



R. Schumann: Fantasie op. 17,
Kreisleriana op. 16 & Arabeske op. 18

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Pianist (Marius Dawn - 2011.02.01)

The two big composer birthdays of 2010 were Chopin and Schumann. Both were born in 1810, but a birth year is one of the few things these very different composers have in common. If one were to choose a single genre of piano music that most characterised each composer, one might say that Chopin was the nocturne and Schumann was the fantasy. One can judge a pianist's ability to perform Chopin by listening to how he plays the nocturne, while with Schumann, it's how he plays the great C major Fantasie.

In this selection of the many Schumann recordings made in the anniversary year, half of the pianists have recorded the Fantasie. The results span the spectrum from frustrating to fantastic. Schumann painted a portrait of his beloved Clara in this three-movement work, in which he asks the pianist to play 'through and through with passion'. Francesco Piemontesi and Hideyo Harada understand this to mean fast tempos, and they rush through many of the louder passages in the first movement, plus they make the scary skips in the end of the second movement faster than anybody else. Alberto Reyes, on the other hand, understands Schumann's instructions to mean slow things down and his first movement is by far the slowest of them all. He thumps his way through the march-like second movement, but in the ultra-slow last movement he seems barely alert. Reyes is an otherwise fine interpreter of Chopin, but Schumann is not the composer for him. In his version of the Fantasie, Florian Uhlig shows a fine sense of balance between the passionate first movement and the persistent rhythmic patterns of the second movement, and only in the finale is he too wayward for my taste. Overall he gives a deeply felt performance and his Schumann complete piano music series is off to a fine start.

Last, but most certainly not least, is Mitsuko Uchida, who outclasses all the other pianists in the Fantasie. Not since Pollini have I heard a more convincing first movement, and Uchida blends the big chords and the rhythmic drive of the second movement to near perfection. It's a pity that in the last movement she loses the underlying forward momentum and allows the long-spun lines to reach a near standstill, else I would have put her interpretation of the Schumann Fantasie as among the very best. Few CD collections will contain a convincing recording of the early piano cycle Davidsbündlertänze opus 6, where the Florestan and Eusebius of the split artistic soul of Schumann come to full fore. Here Uchida is on top form and if she can't beat the early Pollini in the Fantasie, she is the master in these 18 small piano pieces. Just listen to the tenderness in the second piece marked 'Innig' and again in No 14. Few can match her pianism here and the luxurious 2-disc production (the second disc contains an interview with Gramophone editor James Jolly) is worth getting just for the Davidsbündlertänze.

After such overwhelming pianistic finesse from Uchida, it was with some hesitation I

turned to Angela Hewitt and her selection of three large Schumann works. She has been branded as a Bach specialist and true, her Bach is lively and full of rhythmical vitality and energy. On the other hand I was disappointed by her Beethoven sonata cycle, and her live performances are uneven. So can she convince me with her new Schumann recording? The answer is a big resounding Yes! Her Davidsbündlertänze ousts even Uchida from top position, and relegates such old favourites as Kempff and Arrau to the shadows. Where Uchida has a heartbreakingly beautiful tenderness in the Eusebius pieces, Hewitt is outstanding in the extroverted Florestan dances. Her opening chords immediately set the air of expectation and even if her slightly brittle Fazioli piano cannot compete with the Uchida Steinway, her musicality outshines a recording lacking in warmth. In the popular Kinderszenen, Hewitt is up against many recordings (not to mention the fact that almost every amateur pianist has tried to play the famous Träumerei and the two last pieces). The penultimate piece is entitled 'Child falling asleep' and when Alberto Reyes reaches that point in his recording, it is beyond me how he kept awake enough to play the next piece. Hewitt doesn't fall into that trap. She is not a sentimentalist and knows that with Schumann one cannot just stop the flow and fall into a reverie. Reyes is better in the faster pieces, but overall Hewitt is on a different level.

In his recording of the eight pieces that make up Kreisleriana Alberto Reyes finally shows some pianistic sense and sound musicality. Hideyo Harada might have faster fingers and a slightly better Steinway, but Reyes is no slouch. Schumann constantly uses the German word 'sehr' ('very'); pieces are either 'very' fast or 'very' slow. It is Schumann at his most extreme, and successfully performing Kreisleriana so that each movement rolls naturally into the next is something I have heard only a few pianists do with conviction. Sadly neither Harada nor Reyes can hold the half-hour Kreisleriana together. Harada, however, offers a lovely account of the Arabesque at the end of her recital, perfectly played as Schumann wanted it, 'light and tender'. If Harada stumbles into the world of Schumann with too much eagerness in the Fantasie and Kreisleriana, she leaves the stage with a big bouquet of roses from me for a fine Arabesque.

The cyclic form Schumann so loved in his larger compositions reach a technical pinnacle in his Etudes symphoniques. This work is reserved for the super virtuosos and in the recorded catalogue one can find many legendary performances. Alexander Romanovsky is not intimidated by any of the technical obstacles of the Etudes symphoniques (and I can assure you there are many) and just to prove that Schumann is a light hors d'oeuvre, he tosses off the frightfully demanding Brahms 'Paganini' Variations on the same release – playing it as if it had been written for children. This is impressive piano playing and a very remarkable command of the music. The five posthumous variations are inserted into the published version, presumably by Romanovsky himself, and they form a logic part of the whole set of etudes. Romanovsky is the best advocate Schumann could have to argue his case against Brahms, who outshines Schumann in originality of the variation form.

