



Composer of
the Week
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repeated the
following week
12 midnight-1 am

COMPOSER OF THE MONTH

ROBERT SCHUMANN

TORTURED GENIUS OF THE ROMANTIC AGE

HIS STYLE

FLORESTAN, EUSEBIUS & CLARA

Polar opposites, represented by 'Florestan' and 'Eusebius' - impetuosity versus introversion - recur in Schumann's music; so, too, does his theme of five descending notes, representing Clara. Extreme contrasts of mood can suggest his manic depressive tendencies, yet another side of him - stabilised, perhaps, by Clara - can speak of serene intimacy, as in *Kinderszenen*, the A major String Quartet and some of the *Lieder*.

SONG ACCOMPANIMENTS

'The singing voice is hardly sufficient in itself,' wrote Schumann. 'It cannot carry the whole task of interpretation unaided... the finer shadings of the poem must be represented as well.' The piano therefore plays an equal role in Schumann's *Lieder*: he evokes emotions through keyboard patterns resonating with the text's innermost meaning.

OBSESSION

Schumann's obsessive tendencies sometimes show in his use of rhythm. Works such as the finales of the *Symphonic Etudes Op. 13* are repetitive, focusing on one rhythm of which Schumann seems unable to let go. But perhaps it is not solely psychological: he may have derived it from Schubert.

THE RHAPSODIC ROMANTIC

Schumann's rhapsodic, passionate energy adds to the personal nature of his music. He pays attention to little beyond his inner self and his sources of inspiration, whether ETA Hoffmann or Clara. This thinking aloud, almost a stream of consciousness, gives rise to a marvellous originality of form - nothing quite like *Carnaval* or the C major *Fantasie* had previously existed.

A prurient fascination over Schumann's relationship with his wife Clara, his friendship with Brahms and his final years in an asylum often overshadows his brilliance as a composer.

Jessica Duchon calls for a closer look at his music

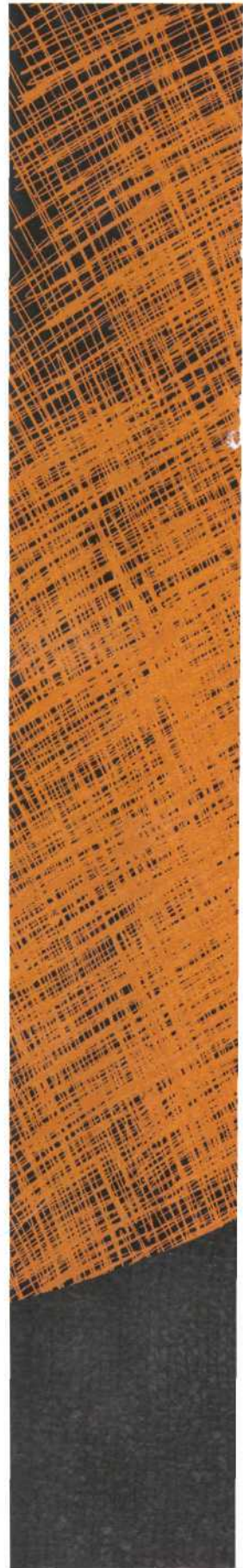
Even now, 150 years after Robert Schumann's death in a mental hospital in Eindhoven, fresh views about the true nature of his art are still appearing. His marriage to the pianist Clara Wieck dominates accounts of his life; mental illness, too, plays its appalling role. But Schumann was not only a turbulent, doomed genius; he was a forward-thinking intellectual, wielding a literary pen as sharp as his musical one, with which he championed younger composers, especially Brahms, and helped the reputation of others such as Weber, Chopin and Mozart. Fusing literary and musical thinking was central to his philosophy. He was a unique musician, who has often been misunderstood.

