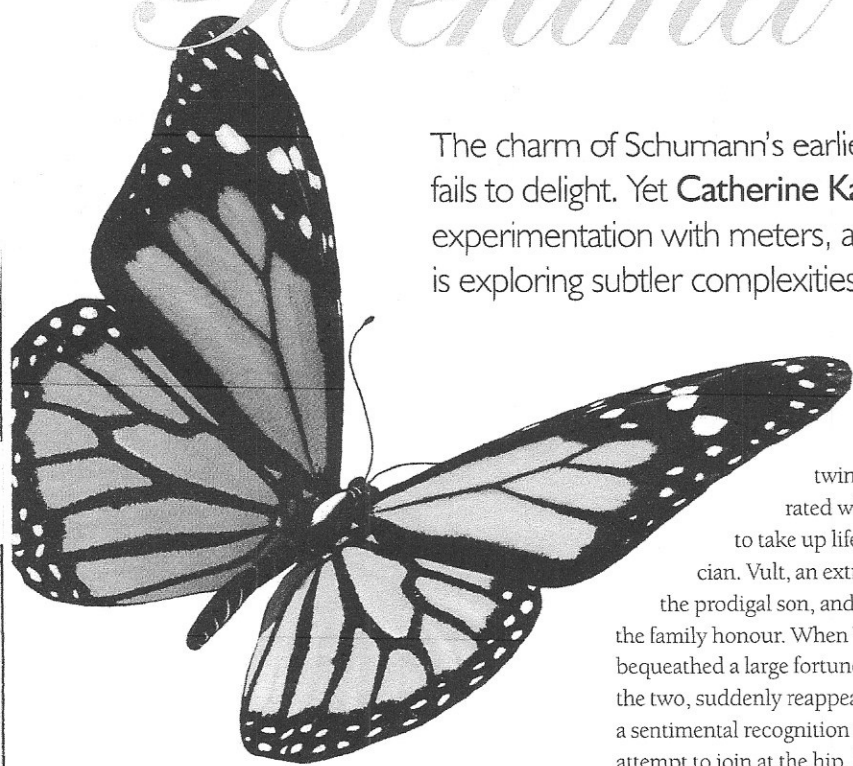


Behind the mask



The charm of Schumann's earliest piano cycle, *Papillons* op.2, never fails to delight. Yet **Catherine Kautsky** argues that through crossreferencing, experimentation with meters, and unusual key juxtaposition the composer is exploring subtler complexities of identity

As I play Schumann and hear his inner joys and demons, I feel increasingly surrounded by doppelgängers. I see them referenced everywhere. I recently read a book review quoting a joke by the American comedian Steven Wright: 'I woke up one day and everything in the apartment had been stolen and replaced with an exact replica. [My roommate] said: "Do I know you?"' Shortly thereafter I read the following quote in a newspaper article: 'Mirrors are like pieces of dreams, their images hyper-real and profoundly fake.' I think Robert Schumann experienced life this way, feeling unsure whether it was Florestan or Eusebius peering back at him from the looking-glass, and worrying that either one might be a charlatan.

Much of Schumann's piano music poses questions about identity, and *Papillons* is most explicit, based programmatically on the German Romantic writer Jean Paul's novel *Flegeljahre*. The 1804 novel strains our patience, digressing so frequently as to make one wonder whether the book is somehow primarily about digression. Its multiple plot lines deal with themes as disparate as German class inequalities, music's magical properties, the nature of friendship and finally, identity and disguise. Most importantly, the novel details the relationship between two

twins, Walt and Vult, separated when Vult flees home to take up life as an itinerant musician. Vult, an extraordinary flautist, is the prodigal son, and Walt is left to uphold the family honour. When Walt, the dreamer, is bequeathed a large fortune, Vult, the shrewder of the two, suddenly reappears on the scene. After a sentimental recognition scene, he and Walt attempt to join at the hip, living together, writing a novel together, and finally falling in love with the same woman.

