

Robert Schumann

The most valuable outcome of a composer's anniversary celebrations is a wholesale critical rethink – a liberating challenge to that old enemy of free thought, received opinion. Yet with Robert Schumann there is no settled 'received' view to challenge. All right, Schumann's high standing amongst composer of German *Lieder* is fairly secure, while a handful of his more eccentrically brilliant piano works – and, of course, the Piano Concerto - remain core repertoire. But as regards almost every other aspect of the man and his work, impassioned, sometimes bitter controversy holds sway. Take the symphonies: championed by some, deliberately ignored or trashed by others, they have been hauled over critical hot coals for inept orchestration, poor grasp of form, even poverty of thematic invention; yet these same feeble, faltering symphonies were a vital source of inspiration and encouragement for Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Dvorak and Elgar (the latter called him simply, 'my ideal'). Granted, when Mahler conducted them (which he did frequently), he felt the need to 'help' the orchestration – but then he did the same with Beethoven and Schubert, who we're somewhat less inclined to help nowadays.

As more and more Schumann has re-emerged (or in some cases simply emerged) from obscurity in recent years, reaction has once again polarised. For some the Cello and Violin Concertos, the choral-orchestral *Paradise and the Peri*, the *Scenes from Faust* and the three string quartets are exquisitely original, any putative faults utterly eclipsed by their many precious and unique virtues. For others they are simply sad failures, in some cases painful testimony to Schumann's increasingly delusional state as he approached his final mental collapse.

And there, the biggest, nastiest can of worms opens irrevocably. Did Schumann suffer from mental illness? If so was it continuous, intermittent, or only really manifest in his last decade? Was he manic-depressive (or as we'd now say, bi-polar), or was it syphilis that finally turned his brain and sentenced him to spend his last two years in a lunatic asylum? Bizarrely, many of the commentators who have weighed in on the last issue (see for instance John Worthen's recent *Robert Schumann: Life and Death of a Musician*) seem to be convinced that it has to be one or the other – can't a manic depressive also catch syphilis? Until the final years Schumann's creative life shows the kind of extreme undulating pattern typically of many bi-polar creative people: periods of intense mental activity and artistic productivity (for example the 'wonder years' 1840-43 following his marriage to Clara Wieck) alternating with long periods of depression and anxiety in which virtually nothing is produced (1844 and early 1845). But many artists and thinkers manage to survive the highs and lows and continue producing great work over long, full lives – in some cases it is clear that their creativity was a major force in keeping them stable enough to continue. Might Schumann have done the same, if syphilis hadn't been added to an already dangerous mixture?

What is quite clear, reading books, articles and reviews dealing with this issue in relation to Schumann, is that a huge weight of prejudice still bears down on many attempts at rational discussion. Firstly, to say that someone 'suffers from mental illness' is emphatically not the same as saying that they are permanently

'mentally ill' - still less 'mad' – any more than to say that someone is 'ill' implies they should be booking themselves into a hospice. The mental health charity MIND estimates that around one in four adults suffer from depression at some time in their lives; yet for most of their lives the majority of these people will function perfectly normally. Secondly, however enlightened we may claim to be, it is clear that many educated people still cling, if unconsciously, to the Victorian belief that mental illness is basically a 'moral' disorder. One reviewer of John Worthen's book enthusiastically hailed its rejection of the deplorable suggestion that Schumann suffered from a mental illness, yet seemed to have no difficulty accommodating himself to the book's portrayal of the composer as a syphilitic drunk.

Part of the problem surely derives from another popularly persisting 19th century notion: that of the tortured 'mad genius' – usually backed up with a well-worn phrase like 'genius is close to madness'. Actually the history of that saying is rather interesting. It appears to derive from a once-frequently quoted couplet in John Dryden's poem *Absolom and Achitophel*: 'Great wits are sure to madness near allied, / And thin partitions do their bounds divide.' What is striking about Dryden's version is that he sees great creative intelligence as *near* to madness, not congruent with it: the two states are separated by 'thin partitions'. The point is surely that the partitions are thin enough to allow the artist to see into the unconscious, nocturnal regions of the mind that emerge unmediated in madness, but that they still remain strong enough to prevent him from being overwhelmed. The tiny boat exposes the navigator to the full terror and exhilaration of the storm-tossed sea, yet remains just sturdy enough to remain afloat. As the eminent psychiatrist and amateur musician Anthony Storr forcefully pointed out, truly psychotic art is often very boring. When the rational conscious mind, the 'ego', is completely overwhelmed, its utterances tend to become repetitive, stilted, formulaic, and full of the kind of dissociated imagery that makes sense only to the sufferer – and, perhaps, to the patient, empathic psychiatrist.