He was born in 1810 in Zwickau, the son of a publisher; initially he was torn between writing and composing. When he decided, despite early studies in law, to become a musician, he lodged with his piano teacher, Friederich Wieck, in Leipzig and there met Wieck's small daughter, Clara, a child prodigy pianist. Schumann soon suffered a hand injury - the result, some said, of a contraction he had built to encourage independence of the fingers, but according to others a side effect of mercury poisoning after treatment for syphilis. Either way, a performing career was not a viable proposition. Clara

was on hand to become Schumann's pianistic amanuensis.

While Clara was still too young, Schumann was engaged to a girl named Ernestine von Fricken, whom he portrayed musically as 'Estrella' in *Carnaval*. But as Clara grew up, so did her relationship with Schumann. Wieck can hardly be blamed for objecting: Schumann did not seem a suitable husband for a precious prodigy, with his reputation for dissolute living. Wieck did all he could to keep them apart, to no avail. Clara's image returned constantly in Schumann's compositions, as in the feverish G minor sonata ('One single cry of my heart for you, in which your theme appears in every possible form,' Schumann wrote, sending her the manuscript) as well as the glorious closing love song of the *Fantasie Op. 17*. The pair took Wieck to court and won the right to marry, which they did the day before Clara's 21st birthday in September 1840.

Their marriage was far from carefree. The pressures of managing two musical careers in a house with thin walls were difficult even before adding seven children. They juggled their musical activities with family life as best they could. Schumann edited a musical journal, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, which he had founded in 1834,