Schumann's music concerns itself only with the masquerade ball at the end of the novel, where Walt, disguised as a wagoner/miner, anticipates dancing with Wina, his beloved, masked as a nun. His brother Vult also sees the ball as an opportunity to win Wina, but fears (rightly) that she already loves Walt. In order to know her preferences, he plots to switch his costume (a female personification of Hope) with that of Walt, whom Wina has already recognised. He then proposes to dance with Wina in his disguise as the disguised Walt and to ask for a declaration of love, which, should she give it, will of course be meant for Walt. When Wina makes her love for Walt apparent, Vult disappears, ostensibly forever. The novel ends: 'Walt heard him from the street, listened delightedly at the parting tones, for he knew not, that with them his brother flew from him,' and it is this sentence that Schumann initially placed at the head of the manuscript of *Papillons*.

The mental acrobatics required to follow the masquerade story above are indicative of Jean Paul's view of a world peopled by 'veiled forms'. The masked ball is the perfect symbol of this slippery world, for here nobody is as they appear to be. Vult is purportedly not only a different person, but a different sex. Walt is in 'double

disguise' as both a wagoner and a miner. Wina appears as a nun, whose vows would expressly forbid her current love for a man. And this insistence on deception of course intensifies: the disguises themselves are disguised when the costume switch occurs; mask is heaped upon mask.

As Schumann's biographer John Daverio points out, the word 'Larve' in German literally means 'mask', and Jean Paul frequently employs the caterpillar/butterfly metaphor that inspired the title of *Papillons*. Sometimes the disappearing larva/mask is an ugly prison from which the butterfly escapes; at other times it's a protective shield, nurturing the butterfly within. In the end, however, the masks are all for nothing: 'that foolish carnival of life... earnest death, at last draws off the mask and [permanently] alters the countenance'.

Papillons happily steers clear of this 'earnest death' and veers toward the 'carnival of life'. Schumann delights in Jean Paul's fancy of a masked ball that can only be unmasked by the application of further masks. Although Schumann wrote most of *Papillons* before making links to *Flegeljahre*, the swirl of confusion resulting from the brothers' masquerades bears a direct parallel to the swirl of keys and dances which comprise the music. Of all Schumann's cycles, this the earliest, with its pretty tunes and charming dance rhythms, is easiest to take for granted. Yet apart from Beethoven's op.34 Variations, where each variation is in a new key, this daring use of shifting tonalities within a unified whole is original. Indeed, as Schumann's first experiment with the piano cycle form, op.2 is the perfect counterpart to a carnival tale. The keys stride in and out in a far more shocking sequence than Beethoven ever conceived (D major, E flat/A flat major, F sharp minor, A/F sharp major, B flat major, D minor, F minor/A flat major, C sharp minor/D flat major, B flat

EXAMPLE 1 NO.4 BARS 47-48 & NO.5 BARS 1-2



EXAMPLE 2 NO.12 BARS 62-73



minor, C major, D major, D major), and no two consecutive dances even share a key until the last pair, nos. 11 and 12, which arrive as a pair (added after the initial plan for the piece had been completed). Certain abrupt transitions between dances are particularly arresting: between nos. 1 and 2 (D to E flat), nos. 4 and 5 (F sharp to B flat) [EXAMPLE 1], and nos. 9 and 10 (B flat minor to D major). Notice too how frequently Schumann is not content with a single key even within a brief dance: no. 6 seesaws from D minor to F to A; no. 8 careens from C sharp minor to its sweeter enharmonic, D flat major; and no. 9 slides from a dominant cadence on F to a skittish D flat major.

Thematic material is likewise unstable: even within the tiny vignettes which make up the cycle, tunes seem illusory, disappearing before completion and migrating from one location to another. No. 6 turns up in no. 10 as does a fragment of no. 9; no. 1 makes up a large part of no. 12; and no. 12 itself refers back to a 'Grandfather's Dance' used in other music by both Schumann and earlier composers. The entire work begins with an incomplete fragment and ends with its first theme disintegrating until only bells remain. It seems that the more regularly time is marked, the more quickly thematic identities recede: in no. 12 the tunes become

increasingly fragile, and finally disappear altogether once the uncompromising gongs begin [EXAMPLE 2]. The brisk ending implies that the dream is over; time has overrun it.

