

Music, Magic, and Madness: Tales of Hoffmann, Schumann and Kreisler
by Catherine Kautsky

What does one make of a tomcat writing an "immortal" (p. 27)¹ work entitled *On Mousetraps and their Influence on the Character and Achievement of the Feline Race*, a prince who "wore a round hat and put on a grey overcoat, so everyone knew at first sight that [he] was incognito," (p. 31) and a book which can't make up its mind if it's written by a cat who often thinks in "Poodlish" or by a distinguished biographer of the musician, Kreisler? If one's Robert Schumann, one makes *Kreisleriana*.

The biographical parallels between Schumann (1810-1856) and E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776-1822), literary father of both the prince and the tomcat, are uncanny. Trained like Schumann as a lawyer, Hoffmann shared Schumann's passion for both literature and music. Despite his large literary output, Hoffmann nevertheless felt that "music is perhaps the only romantic art."² So taken with music that he changed his middle name from Wilhelm to Amadeus in homage to Mozart (thus E.T.W. became E.T.A.), Hoffmann was himself a prolific composer, conductor, and writer on music. He shared with Schumann not only an obsession with music, but also a fascination with madness, disguise, and the subconscious. George Sand commented on Hoffmann: "Never in the history of the human spirit has anyone entered more freely and more purely into the world of dream."³ Schumann provided Hoffmann with healthy competition.

Not only were Schumann and Hoffmann linked by shared passions, both professional and instinctive, but they were both regarded as eccentric outsiders by the luminaries in their respective fields. Goethe spurned Hoffmann, and Clara begged Schumann, "Couldn't you just once compose ...a completely coherent piece?"⁴ Schumann, an avid reader, adored Hoffmann; his diary records with unmistakable fervor that he is "reading Hoffmann incessantly. New Worlds" "One can hardly breathe when one reads Hoffmann."⁵ Small wonder that not one, but three of Schumann's cycles (*Fantasiestücke*, *Nachtstücke*, and *Kreisleriana*) are namesakes of Hoffmann's literary works.

¹ All parenthetical page numbers are drawn from E.T.A. Hoffmann, *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr* (London and New York: Penguin, 1999) unless otherwise noted.

² Jeremy Adler, Introduction to *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr* (London and New York: Penguin, 1999), p. xvii

³ Ibid. p. xi

⁴ John Daverio, *Robert Schumann* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 137

⁵ Lora Deahl "Robert Schumann's *Kreisleriana* and Double Novel Structure," *International Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 5, 1996, p. 132

Of these three musical offspring, *Kreisleriana* shows the most direct affiliation with the Hoffmann source. Hoffmann's fictional Kappellmeister, Johannes Kreisler, appears in both the collection of essays, *Kreisleriana*, and the novel, *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr* (*Kater Murr*, in German), and also makes cameo appearances in other Hoffmann stories. It is the novel *Murr* which this article will discuss, but the essays, largely music criticism set in an ironic tone, are strikingly reminiscent of Schumann's own diatribes against the musical Philistines whom his Davidsbündler had set out to vanquish. They paint the portrait of Kreisler as an ideal musician "tossed back and forth by his inner visions and dreams as though on an eternally stormy sea."⁶ In both the essays and the novel, Kreisler is a half-madman, half-genius whose music expresses the "wild pain of...infernal regions." (p. 103) *Kater Murr* alternates between the biography of Kreisler and that of a most remarkable literate tomcat, Murr. The novel's cyclical form, its dualism, and the ambiguous dream world which it inhabits form a compelling literary companion to Schumann's famous piano cycle.

