

Brahms: Variations on a Theme by Paganini

Schumann: Études Symphoniques

Johannes Brahms (May 7, 1833, Hamburg, Germany - April 3, 1897, Vienna, Austria) is one of the most important masters of the Romantic era. Robert Schumann proclaimed him the new musical messiah when Brahms was just 20. The phrase "the three Bs" (Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms) was formulated after Brahms composed his first symphony, not yet turning 40. Schumann and his wife, pianist Clara Wieck Schumann, helped to establish Brahms's career. Johannes' close friendship with Clara, especially after Robert's death, has been deliberated upon unceasingly. A virtuoso pianist, Brahms spent early years of his life performing. He premiered many of his own compositions. He wrote pieces for symphony orchestra, piano, chamber ensembles, voice, and chorus.

Brahms was a loner, a perfectionist, and a divided nature: a classicizing Romantic, both a traditionalist and an innovator. His compositions strongly reflect Baroque and Classic tradition. Being a master of counterpoint, Brahms honored classical structures, but boldly explored rhythm, phrasing, melody and harmony, inspiring both modernists and more conservative composers and influencing the future of music. In his essay "*Brahms the Progressive*" (1933, rewritten in 1947), Arnold Schoenberg explored Brahms's irregularities of rhythm and phrase, and concentration of motifs; in his last book ("*Structural Functions of Harmony*", 1948), he analyzed Brahms's "enriched harmony". Brahms subdued a "chaos" (his own description) of thoughts and emotions by adamant discipline, integrity, and honesty both in his art and in his life.

Brahms' most important development in piano music is variation, both as thematic cross-references in melodies and as large cyclical works. *Variations on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 35*, composed in 1863, is based on the Caprice No. 24 in A minor by Niccolò Paganini. It was intended to be a set of etudes and was composed for virtuoso Carl Tausig, one of Liszt's most notable pupils. The work consists of two books, with theme and fourteen variations in each. The final variation in each section is a 3-part climactic and brilliant coda. This work is well known for its emotional depth and technical challenges. Clara Schumann called it 'Hexenvariationen' (Witch's Variations) because of its difficulty. Writer David Dubal describes it as "a legend in the piano literature," and "fiendish," "one of the most subtly difficult works in the literature." Dubal quotes critic James Huneker: "These diabolical variations, the last word in the technical literature of the piano, are also vast spiritual problems. To play them requires fingers of steel, a heart of burning lava and the courage of a lion."

Robert Alexander Schumann (June 8, 1810, Zwickau, Germany - July 29, 1856, Bonn, Germany) was one of the great composers of the 19th century and an influential music critic, whose works are the embodiment of the Romanticism in music. He studied piano and developed an interest in literature at early age. In 1830 Schumann enrolled as a law student at the University of Leipzig. He also began studies with a prominent Leipzig piano teacher, Friedrich Wieck, whose daughter Clara he would eventually marry. Schumann's hand injury ended his dream to become a virtuoso pianist, and he focused on a career as a composer and musical writer. Schumann co-founded *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. In his articles as well as in compositions, he personalized his contrasting alter egos - passionate "Florestan" and lyric "Eusebius". There was mental illness in Schumann's family, and he himself most likely suffered from a bipolar disorder. His life ended in the asylum tragically and early.

Although Schumann wrote in all the forms then known, his outstanding talent to express the most refined and deep feelings is reflected best in piano pieces and songs, where he attained the fleeting union of music and poetry which was the ultimate goal of the Romantic poets and musicians. Schumann had considerable influence in music, despite his conservative modes of composition, especially after his marriage. Schumann's music was promoted by his protégé Brahms. Composer Sir Edward Elgar called Schumann "my ideal."

The *Symphonic Etudes* (French: *Études Symphoniques*), Op. 13 (1834-1835), is a complex set of etudes in the form of variations. The theme is by Baron von Fricken, guardian of Ernestine von Fricken, the Estrella of Schumann's *Carnaval*. Schumann had been briefly engaged to her in 1834 and etudes have an autobiographical element, like many other of his works. The final, twelfth, published etude was a variation on the theme from the Romance *Du stolzes England freue dich*, from Heinrich Marschner's opera *Der Templer und die Jüdin*, which was based on Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, as a tribute to Schumann's English friend, pianist and composer William Sterndale Bennett, to whom the work is dedicated. There were originally eighteen etudes in the set. Schumann cut the number down to twelve. Brahms republished the etudes in the 1890s, with five additional etudes as 'posthumous'. The virtuosic element in Symphonic Etudes is not just for effect, but to express colorful polyphonic complexity, so the piano sounds like an orchestra. They are considered to be one of the most difficult works for piano by Schumann and "one of the peaks of the piano literature, lofty in conception and faultless in workmanship" (Hutcheson).

Liebeslied "Widmung" ("**Dedication**") opens Schumann's song-cycle *Myrthen* ('Myrtles') with texts from the poems of Friedrich Rückert, which was named after the blossoms traditionally associated with marriage. It was a wedding present to his bride, Clara Wieck. In *Widmung* Schumann expressed his most intimate emotions: ecstasy, adoration, anxiety, chagrin, anguish, longing, and the dreams of their life together. Franz Liszt transcribed "Widmung" for solo piano, preserving the spirit and form of the song in flowing passages, haunting enharmonic progression, and passionately nuanced expressivity.

Lyrics and translation excerpt "Widmung (Dedication)", No. 1 of "Myrthen", Op. 25.
A poem by Friedrich Rueckert.

Du meine Seele, du mein Herz,
du meine Wonn', o du mein Schmerz,
du meine Welt, in der ich lebe,
mein Himmel du, darein ich schwebe,
o du mein Grab, in das hinab
ich ewig meinem Kummer gab!

You my soul, you my heart,
you my bliss, O you my pain,
you my world in which I live,
my heaven you, wherein I float,
O you my grave, into which
I ever lowered all my cares.

~Sophia Agranovich