Schumann's favourite authors, E. T. A. Hoffmann and Jean Paul, both saw music as a way to prolong that dream. In *Flegeljahre* Walt tells Wina that 'music is the climate of the soul' and Vult tells Walt that music is 'the only divine experience that lifts us far above life's villainy'. Similarly, in his own autobiography Jean Paul says: 'To music was my soul... everywhere open: I devoted whole hours... to thundering out my fantasies... as free and bold as any in Europe'. Schumann could avow the same freedom, for not only do tunes and keys flit in and out of *Papillons*, but so too do 'wrong' notes, errant rhythms, and twisting harmonies. Notice the frank emphasis on G sharp in the D major opening of the work [EXAMPLE 3] and the tenderness with which G sharp, A sharp, A flat and D flat disturb the tranquillity of the tonic C in no. 10 [EXAMPLE 4]. Notice too the delightful indecisiveness with which Schumann changes tempo midstream in nos. 4, 10, 11 and 12; the abrupt rhythmic and dynamic shifts in nos. 2 and 6; and the seductive offbeat accents entirely extraneous to the otherwise regular rhythm in nos. 8 and 10 [EXAMPLE 5]. The

parallels to itinerant butterflies and itinerant flautists are legion!

Obviously Schumann was entranced by Jean Paul's tale on multiple fronts. He loved its digressions, which inspired his own non-sequiturs. He adored its romp through identity theft, which licensed him to inject false keys and wrong music into pieces well under way with their own tunes and tonics. And he cherished the doubles and kinship Walt espoused: he agreed that with twins 'two bodies unite in one soul', with friends there is 'a double silken thread of conversation and love', and with a beloved 'two souls might... revolve only around the axis of the other'. Schumann's own life indicated a similar search for an indestructible link with a 'better half', both in its wildly romantic courting of Clara and in its creation of the imaginary Florestan and Eusebius. Clear though it may be that much of *Papillons* was dictated by Jean Paul's novel only in retrospect, there is no question about the remarkable coincidence of concerns and methods between author and composer. Indeed, more interesting than specific correspondences between the book and the music is the fact that author and composer are themselves soulmates 'sharing... the same and equal joys'.

That said, Schumann *did* both underline important passages in *Flegeljahre* and mark the corresponding pieces in *Papillons* (see the Henle edition for specifics). His markings are of course intriguing, but they are at best suggestive rather than definitive. Some pieces bear no obvious resemblance in mood to the designated literary equivalent, and several passages highlighted in the text must be taken out of order in order to correspond to the proper progression in *Papillons*, thus making a continuous narrative impossible. John Daverio hypothesizes that Schumann may have changed the order and numbering of *Papillons* after making his annotations, so it is conceivable that we are sometimes looking to the wrong music for correspondence with the text.

Even with all of these uncertainties, there remains an irresistible urge to study Schumann's annotations and learn what texts most inspired him. One can easily imagine multiple interpretations of each highlighted passage vis-à-vis the music. No. 1 for instance refers to Walt's departure for the ball; the waltzing waltz we hear could well have been floating through his head as he left home so full of trepidation. No. 2, with its rapid-fire changes, is about the fluttering and frenzied figures Walt encounters on entering the ballroom. No. 3 depicts a 'slipping and sliding boot that wore and carried itself'; it impresses Walt greatly, and the music consists of heavy trouncing octaves which eventually appear in ►