Kater Murr is, in Hoffmann's introductory words, the autobiography of a cat, which "now and then...breaks off [followed by] interpolations of a different nature which belong to another book, containing the biography of Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler." (p. 3) The following explanation suffices for this strange scenario: "When Murr the cat was writing his *Life and Opinions*, he found a printed book in his master's study, tore it up without more ado, and, thinking no ill, used its pages partly to rest his work on, partly as blotting paper. These pages were left in the manuscript - - and were inadvertently printed, too, as if they were part of it!" (p. 4) Thus the reader has no choice but to essentially read two novels -- and to be pitched back and forth between them, mid-sentence, without the slightest preparation for the resultant jolts. The novel's plot is so convoluted as to defy summary, but its main characters, Prince Irenaeus, his children, Princess Hedwiga and Prince Ignatius, Madame Benzon and her daughter, Julia, all inhabit an imaginary kingdom of their own creation. They are visited by the magician, Master Abraham, and his friend, the Kapellmeister, Johannes Kreisler, whose music gives him, too, magical powers. Kreisler is followed close on by Hector and his brother, Cypriot, sorcerers of a different sort. Hector and Cypriot are mysteriously linked in a murderous plot, and it is Kreisler and Master Abraham who expose them. Hedwiga and Julia are buffeted about amongst these variously possessed men, passive victims to their thoughts and plots, and both girls, in their attempt to escape from the hypocrisy of their own world, feel an other-worldly bond with the "wild[and] crazy" (p. 53) Kreisler. Neither has a physical relationship with him, but Julia is linked to him through the "unique spirit of music" (p. 51) and Hedwiga experiences an "electric shock" (p. 128) whenever they touch.

⁶ E.T.A. Hoffmann, Ed. David Charlton, *E.T.A. Hoffmann's Musical Writings* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) *Kreisleriana*: Part 1, p. 79

Interestingly enough, electricity frequently powers Hoffmann's supernatural world; he finds it "wonderful, splendid, terrible, hilarious, and hideous."⁷ Music, with its own intangible power, is presented as a similarly mysterious force, and it alone is "able to speak the language of th[e] unknown, romantic spirit-realm."⁸ As music, love, and magical forces flow together in the novel, biographical parallels with both Schumann and Hoffmann are again inescapable. Hoffmann had suffered an unrequited love-affair with a music student, Julia, and Schumann, of course, saw Clara as the source of his love and passion. Music and female love become inseparable in both book and life, and they provide entry into a spiritual world of "mystery that often enfolds man in invisible arms," clearly preferable to "the surface of the world... a glittering fruit, which has deadly poison concealed within it"⁹ The distance from the desirable "spirit [world] born of light and subterranean fire"¹⁰ and the "red hot claws"¹¹ of madness, however, is a short one, and we read without surprise that Kreisler, Hoffmann's mouthpiece, "had always been obsessed with the idea that madness lay in wait for him." (p. 117) Schumann, too, as we know all too well, was early "seized with a fixed idea of going mad."¹² Clearly, the electrical charge of music was not bounded by the rational in either man, and the men showed themselves as doppelgängers, letting that charge carry them both to the brink of insanity.

The cat Murr, on the other hand, happily inhabits a more material world, revealing its faiblesse at his every prideful turn. His half of the novel remains entirely separate from the saga above, impermeable, save for the fact that Master Abraham, and then Kreisler, are his owners. Not one to understate his own achievements, he explains his advanced state of learning thus: "With my paw I skillfully opened a rather thick book lying in front of me, and tried to see if I could understand the characters in it. At first, indeed, I could make nothing at all of them; but I did not give up. Instead, I went on staring at the book, waiting for some very singular spirit to come over me and teach me to read." (p. 25) "Brilliant tomcat" that he is, he becomes "poet, writer... artist" (p. 303) in his own modest estimation. Murr's acquaintances include not only the humans from whom he acquires his love and mastery of the written word, but also his feline and canine companions, the wily cat Muzius, the seductive Kitty, and the deceitful poodle, Ponto, all of whom teach him the ways of the world. Though ostensibly living a life saturated by the supernatural -- how else might a cat read and publish? -- Murr is, in fact, so completely absorbed with his daily needs that he can

