wherever you look, there she is. She indicates the notes, helps whenever someone is stuck, and is always playing piano in the Society.”

Whenever something did not go according to plan, Robert would quickly give up in resignation. He did not have the will or the ability to bear down on problems while still retaining a sense of engaging authority, a crucial skill when dealing with the many factions and divisions almost inevitably part and parcel of conducting a large and highly diverse ensemble. Pianist and composer Louise Japhe wrote the following after the second concert in the winter of 1851-1852: “What a pity that a large part of the local public is against Schumann and greets each of his works with sharp criticism, even before a first hearing of it; it is so easy to lose patience upon listening to so many otherwise highly educated people who have no understanding whatsoever of Schumann’s work and are always uttering the wish that their former music director Hiller would return, opining that he ‘is a much better conductor and much more amicable, a true *salon personality*.’”

In the face of all this, Schumann still brought renown to Düsseldorf in his second season, which included performances of Handel’s Jephtha and Bach’s St. Matthew Passion, Schubert’s “Great” C Major Symphony, Niels W. Gade’s Symphony in B-flat Major and Mendelssohn’s Symphony in A Major as well as Chopin’s Piano Concerto in F Minor. He himself directed the premiere performances of the oratorio *Der Rose Pilgerfahrt*, Op. 112, and the choral ballad *Der Königssohn*, Op. 116. Clara Schumann wrote the following to her friend Marie von Lindemann in May of 1852 regarding the success of the choral ballade: “The public was very enthusiastic – or at least as enthusiastic as it possibly could have been. You can hardly find a colder public in Germany; they have no idea what they have in my husband and knew just as little what they had in former conductors – Mendelssohn, Rietz, Hiller. We will be leaving Düsseldorf at the first chance that presents itself.”

In 1852, at the end of the year, three members of the Allgemeine Musikverein board of directors called on Schumann almost unceremoniously to either limit or completely terminate his activities



as a conductor. Although the ensuing conflict was decided in favor of Schumann due to the intervention of numerous members of the society, the damage had been done. Further erosion of the working relationship during the subsequent 1852-1853 season could not be staved off despite the significant world premieres celebrated during that period of time – the large-scale choral ballade “Des Sängers Fluch,” Op. 139; the cycle of four short ballades entitled “Vom Pagen und der Königstochter,” Op. 140; two movements of the Op. 147 mass, and a reworking of the Symphony No. 4 in D Minor, Op. 120.

Things finally came to a head at the beginning of the 1853-1854 season, on the occasion of a disastrous performance of the Mass in G Minor, by Moritz Hauptmann, during the Patronatsfest in the Church of St. Maximilian. Julius Tausch, Schumann’s assistant, had rehearsed the work and conducted its dress rehearsal; nonetheless, Schumann – clearly euphoric after the visits of Johannes Brahms, Joseph Joachim and Bettina von Arnim – decided that he himself would conduct the public performance. When the performance turned out to be a miserable failure, the choir refused to sing under Schumann’s direction in the following first subscription concert performance of Mendelssohn’s “Die erste Walpurgisnacht,” and Tausch ended up conducting the work, on October 27, 1853. Despite this, Schumann was still able to premiere his Fantasy for Violin, Op. 131, during that same concert, with Joachim as soloist. Even this, however, was in opposition with Schumann’s actual wishes; the Fantasy for Violin had been put on the program to replace his new violin concerto after its performance had been denied him by the Allgemeine Musikverein board of directors.

The situation had become hopeless, its outcome inevitable. A suggestion on the part of the board of directors that Schumann conduct only his own works and leave the rest to Tausch was met with indignant refusal. Corresponding “letters of ultimatum” amounting to the equivalent of an informal resignation encountered no objections on the part of the administrative committee. In the end, the contract was formally terminated as of October 1, 1854, until which date Schumann’s salary continued to be paid.

Robert and Clara began to re-air old plans to move to Vienna or Berlin. But then, just before the 1853 Christmas season, they turned their backs on bothersome Düsseldorf for a bit of diversion in the form of a four-week trip to Holland, where their friend Verhulst, court music director in The Hague, was to arrange circumstances such that they might experience a bit of success. His plans proved more than successful. “Everywhere he went, Schumann found concerts already rehearsed and awaiting him; all he had to do was mount the podium and conduct them,” reported the music journal “Signale für die musikalische Welt” regarding predominantly successful evening concerts in Utrecht, The Hague, Rotterdam and Amsterdam.

Following the concert in Rotterdam, where Robert conducted his “Rhenish” Symphony and Clara performed his piano concerto, a large crowd gathered in front of the hotel. There, under Verhulst’s direction, hundreds of singers bearing torches and a wind ensemble performed the “Waldchor” from *Der Rose Pilgerfahrt* as well as the “*Geburtstagsmarsch*,” most likely an arrangement of Op. 85, No. 1, despite the bitter cold. Following Clara’s musical performance at the court of Prince Consort Friedrich, Robert had to face that seemingly imminent question, “Are you musical as well?” Nevertheless, apart from that, he was honored not only as a composer but also as a conductor and could bid a gratifying farewell to the “obstinate monstrosity,” as he once described the orchestral institution of Düsseldorf – forever, as it turned out.