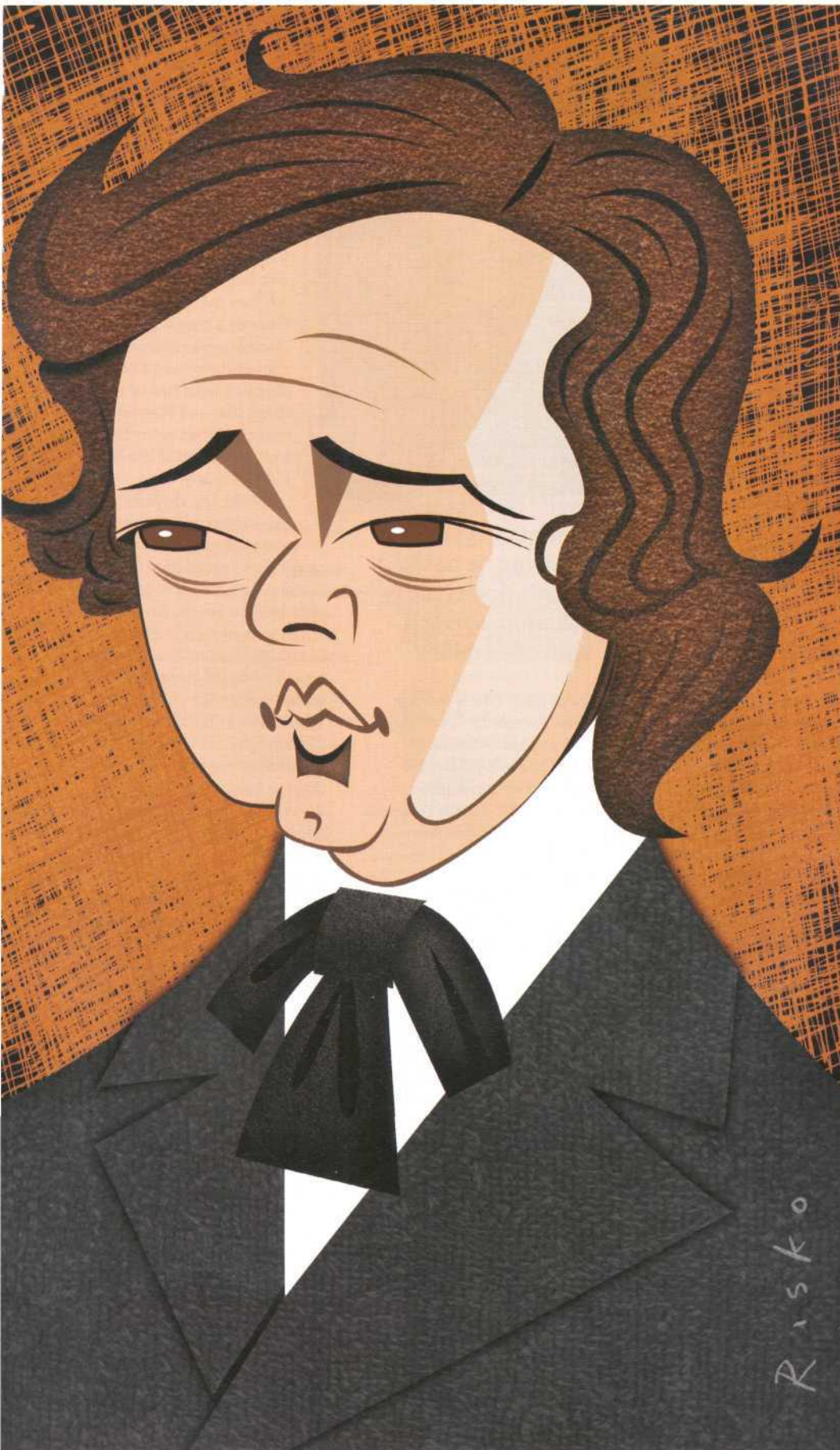


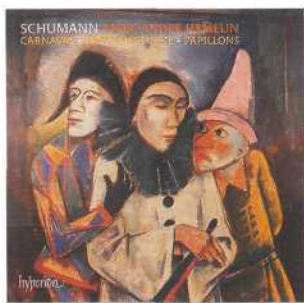
ILLUSTRATION: RISKO

as well as composing prolifically and, on occasion, attempting to become a conductor (unsuccessfully). His greatest battles were against depression. 'So long as I am young and strong, I want to create and work as long as possible,' he wrote, 'even if the demons were no longer to compel me...'

Schumann's predilection for composing for one medium at a time has often been seen as a sign of unhealthy obsessiveness; but it could have been a means to deepen his understanding of a genre. First came piano music. His unprecedented piano cycles, such as *Papillons* Op. 2 (1829-31), *Carnaval* Op. 9 (1834-5), the *Davidsbündlertanze* Op. 6 (1837) and *Kreisleriana* Op. 16 (1838) were the musical equivalent of novels. Works drawing on his favourite writers, Jean-Paul Richter (*Papillons*) and ETA Hoffmann (*Kreisleriana*) followed episodes of their books. They were also peppered with musical ciphers and coded messages to Clara. Schumann's two contrasting alter-egos in fictionalised form were equally dominant characters at this time: 'Florestan', the extrovert, passionate, effusive self and 'Eusebius', the introverted, lyrical counterpart, moderated by a third, more objective character, Meister Raro. They featured in his critical writings before finding their way into music.

In 1840, Schumann plunged into *Lieder*, which he could barely write fast enough. Again he found inspiration in text, especially poems personally meaningful to him. Themes of love gained or thwarted, marriage, anticipation, loneliness and loss constantly appear, his chosen

THE BEST RECORDINGS

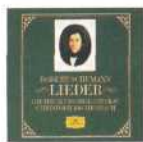


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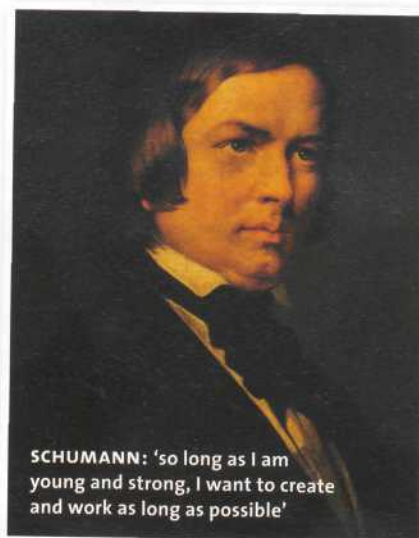
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poets including Goethe, Eichendorff, Byron, Ruckert and the bitter-edged Heine, the poet of arguably Schumann's greatest song-cycle, *Dichterliebe*, Op. 48. Two symphonies, the first version of what would become the Piano Concerto, and more songs appeared in 1841 and the following year Schumann turned to chamber music, producing three beautiful string quartets, the ebullient Piano Quintet and the Piano Quartet, all of them overflowing with originality.