⁷ E.T.A. Hoffmann, *The Golden Pot and Other Tales*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), "The Sandman," p. 97

⁸ E.T.A. Hoffmann, Ed. David Charlton, *E.T.A. Hoffmann's Musical Writings*, Kreisleriana, Part 1, "Ombra adorata," p. 88

⁹ E.T.A. Hoffmann, *The Golden Pot and Other Tales*, "The Sandman," p. 94

¹⁰ E.T.A. Hoffmann, Ed. David Charlton, *E.T.A. Hoffmann's Musical Writings*, Kreisleriana, Part I, "Extremely Random Thoughts," p. 112

¹¹ E.T.A. Hoffmann, *The Golden Pot and Other Tales*, "The Sandman," p. 114

¹² Roy Porter, *A Social History of Madness* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1989), "Madness and Genius," p. 67

"tolerate only agreeable sensations."¹³ His lack of serious angst precludes spiritual development, and when he describes himself as "a young Romantic artist [who] suffer[s] the experience of feeling great and elevated ideas struggle to develop in [his] mind" (p. 44-45) we know he is really describing Kreisler, on the OTHER side of his blotting paper. As usual in the novel, truth is to be found where it's hidden.

Clearly, paradoxes and dualities run rampant here. There is, first of all, the obvious dichotomy of a book which is actually two books, printed together only through happenstance. This central conceit of braiding together two tales which constantly interrupt one another and unfold entirely independently of one another, can exist only in a fantasy world which rejects the rationality of linear time. The reader himself is pushed into a constant readjustment of location and time frame, as if he too simultaneously inhabited two different worlds. Like these split readers, the heroes are cut into contradictory halves: Kreisler, the manic/depressive, who "in the midst of the merriest of games... would run away, to cast [him]self down... weeping and sobbing inconsolably, although [he] had just been the merriest and most hilarious of us all" (p. 54) and Murr, the scholar/ beast moving between "a certain impassioned appetite" (p. 9) for "the sublime, vital spark of poetry" (p. 23) and that same impassioned appetite for fish and sex. Kreisler acts one moment with impulsive temerity, the next with paralytic timidity. Murr alternates between self-satisfied lassitude and macho bravura, moving between the arrogant world of a renowned intellectual and the cat-eat-dog -- or, God forbid, dog-eat-cat-- world of prowling strays.

This division of the world into opposing halves was a trademark of both the composer and the author. Schumann divided not only his music but his own persona into opposing parts, signing articles, letters¹⁴ and even music (see *Davidsbündlertänze*) with the names of his alter-egos, Florestan, the confident extrovert, and Eusebius, the dreamy introvert. Doppelgänger are omnipresent in Hoffmann as well: Kreisler announces, "It is so; there are two of us -- I mean I and my doppelgänger," (p. 124) Master Abraham says "I have only to step outside the door and my own doppelgänger will appear..." (p. 135) "Mademoiselle de Scudéri," another Hoffmann story, is about the hideous "crime of a man [who is by all appearances] the epitome of virtue and probity."¹⁵ And Nathaniel, from the story "The Sandman," is "gentle and child-like" one moment and "like a tormented animal"¹⁶ the next. Schizophrenia and

¹³ E.T.A. Hoffmann, Ed. David Charlton, *E.T.A. Hoffmann's Musical Writings*, Kreisleriana, Part 11 "On a Remark of Sacchini's and on so-called Effect in Music," p. 152

¹⁴ Robert Schumann, *On Music and Musicians*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1946) See for example, p. 98-99 "Letter of an Enthusiast to Chiara" signed variously by Eusebius and Florestan, and "Mardi Gras Speech" by Florestan

¹⁵ E.T.A. Hoffmann, "Mademoiselle de Scudéri," (London: Hesperus Press Limited, 2002), p. 59

¹⁶ E.T.A. Hoffmann, *The Golden Pot and Other Tales*, "The Sandman," p. 116, p. 117

manic-depression awaited neither labels nor Freud to become mainstays of Hoffmann's and Schumann's reality.

