

PERSONAL TOUCH

German pianist *Burkard Schliessmann* explains how he has found inspiration for his latest album of Schumann by delving deep into Romantic literature and philosophy, as well as encountering the underwater world through his love of scuba

GOETHE SAID: 'DREAMS ARE the feelings of the imagination'. To me, fantasy and imagination without feelings are hollow and dry – music only comes to life when they are combined.

The realm of fantasy, that 'dreamland Atlantis' of which the writer ETA Hoffmann

spoke, is the true domain of all Romantic musicians. The thoughts and dreams of the poets, their poetry and vividly evocative tales, inspired composers like Schumann to invent new harmonies and forms that dissolved inherited preconceptions. Schumann used the word *Fantasy* in the title of his Opus 17, but not only there:

his Opus 12 and 111 consist of groups of *kleinere Fantasiestücke* (shorter fantasy pieces). Other works by him that could come under this designation include *Kreisleriana*, the *Novelletten*, *Nachtstücke*, *Kinderszenen* and the later *Waldszenen*.

Many of Schumann's piano pieces were inspired by works of literature. Knowledge ►

Burkard Schliessmann: 'Schumann was a master of using music to evoke special states of mind'



MATTHIAS HEYDE



Diving deep: Schliessmann in the Caribbean

of these literary sources, together with an understanding of musical structure, is essential for any interpreter. Schumann was a master of using music to evoke special states of mind: for example, he frequently writes passages that require the hands to cross, upsetting the performer's natural sense of rhythm. Some effects can seem completely illogical when you hear them for the first time, but they gradually make sense as the piece develops. In this he is a typical representative of an epoch in which the decline of religion led to a revaluation of madness. Early Romantic writers like Gerard de Nerval, Hölderlin and Charles Lamb tried to replace logical thinking and rationalism with a new form of understanding. Schumann did the same in music: anyone listening carefully can feel his irrational, almost crazy quality.

Stylistically, Schumann's works follow on from a transitional period defined by the successors of Viennese Classicism, particularly Beethoven. Just as the sons of Bach espoused the 'galant', ornamented style of their generation, so the pupils of Mozart and Beethoven – Hummel, Ries, Czerny, Moscheles and so on – took pains to compensate for thinner musical substance with increased instrumental brilliance, thereby preparing the ground for the golden age of the piano and the era of the Romantic virtuoso. Yet among the multitude of composers writing for the piano at that time, only two – Weber and Schubert – stand out as original creative forces. Schumann's early piano works owe a greater debt to the intimate, romantic and deeply soul-searching idiom of Schubert than to Weber's refined brilliance.

The originality, greatness and individuality of Schumann's mature style comprises two aspects. His creative imagination took him well beyond the harmonic sequences known by his predecessors, but he also discovered a Romantic principle in fugues and canons by earlier composers. Schumann saw a parallel between the interweaving of voices, the essence of counterpoint, and the mysterious relationships between the human psyche and exterior phenomena. He felt impelled to express this discovery in what the German Romantics called musical arabesques.

Schubert's broad melodic lyricism is often contrasted with Schumann's terse motivic writing, erroneously regarded as 'short-winded'. Yet it is precisely with these short melodic formulae that Schumann shone his searchlight into the previously unplumbed depths of the human psyche. His melodies are rarely through-composed, but their simple strophic form can express everything from tender intimacy to violent passion. The key to this transformation is harmony, achieved through Schumann's use of chromatic progressions, suspensions, pedal points and a rapid alternation of minor and major modes.

Schumann's unique instrumental style is perfectly attuned to his own compositional idiom. Following a period in which the piano had been used to explore sensuous beauty of sound and brilliant colouration, with Schumann it again became a tool for conveying poetic monologues. He avoids using the tone-colours of different registers in an orchestral, Beethovenian manner, but what counts is the dynamic richness and the differentiation between main and secondary voices. The fact that Schumann rarely uses the top and bottom extremes of the keyboard is one feature of his piano style that significantly differentiates its colour palette from that of Liszt or Chopin. The use of the sustaining pedal over long arcs of sound, especially in lyrical passages, helps the performer to evoke Schumann's dreamlike moods, mysterious sound quality and free-roaming imagination. It also reveals the limitations of the instruments of his day: notes can be sustained for much longer on modern instruments, making it easier to achieve what is indicated in the score.

Schumann gave fantasy names to different aspects of his own personality: 'Florestan' and 'Eusebius' represent opposing qualities such as 'storm' and 'explosion' versus 'deep emotionality' and 'intimacy'. Recognising these extreme feelings is the key to understanding Schumann's life, in which *illusion* became reality for him. By holding up a mirror to Schumann's febrile inner conflicts, sharpness and poignancy, we can access his Romantic realm of fantasy.

In terms of his development, Schumann's direction of travel was from large architectural forms to miniatures. His later works offer a concentrated explosion of sheer detail. *Gesänge der Frühe* (Songs of Dawn) Op 133 is one of Schumann's most shattering and deeply touching works, created from the depths of his soul. It is visionary yet abstruse.

I strongly believe that intuition is an aspect of truth. Intellectual understanding is one way for an interpreter to approach

a composer or a piece of music, but in the end, it is important to free oneself from thinking. True artistry can only be achieved by merging all aspects of music. The result is an 'explosion' felt by every member of the audience: intuition and emotionality end in catharsis, the highest level of art, interpretation and intermediation.

Away from the piano, I find inspiration for my music-making through scuba diving. I am a qualified PADI Master Instructor and have logged more than 8,500 dives in oceans around the world. Thanks to a phenomenon called synesthesia, I am able to express the colours of the underwater world through my playing. Diving also offers a psychological 'border experience', comparable with my experience of performing: when everything flows, the music merges with the intentions of the composer, the instrument, the acoustic of the hall and the audience to achieve artistic perfection – the highest ideal of all. 🎵

Burkard Schliessmann's Fantasies will be released in Spring 2019, featuring an all-Schumann programme on two SACDs/CDs: Fantasiestücke Op 12, Kreisleriana Op 16, Fantasie in C major Op 17, Nachtstücke Op 23, Fantasiestücke Op 111 and Gesänge der Frühe Op 133 (Divine Art DDC 257530) www.schliessmann.com



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