



R. Schumann: Complete Works for Pedal Piano/Organ

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Schumann's 'organ' works are well represented on record. The three almost consecutive opuses make an attractive collection and fit neatly onto a CD. Their paucity must be a frustration for organists, elegant as the works are, and representing a potentially impressive talent for idiomatic organ writing. All the works have been arranged for multiple pianos or for chamber ensembles, in some cases many times, demonstrating their popularity beyond the organ loft.

In the case of opp. 56 and 58, even organ performance is a re-appropriation, as the music was originally composed for pedal piano, a fact rarely acknowledged in CD titles and so all the more creditable for being so described here. That could lead to a potential disappointment for listeners hoping for a taste of this exotic instrument, although the early 19th century Walcker organ on which the music is played is interesting enough in its own right, especially as it is almost contemporaneous with the music.

A recording is available of the two works performed on a pedal piano, the adventurous pianist being Martin Schmeding (ARS 38 011). The comparison is interesting, in that one work, the Op.56 Studies, transfers very well to the organ, while the other, the Op.58 Sketches, relies much more heavily on pianistic textures. The opening of the Op.58 is all staccato chords, never an ideal texture for the organ. Later textures use tremolo effects in the right hand over a melody in the left hand and pedals, again a specifically pianistic texture. On the other hand, Schumann's dynamics are simple and stepped, allowing the organist to switch between manuals to distinguish answering phrases, for example.

Rothkopf never tries to make the organ sound like a piano. Much of the music is written in long legato lines, for which he can rely on the smoothness of the organ sound and the church resonance, which is always evident on the recording but not to the detriment of the clarity of articulation.

Both the Op.58 Studies and the Six Fugues on the Name BACH, are products of a brief but intense period of Schumann's life when he became obsessed with the study of strict counterpoint. This makes the instrumentation less relevant, because, as with much of Bach's keyboard music, the counterpoint plays out in long melodic lines that transfer well between instruments.

Bach is an abiding presence in both works, and not just on account of his name running through the themes of Op.60. The Op.56 studies bear strong stylistic resemblances to much of Bach's organ music. Many of the themes imitate the ways in which Bach made music playable on the pedal board, such as alternating between a stationary note on one foot and a scale passage on the other.

The idea of fugues based on the BACH cipher seems old hat these days, not least because of the similar works by Liszt and Reger, but in their day they were revolutionary. However, I would have to say that 30 minutes of contrapuntal music based on a single four-note theme can tend towards monotony. True enough, Bach succeeded spectacularly in both *The Musical Offering* and *The Art of Fugue* to maintain the interest purely through contrapuntal ingenuity in long monothematic works. It is no discredit to Schumann to say that his skills in this respect don't quite match up to those of his hero.

The performance of these three works is very fine. As befits what are essentially studies in counterpoint, Andreas Rothkopf never attempts to spice up the textures with unusual or rapidly changing registrations. The recording was made in 1987, some 13 years after the restoration of the 1846 instrument. It sounds in fine condition, excellently tuned and balanced and with no audible tracker noise. In general, it is quite a soft-sounding instrument, all warm, woody tones, which I personally find very attractive.

Good recorded audio too, especially given that it dates from the mid-1980s. The microphones are set quite close, I think, or I assume from the subdued resonance of the church. This is not an SACD by the way, despite what you may read elsewhere on the net, but the recording date alone should make that obvious.

This music isn't the sexiest that Schumann ever wrote, but it is a valuable contribution to the organ repertoire, not to mention the pedal piano repertoire. This reissue coincides with Schumann's anniversary year. The record labels have so far done a great job of demonstrating the incredible diversity of his art. He is not really known as an organ composer, and what a shame he did not write more music for the instrument, given the quality of what is on offer here.