The same insistence on duality and the marriage of irreconcilable differences pervades Schumann's musical cycle *Kreisleriana*. In it, Schumann eschews both traditional sonata form and a clear tonal center; he must then unify his work without recourse to conventional form or a tonic key. Paradoxically, he solves the problem of unity via dichotomy. Movements II (in its main section), IV, and VI hover around Bb Major, focusing, as Deahl points out, on an "F " V7 chord which opens each piece in the same register. Movements III, V, and VIII, hone in on G Minor, opening with the same bass "G" and sharing a similar cat-like motive.¹⁷ (Movements one and seven function on their own in closely related keys: movement one is in a solitary D Minor and movement seven reluctantly embraces Eb Major at the end.) Not only key and register, but also mood and tempo bind each trio of movements together, with the former grouping songful, slow, and introspective, and the latter brilliant, rhythmic, and full of nervous energy. The division between the two parts extends, of course, to the physical properties of their performance. Pieces II, IV, and VI demand of the pianist only the slightest bodily exertion, while III, V, and VIII require an almost claw-like physical engagement of the fingers. Quite literally, in both sound and technique, the first group reminds us of Kreisler, the second of Murr. The pianist's art holds up a mirror to the mind/body duality tugging humorously at Murr, and, more profoundly, at Kreisler, as he aims for a "constancy [and] love" (p. 299) with Julia based on musical or spiritual, rather than physical union. Kreisler states wistfully, "As for the artist's love...A true music maker carries the lady of his choice in his heart, desiring nothing but to sing, write, or paint in her honour."(p. 119) Murr scratches his way to physical union, while Kreisler's love is conveyed only through his guitar, a "magical instrument." (p. 41)

Both Hoffmann and Schumann were fascinated not only by the transformative power of "magical instruments" as beheld in dreams, art, and the sub-conscious, but also by their parallels in the occult. Schumann predicted the future through tables which moved of their own accord, Hoffmann embraced the supernatural through animal magnetism. It was taken for granted that the deepest realities of life were hidden and inexplicable: indeed Hoffmann includes a beloved Invisible Girl in *Kater Murr* and Schumann writes beautiful music which is not to be heard, in the *Humoresque*. These men's enchanted worlds are filled with disguise, as if to say that what lies concealed beneath the masks, seen and heard only in the human imagination, is what really counts. Just as Schumann was drawn to musical masquerades, (see *Papillons*, *Carnaval* and *Faschingschwank aus Wien*, all dealing with masked balls), so Hoffmann chose to make all the main characters of *Kater Murr* either imposters and sorcerers themselves, or puppets thereof. The cat is certainly the most humorous imposter of all, but the humans are only slightly less ambitious in their trickery. There is Prince Irenaeus, with "the false brilliance of his imaginary court", (p. 29) surrounded by the women and children who support and reflect his establishment.

¹⁷ Deahl, p. 139

There are the brothers Hector and Cypriot, who appear respectively as a princely suitor and a saint and are jointly revealed as murderers. And, on the side of Right, there is Master Abraham, "a very skillful and famous conjuror" (p. 31) who appears to be "a supernatural being elevated above the rest of humanity," (p. 33) and Kreisler himself, an "uncanny creature...meant to lure us into...magic circles." (p. 40) We have here then a book where the main "personage" is a cat, the main location an imaginary kingdom, and the central human characters magicians. It is strange indeed that the character who writes most persuasively of reality, could not possibly in reality write, that the character who speaks in the first "person" is a cat, and that the only humans we can trust deal in magic mirrors, spells, and ghosts. The human tale, presumably intended for posterity, is, in the novel, consigned to the waste basket (each episode introduced by the initials W.P. for waste-paper), while the cat-story is the ostensible "his-story" of the novel.