Schumann never had the technical prowess to play his own music, however Liszt did. The two composers dedicated a piece to one another – Schumann with his half-hour long Fantasie to Liszt and Liszt his half-hour long Sonata to Schumann. The two works often feature on the same CD, however Kirill Gerstein has selected Schumann's Humoreske to sit alongside his daredevil performance of the Liszt Sonata. A ten-minute work by Oliver Knussen, Ophelia's Last Dance, is squeezed in between the Schumann and the Liszt like a sardine in a raisin bagel. Do not let that uninteresting piece of piano music take your joy away from a truly masterly performance of one of Schumann's most complex larger works. Vladimir Horowitz made probably the most convincing recording of the Humoreske, infusing the music with his titanic personality, but Gerstein gets closer to what Schumann wanted more

than any other recordings. The Humoreske is a sort of stop-start piece where Schumann has long passages with slightly boring repetitive sequences followed by rays of sunshine, but Gerstein possesses a forward momentum that binds all parts into an integrated whole. He never strays away from the printed score and he is adamant that the dynamic markings made by Schumann should be followed with painstakingly precision. What a relief to hear a sensitive pianist being happy to play what is written, without feeling the need to make strange alterations.

Now, take everything positive I said about the Gerstein Humoreske, and change it to the negative – and you have the Piotr Anderszewski version of the same piece. After a few minutes I had to look at the booklet notes to make sure I hadn't inserted the wrong disc into my CD player. Why on earth can't Anderszewski understand the German word for 'einfach' (simple)? Schumann often just wants the pieces to 'speak' for themselves. He writes clear rhythmic markings and time signatures, a logic harmonic progression, and melodic lines one can sing with natural breathing phrases. When Schumann wants contrasts, he knows how to break the mood, and there is no need for the performer to add any of his own idiosyncrasies. Anderszewski also includes his own arrangement of the rarely played opus 56 etudes for pedal piano or organ on the disc. One cannot say this is very original Schumann, but if you want to have Schumann complete, this recording fills the gap (even if it is Anderszewski's arrangement of the work). Anderszewski ends his bewildering recital with one of the very last collections Schumann wrote, the *Gesänge der Frühe* (Morning Songs). The five short pieces are more nocturnal reflections than early morning gymnastics. Pollini turned them into finely sculptured masterpieces and probably made them sound better than they are. Anderszewski is in no danger of doing the same and in the end one is just relieved that Schumann did not write more, so the CD can finally come to an end.

One of the least heard of the half-hour Schumann piano cycles is *Bunte Blätter* (Coloured Leaves). The 14 short pieces, a couple of them lasting less than a minute, are nearly impossible to play in concert, because of their fragmented style – no doubt the audience's concentration would be stretched to the limit. Even more impossible to pull off is the collection *Albumblätter* opus 124 which I doubt I will ever hear live. Cyprien Katsaris nevertheless performs these 20 slight opus 124 Schumann pieces live on his new CD, and the audience deserves credit for sitting through the performance – not because Katsaris plays them less than with full enthusiasm, but simply because this is Schumann at his lowest inspiration.

The *Bunte Blätter* also feature on a new release from French pianist Claire Desert, though there are more inventive pieces by Schumann on her disc to draw us away from the less than ideal and fairly frustrating pieces. Schumann wrote piano works that are, to this day, unsurpassed in their brilliance. However he could also mess around with nothing and produce little jewels of inspiration. Desert has included two sets of variations by Clara Schumann and Brahms and they are worth the price of the disc. The early Brahms opus 9 variations 'dedicated to Mrs Clara Schumann' are not on the 'Paganini' Variations level, however they clearly show a genius composer when put next to the variations Clara composed and 'dedicated to him [Schumann]'. Desert's disc is called *Evening Music* and could be used instead of a large whisky for those suffering from insomnia.

Clara Wieck-Schumann also put her hand to compositions for piano and orchestra. Her *Concerto Movement* has just been successfully recorded by Oleg Marshev and the sensitive conductor Vladimir Ziva. It is the bonus work on a disc that features her husband Robert's much-loved piano concerto and his two other published works for piano and orchestra. Cyprien Katsaris also offers us Schumann's piano concerto with the Japan Philharmonic, but Marshev easily outclasses Katsaris with his strong and

dynamic performance, well supported by the Danish orchestra. If you have other versions of the Schumann concerto that you might prefer to Marshev's, he has few competitors in the two other works for piano and orchestra. And then you do get to hear Clara buttering her ten-minute concerto movement with a good dash of Chopin imitations.

Where Liszt said it all in one sonata, Schumann said it in three. They are all part of an ongoing series of the complete piano music from the Swiss label Claves, divided between different pianists. Francesco Piemontesi offers a good and secure performance of the three sonatas, adding yet another volume to what could very well be the best complete Schumann piano music on disc. Florian Uhlig has also recorded the Concert Without Orchestra, as the Sonata No 3 is often called, but it is Piemontesi who is the clear winner. However, Piemontesi cannot beat Angela Hewitt in the frantic Sonata No 2 where Schumann wants the first movement played 'as fast as possible' and then near the end 'even faster'(!). Hewitt is the fresh unsentimental breeze of air that makes us all fall in love with Schumann, just as Clara must have done.