

Robert Schumann

Symphony No. 1 in B-flat, Opus 38, "Spring"

ROBERT SCHUMANN was born in Zwickau, Saxony, on June 8, 1810, and died in an asylum at Endenich, near Bonn, on July 29, 1856. He sketched his "Spring" Symphony in just four days, January 23-26, 1841, and completed the score less than a month later, on February 20. Felix Mendelssohn led the first performance on March 31 that same year, in a pension fund concert of the Gewandhaus Orchestra of Leipzig. The dedication of the symphony is to Friedrich August, King of Saxony.

THE SCORE OF SCHUMANN'S SYMPHONY NO. 1 calls for two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, triangle, and strings.

Robert Schumann's First Symphony was completed in 1841, a year of fertile and diverse activity in European music. A brief scan of this year reveals Chopin composing his F minor Ballade, Liszt his second version of the, Mendelssohn his Symphony, and Wagner and Verdi launching their careers with and . All these men were born within four years of each other and constitute, along with the somewhat older Berlioz, a tremendous new gathering of forces. They form the first musical generation to identify consciously with the Romantic movement long since fully acknowledged in other arts.

Together with the influence of other arts, especially literature, these men were stimulated by the achievements of the Italian operatic melodists of the 1820s, by the works of Schubert's last years, and by a new interest in late Baroque music. But the liberating effect of Beethoven's music must be especially emphasized, since it has been misunderstood. We still read about the necessity to evade Beethoven, to go on in spite of him, and other negative tasks assigned to this first Romantic generation. But he was above all an energizing force, expanding and making available to a greater variety of musical talents the musical vocabulary of the early 1800s.

It is particularly Beethoven's last piano sonatas, more than the quartets and symphonies, that reverberate in the music of the first generation of Romantics—most of whom thought through the piano. These sonatas of Beethoven suggested a new kind of narrative style, free of the necessity to define in sonata-allegro terms each moment in the form. The Schumann piano miniature, the crucial expressive vehicle of his early years, is seeded in the Beethoven piano sonatas. Even as Schumann worked himself away from his natural arena—songs and short piano pieces—toward the symphonic, choral, and sonata composition which he considered a higher calling, the piano remained an underlying sonority.

It is in this context that we must consider his controversial orchestration. Schumann's First Symphony shares with his other symphonies an orchestral sonority that strives to retain the piano's dense tone weight and the mystery of its pedal. All the symphonies have been considered over-scored, and there is some legitimacy to this claim; but it is worth consideration that Schumann's orchestration—doubled, middle-register-dominated, and anti-solo—is partly the sound of this era: much of Mendelssohn and Wagner from this period is thick, and the thickness conveys intensity. Later eras have been uncomfortable with this sound, but this is partly a turn against the entire aesthetic of early Romanticism.*

Schumann intended the opening of his Symphony to be heard as a call to awakening, composing it in "the vernal passion that sways men until they are very old, and which surprises them again with each year." Unfortunately the initial bloom of this phrase was somewhat dampened when Schumann discovered at the first rehearsal that his natural horns and trumpets sounded muddy and indistinct on the lower notes of his motive. He decided to begin the phrase a third higher, on D, thus giving the first two phrases the same melody, and weakening the staged approach to the thrilling D minor chord that begins the third phrase; this chord is rich both in fervent drama and in key-area implications for the rest of the piece. (Schumann's original intention, aided by the use of modern brass, is occasionally reinstated, a practice that hardly qualifies as a reorchestration of the kind so often practiced upon these symphonies.)

This opening motto is a setting of a line from a poem by Adolf Böttger: the line runs "" ("In the valley spring is blossoming!"), its rhythm unmistakable in Schumann's version. This opening makes explicit a secret condition of much of Schumann's instrumental music—hidden words behind the notes. It is with the help of such extramusical associations that Schumann achieves the unique atmospheric world inhabited by each of his symphonies. The Symphony is based on two poems by Böttger; Schumann originally had titles for the movements paralleling moments in the poems—"Spring's Awakening," "Evening," "Joyful Playing," and "Full Spring" (or "Spring's Farewell"). Like many composers, he was less interested in these verbal guideposts as he gained distance from the piece. Very often a composer will seize on poetic or narrative images to free an abstract musical thought-line already brewing in his subconscious, and in the calm that follows remains interested only in those musical urges that were primary to him.

The first motto notes of the Symphony become the dominating motive in the ensuing movement. In

adapting his Lied-style forms to larger spans, motivic reiteration and expansion is Schumann's primary resource. Not a writer of free-wheeling melodies like Chopin or Berlioz, he joins motives together into melody, or creates driving development passages out of close motivic repetition. In the Symphony the motivic working is a spontaneous mode of thought. (Later in his career it seems to be thought of more in formal terms, with some loss in naturalness, compensated by a touching simplicity of harmony and gesture.)

The first movement has the first of the independent, poetic codas that are special to this symphony, inspirations that close each of the first three movements with something seemingly new, but revealed as foreshadowing of what is to come. The one in the first movement is in Schumann's warmest hymn-like manner, expressing the inward (Eusebian) side of his nature.*

Often in Schumann's orchestral music, the spirit seems more important than the detail, but the second movement produces some memorable details as well. The lavish afterbeat wind chords behind the cellos' statement of the main theme in B-flat, and the rich combination of octave violin descant and viola triplets at the next statement, are just a few of the many subtle settings in which the rondo theme is shown.

In the third movement Schumann uses the minor key without menace or foreboding, instead reflecting the romantic stirrings of the first D minor in the prelude. The harmonic scheme is unusual, with other keys seeming equally balanced with tonic in the opening strain.

The finale has an operatic exuberance, with even a brief outdoor cadenza, and a very attractive main subject. The development and coda become serious, especially in the gliding sequences that recall Schubert's big C major symphony, so revered by Schumann. But the overall impression is one of Schumann's most unified affects, Florestan and Eusebius joined in positive feelings.

One of Schumann's special qualities is his ability to establish a one-to-one relationship with his listener, to sort that listener out from the crowd and speak only to him or her. This is an essential Romantic ambition, and Schumann's achievement of it brings him close as a personality in a way not available to a less open temperament. Like other Romantic artists who ended in madness, he paid for his intense way of living, and his dualized nature, divided between action and withdrawal, was both substance for poetic fantasy and a dangerous problem. If a rebirth of the spirit of early Romanticism is possible (or even desirable), the artist would once again have to risk being as revealed and present to his listener as is Schumann.

John Harbison