In Hoffmann's upside down world, the "singular and eccentric" Kreisler, ostensibly buried in the lowly trash heap, "rise[s] on the seraph wings of song above all that is earthly." (p. 314) Meanwhile, the royalty, clerics, and intellectuals, so elevated by society, are debunked with bitter irony. No one could be more foolish than the pretend Prince Irenaeus, who "lost his little state out of his pocket one day when he went for a walk over the border ..." (p. 28) Or more ill-matched to his holy profession than the cleric who worries aloud that "If the choir is to go, perhaps the wine cellar will be closed to me too" – but reassures himself "for the moment... glug, glug." (p. 263) Or more arrogant than the cat -turned- intellectual who explains "I myself couldn't understand what I was thinking. I set most of the ideas I didn't understand down on paper, and I am amazed at the profundity of these utterances, which I have collected under the title of *Acanthus Leaves* and which I still don't understand." (p. 48) Or more hypocritical than the fallen cat whose funeral oration proclaims that "he always expressed the most laudable attitudes, and was even ready to make some sacrifices to get what he wanted; he was hostile only, and exclusively towards those who crossed him and wouldn't do as he wished. A good faithful husband? Aye – for he chased other little ladies only when they were younger and prettier than his wife, and irresistible desire drove him to it..." (p. 249) Woe be to those in Hoffmann's universe who aren't what they appear to be. The world is a topsy-turvy place, and only those equipped with magic seem able to set it aright.

Although Schumann's music cannot take as explicit an anti-church and government stance as Hoffmann's novel, it too turns expectations on their heads. Schumann clearly concurs with Hoffmann that "A great poet or philosopher ... upsets the balance that polite society is always chiefly concerned to maintain. Every voice must join the perfect accord of the whole, but the poet's strikes a dissonant note." (p. 302) While Hoffmann shows that what society assumes to be honest is often crooked, Schumann in turn shows that what is most circuitous is often most abidingly true. His music, like Kreisler's, revels in "strange flights of humour" (p. 218) and affords "tune after tune, linked by the strangest of transitions, the most outlandish sequences of chords." (p. 38) In *Kreisleriana*, Hoffmann's metaphors suddenly become audible. Take for instance the "outlandish sequence of chords" in movement VI, m. 8-10, which begins

by replacing "Cb" with "B" and proceeds with a veritable magic carpet of modulations. What better musical disguise than that initial enharmonic substitution? Or the "strangest of transitions" in the middle section of movement III, m. 53-69, which takes us back from eb minor, then Gb major, to the opening Bb major only through the gentlest persuasion imaginable. Here, and in countless other examples in movements II, IV, and VI, Schumann treads through keys with gloved hands, gently touching down here and there, but rarely alighting with certainty or at length. He delights particularly in grace notes which create a shiver of doubt and provide that perfect "dissonant note." (See, for example, the entirely gratuitous and thus particularly delightful grace notes "A" near the end of the first section of movement II (m. 35), "D" in m. 2 of movement VI, and "A" eight measures before the end (m. 109) of movement VII.)

Even cadences are affected by this propensity for transforming certitude into doubt. In *Kreiseriana* they are often treated like delicate question marks, points of arrival to evade or even avoid altogether. Some are deceptive, leading where they did not start out to go (movement VI, m. 15-16); others veer off entirely from the path of origin (movement VI, m. 8-11). Some overlap with beginnings (movement VI, m. 17) or fracture the force of their arrival by coming to it in stages (movement III, middle section, m. 46-48). Some are so averse to choosing an identity that it is the listener who must imagine the key of choice. (See, for instance, movement IV, m. 10-11, where, as Charles Rosen points out, Schumann sets up the expectation of a G minor cadence via its dominant 7th (m. 9), but then ends on a bare Bb, leaving the listener unsure whether to complete the chord in the original key of Bb or follow through on the preceding dominant, thus resolving in g.¹⁸ Other cadences are evaded as long as possible: see the "ad libitum-Adagio" near the end of movement II (m. 140-142), whose primary purpose is to prolong uncertainty. Even when they take place with finality, as in movement VII, m. 88, cadences can be withdrawn with equal alacrity and replaced with music which refuses to choose a definitive goal. (Note especially the "etwas langsamer" in movement VII, which so unexpectedly and tenderly saps the energy and bravura confidence of the preceding "presto.") Schumann is at his most touching when the arrogance of speed and brilliance are replaced by doubt and ambiguity, and musical sentences trail away with no clear achievement.