PAPILLONS

OPUS 2

Dédiés à Thérèse, Rosalie et Emilie

Komponiert 1830 - 1831

Introduzione
Moderato

1. (M.M. ♩ = 120)
dolce
p

2. *Prestissimo* (♩ = 116)
ff
mf

EXAMPLE 4 NO. 10 BARS 41-48

41 *mf* *pp*
47 *mf*

◀ canon, 'wearing themselves' as obviously as ever music could [EXAMPLE 6]. In no. 4 Walt sees Wina bedecked with auriculas; one can veritably smell the fragrance in this 'sehr leicht und leise' waltz and feel Walt's heart palpitations as he first encounters his love in bar 17. No. 5 is a gentle evocation of Walt recognising Wina, and in it we encounter the first traces of a polonaise, presumably inserted to honour Wina's Polish parentage. The text then skips to the eighth of *Papillons* (and proceeds out of order from there); it's surprising to find that the delicate butterflies Walt imagines as he dances with Wina appear here at first as big fortissimo chords – perhaps Schumann liked the idea of portraying Walt's bumbling feet before confronting the delicacy of his sentiments! Next comes the biggest surprise of all, for no. 7 with its touching *pp* is linked to the crucial textual passage where Vult desperately begs his brother to switch costumes so that he can appear to Wina as Walt. Here, surely, we experience musically Walt's perplexity as he accedes to his brother's request, rather than the actual shrillness of Vult's plea. No. 9 is Vult's curt acceptance of Walt's agreement; its prestissimo captures Vult's rough eagerness to get on with his own agenda. No. 6 is designated to convey Vult's scathing comments on Walt's clumsy dancing: one can imagine the first jarring off-beat accents as representing Walt, and the suave waltz in bar 25 as Vult's impersonation. No. 10, the final piece for which Schumann chose verbal equivalents, depicts Vult dancing with Wina with the utmost finesse, imitating Walt's manner and voice, and finally dropping more and more Polish expressions into his conversation, the better to endear her. The music reveals itself only slowly: it begins with a tentative, pianissimo introduction, moves into a recollection of no. 6 (the music's first exchange between Walt and Vult), and then finds itself suddenly swept away by a waltz with accents askew on the third beat, like a Polish mazurka.

Keeping in mind that the literary designations came after the music was written rather than before, it is still fascinating that much of the cycle's most lovely music, like the dance in no. 10, is assigned to the imposter Vult. As with most imposters, his materials are irresistibly seductive. Though the last two pieces have no explicit counterparts marked in *Flegeljahre*, they continue to tell us a good bit about the plot and to build on Vult's magic flute. No. 11 is by far the most complex piece of the cycle. It plays out the polonaise rhythm to a greater degree than any other, and its raucous scherzo character, giving way in the middle to a gently nostalgic *più lento*, provides a nice encapsulation of the two brothers' characters. ▶

EXAMPLE 5 NO. 10 BARS 25–33

EXAMPLE 6 NO. 3 BARS 16–26

EXAMPLE 7 NO. 12 BARS 31–40

EXAMPLE 8 NO. 12 BARS 89–92

◀ The final piece is highly programmatic. Its opening 'Grandfather's Dance' tells the story of an old man who masquerades as a youthful bridegroom for one day, thus linking this ball with revels of the past. The simplistic and cheery material that follows, with its abrupt change of meter, is only four bars long; like the 'Grandfather's Dance' it contains only dominants and tonics, and its spare idiom is a foil for the return of Walt's opening waltz, so drenched in nostalgia and memory. What begins as a simple reminiscence becomes something more complex: the 'Grandfather's Dance' and opening waltz form a counterpoint to each other, first one in the ascendant, then the other [EXAMPLE 7]. Much as the twins have met and struggled throughout the novel, here the melodies intertwine, one hard and metallic, the other gently malleable. Neither can exist without the other, and yet they are also untenable together. They gradually disintegrate, and when the clock begins to chime they break down entirely [see earlier example – No. 12 bars 62–73]. Once they've been reduced to silence, the remaining bars of the piece reiterate three times, in a nervous succession of keys, the opening melodic shape of the 'Grandfather's Dance' over V–I harmonies. Its rhythm and spirit have been extinguished, and what remains fails to generate enough energy to continue, despite its repeated attempts. When it breaks down completely, the final dominant releases so very reluctantly, note by steadfast note, that we know the ball is over. The final brisk cadence confirms our worst suspicions; nothing could provide a cleaner sweep [EXAMPLE 8].

And yet, not so fast. Perhaps it's the cadence that wasn't for real? Looking back, we've heard, as Walt did in his final 'artistically arranged dream', 'two soft tones, dying and mingling, and awaking again, united with each other. "Thou and I"... as though they were the first words that God pronounce[d], and the first that were answered.' That answer must still be floating somewhere – perhaps as the 'reflection of an echo' which Walt relates, perhaps in the rests, fermatas, and unmeted moments that precede the official V–I closure. In this mystical world of Schumann and Jean Paul, all sounds have undiscovered twins, and the authors ask always: 'Dost thou perceive that ancient re-echo?' No simple smiling cadence can possibly escape a brooding and hidden mate. ■

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