Among Schumann's musical influences, Beethoven held pride of place. Schumann quotes from Beethoven's *An die feme Geliebte* in his C major Fantasie, a work which he described as a 'monument to Beethoven'. Crucial, too, was the impact of Schubert, evident in the psychological reaches of Schumann's Lieder. And Schubert benefited posthumously from Schumann: Schumann discovered the manuscript of the unheard Ninth Symphony, compared it to 'a thick novel in four volumes by Jean Paul' and persuaded Mendelssohn, conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, to give its 1839 premiere.

A BROADER APPROACH

Schumann gradually abandoned his preference for working in one genre at a time, mingling the composition of intimate songs, piano pieces and chamber works with larger scale opuses. His orchestral and choral music sometimes proved problematic: many have criticised his orchestrations for a certain heavy-handedness, an accusation that is misguided. The four symphonies are fresh, personal statements ranging from a direct evocation of springtime in No. 1 (1841) through a virtual portrayal of manic depression in No. 2 (1845-6) - juxtaposing an anguished slow movement with a frenzied scherzo - and a powerful, Beethovenian striving



Schumann's late work can be baffling but musicians today are approaching it with open minds

against fate in No. 4 (written in 1841, revised ten years later). His ambitious choral works, including *Scenes from Faust* (1844-53) and the Requiem, Op. 148 (1852) - a compassionate work that sometimes seems to set an example for Fauré's - are overshadowed by the equivalent works of, respectively, Berlioz and Brahms. His sole opera, *Cenoveva* (1847-8), which suffers from weak libretto syndrome, has never entered the repertoire. Ironically, opera could have represented the fusion of literature and music; he dreamed of creating opera that would be 'simple, profound, German,' considering, though never tackling, subjects such as *Lohengrin* and *Till Eulenspiegel*.

Schumann's late music can be baffling. His Cello Concerto (1850) and Violin Concerto (1853) have been regarded as awkward, losing out to the popular Piano Concerto. These and works like the *Cesänge der Fruhe* for piano (1853) have been taken as indications of Schumann's crumbling psyche: the music meanders, structures do not complete themselves in expected ways, and there is neither the élan of his early works, nor the focused strength of the

symphonies. But musicians today are approaching late Schumann with open minds. There is something akin to stream-of-consciousness thinking in these pieces. Rather than just the product of a fragmenting soul, are they the first steps towards a new kind of musical exploration, carrying composition in a different direction from that of the rising Liszt and Wagner? His music holds an entire human soul, warts and all. He is, in the end, one of us.

In 1853, the 20-year-old Brahms visited the Schumanns in Dusseldorf, carrying an introduction from Joachim. Schumann and Clara were bowled over by his music; Schumann wrote in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* that he was 'a young blood by whose cradle graces and heroes kept watch'. Soon Brahms was virtually part of the family. But five months later, Schumann attempted suicide, flinging himself into the Rhine. Was the timing coincidental? Could Schumann see his place as composer and, potentially, husband, being taken by a younger man? Or is there some truth in a study that suggests he was slightly in love with Brahms?

Schumann, rescued, was sent at his own request to the asylum at Endenich. Clara visited him only on his deathbed, two years later. It seems that his condition had earlier improved enough for her to bring him home. But she did not. Perhaps caring for a mentally unstable husband, besides managing her career and family, would have been impossible; perhaps the social stigma of madness in the family frightened her. Schumann's death is now thought to have been the result of deliberate self-starvation.

We'll never know what Schumann could have achieved, given a different fate. But during this anniversary year, his musical legacy can be fully comprehended, not only for its beauty but also for its unfulfilled potential. •