If Schumann provides a veritable encyclopedia for avoiding closure, this swerving off and refusing to end a thought is, of course, the most obvious characteristic of Hoffmann's novel as well. Each episode stops mid-sentence, interrupted by the ploy of blotting paper become an interpolated book. Interestingly, Hoffmann distinguishes between the realism of the cat and the magical world of men by insuring that every interrupted episode of Murr's takes up precisely where cut off, whereas those which comprise the life of Kreisler turn up in scraps lacking connection. The obvious parallel in Schumann would be the relative certitude of the G minor movements, III, V, and VIII, compared with the vulnerability and self-doubt of the Bb movements II,

¹⁸ Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) "Schumann: The Triumph and Failure of the Romantic Ideal," p. 676

IV, and VI. Despite the cat's apparent coup in getting the last word, anyone who has played *Kreiseriana* or listened to it with love, will tell you that just as *Kater Murr* is ostensibly about the cat but of course REALLY deals with Kreisler, so *Kreiseriana*, while ending in unalloyed G Minor, is really about the pieces in Bb. It is they which turn and twist and question and dream, thus mimicking the *process* of the human mind, rather than aping its ever so dubious conclusions. The Bb needs its foil G minor, just as Kreisler needs Murr, but both novel and music in fact choose circularity over linear development, not only from moment to moment, but also in large scale form. Both are cycles; hardly by accident, "kreis" means circle in German. *Kater Murr* ends with the episode from which the beginning takes over, and as Deahl humorously points out, "there must... be few readers who don't go directly from the end back to the beginning, in a somewhat desperate attempt to make some sense of the story." Schumann's work is not so blatantly cyclical as his song cycles *Dichterliebe* and *Frauenliebe und Leben* or the piano cycle *Davidbündlertänze*, where exact material from the beginning recurs near the end, but, nevertheless, in movement VIII the three note opening motif is derived from that of movement I, and as noted by Deahl, the D Minor episode (m. 73) highlights "A-Bb" in the same key and register as the very beginning. More importantly, the beginning and end of the piece appear to be whirling onward, perhaps toward each other, both before and after their ostensible birth and demise. The opening is completely devoid of downbeats for its entire first section; it is thus setting out on its musical journey already unhinged. Similarly, the end of the piece fades away into "ppp," evaporating with a striking lack of finality, as if it has no substance left with which to remain grounded. One can easily imagine the two parts, no longer earth-bound, colliding as the circle goes round.

Just as that circle whirls, so whirl our dreams. Kreisler tells the Princess Hedwiga, "It is only in dreams that our butterfly wings really grow, allowing us to escape the most confined, most secure of dungeons and rise aloft, gleaming brightly into the highest air. After all, everyone has a natural propensity for flying, and I have known grave, sober folk fill themselves up in the evening with nothing but champagne, as a serviceable gas to help them rise aloft in the night, both air balloon and the balloon's passenger." (p. 119) That stuff of dreams and circular flight is the staff of life for Schumann and Hoffmann. The man Schumann who was inhabited by two men and the man Hoffmann who wrote a book inhabited by two books both composed in a "somnambulistic delirium." (p. 22-23) We the listeners and readers attend in a similar trance. It seems striking indeed that a work of music and a work of literature come together so closely in content, form, and intent to evoke this ephemeral world of music, magic, and madness.

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