In which case, the fact that Schumann's most emotionally extreme, intellectually paradoxical compositions clearly do make sense to large numbers of listeners has to be an indication that its composer remained basically stable at the time he wrote them. His rope was long and supple enough to allow him to descend into the subterranean dream-world, but strong enough to pull him back, with the otherworldly treasures he found safely in his knapsack. The hushed 'fantasy' episode at the heart of the Piano Concerto's first movement, or the delicious, timeless flute cadenza in the finale of the First Symphony are two of the most obvious and attractive examples. But we can also see evidence of this in the brilliantly 'lateral' structures he created in some of his most original works. In the Second Symphony, the work Schumann composed to pull himself back out of the crippling depression of 1844-5, the manic, obsessive, driven repetitions of the first two movements are calmed by the wonderful invocation of Bach – in Goethe's words the portrayer of 'the eternal harmony' - in the minor-key *Adagio*. The latter ends peacefully, but the turbulent finale is haunted by memories of its darkly eloquent lyricism, eventually leading to kind of grim 'alternative' ending – after which the finale begins again with new material: a kind of structural 'Take

Two'. Schumann seems to present us with two possible outcomes: one hopeful, the other tragic.

The Fourth Symphony (actually composed before No 2, but revised later) takes this kind of lateral structural thinking to levels of almost Escher-like complexity. For a start, is the Symphony in four movements, or one? Apparently audience and critics at the first performance found it just too confusing. But for those who don't need their symphonies neatly laid out the Fourth Symphony's ambiguity is its glory. After the 'second' movement's gorgeous oboe and solo cello tune, the shadowy slow introduction of the first movement is heard again: is this a flashback or a new theme within the context of a new movement? This ambiguous formal gamesmanship continues in the Scherzo. The listener may even wonder if two simultaneous strands of argument are unfolding here, one fleetingly intruding on the other like a visitant from a parallel world.

Significantly, when Schumann revised this symphony nearly a decade later, and three years before his final breakdown, he seems to have taken fright at some of these manifestations of 'lateral' fantasy. Schumann goes to sometimes quite radical lengths to make the formal outlines clearer, most drastically in the transition between the finale's slow introduction and main allegro. Where in the first version the introduction eventually boils over and sweeps on into the finale, the revision draws itself up and pauses grandly, like a master of ceremonies portentously announcing, 'And now, ladies and gentlemen, the finale!' Of course Schumann may simply have wanted to guarantee his most original symphony an easier ride with audience and critics, but to this writer these revisions betray an element of panic. Are the 'thin partitions' too thin after all: do they need strengthening? Better safe than sorry – or perhaps not.

It is quite true that Schumann was able to achieve mastery within more apparently stable, conventionally rounded forms. The magnificent *Manfred* Overture breaks no significant structural rules, allows no guests from parallel universes (though the oddly syncopated opening chords have puzzled some conductors), and its tragic emotional intensity is surely only enhanced by the strength of its formal 'container'. Third Symphony manages to incorporate a substantial extra movement – an atmospheric evocation of a solemn ceremony witnessed in Cologne Cathedral – in the process only strengthening the symphony's overall architectural plan. The Piano Quintet is one of Schumann's most admired large-scale compositions, yet its apparent formal security – rounded off by an elegantly solid fugue – conceals more intriguingly lateral touches: for instance another quiet 'flashback' in the funereal slow movement to a fleeting passage midway through the first. And what of the funeral march itself: grief-laden or mischievously ironic – or both?

Schumann will always frustrate those who like their ambiguities resolved, their endings reassuringly closed, their emotions formally tamed. He will continue to draw scorn from those who see the ultimate manifestation of 'art' in a polished surface. For others though, like this writer, he is at his greatest the embodiment of what John Keats called 'negative capability': the ability to exist 'in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching out after fact and

reason'. Approach Schumann in a similar frame of mind and his unique, multi-faceted mastery should be apparent at every beguiling twist and turn.

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