Robert Schumann's Poetics: Mystical Fusion and Ecstasy. A Conversation with Burkard Schliessmann

BY ROBERT SCHULSLAPER

Towards the end of my last conversation with pianist Burkard Schliessmann (*Fanfare* 45:3), he told me of his intention to record "all the major works of Robert Schumann that were originally composed as fantasies." Now, with the release of the aptly titled three-SACD set *Fantasies*, that dream

has become a reality. However, not one to rest on his laurels, Schliessmann's future plans include tackling Beethoven's last three sonatas, Chopin's three sonatas, and Liszt's *Transcendental Etudes*, recordings that will surely be eagerly awaited by his many admirers.

*Welcome back, Burkard; it's a pleasure to speak with you once more. In your previous interview with James Harrington (*Fanfare *47:4) you discussed* Live & Encores*, a release that brought us your spontaneous performances of music by Bach, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Chopin. But in addition to describing the genesis of that recording and the current one, you emphasized Bach's impact on the generation that rescued him from artistic obscurity.*

Bach's works are a bridge that link together far more remote areas of music and allow every later generation to understand the musical past. They were written at the end of a major period in the history of music, and while they are rooted in the past in terms of their form and spirit, their bold divinatory treatment of their musical material means that they also point the way forward and adumbrate a future age. Ever since Bach's works were rediscovered by the Romantics in the early 19th century, their composer has been admired and hailed as the quintessential musician and as the incarnation of a supra-personal, timeless spirit in music.

It is hard to put into words this special quality about his music, not least because it is *sui generis* and because the distance from the self, or "I," which it was almost impossible for the Romantics to grasp, was still a given for Bach as a result of the tradition in which he was working. He never spoke about himself or about his own sufferings and pleasures. His calling was sustained by a profound artistic and intuitive understanding of the nature of archetypal procedures in music and of the life and impact of the melodic line, which he had inherited from the age of Renaissance polyphony as one of the tools of his trade. With his unsurpassed ability to create the most vivid themes, Bach contrasted the older style with the newer Classical art, with its additional dimension of humanity. The mouthpiece of a higher power, he was the medium of religious revelation in his sacred works, the servant of social conventions in his secular suites, and the executor of musical developments and decisions in those "free" compositions that were not tied to a particular purpose, most notably the preludes and fugues of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. In short, Bach's incomparable greatness rests as much on his genius as on his position and function within the history of music.

Bach's works are remarkable for the synergy arising from many different currents, a quality inspired by remote forms from the past, starting with vocal polyphony. The power associated with the independent melodic line, the primal power and impulse of all music-making, continues unbroken in his music, filling his fugues with their uninterrupted thematic momentum. The architectural spirit of Gothic art is manifest in Bach's forms, achieving a sense of fulfilment that seems like a reminiscence. Such forms are like bold and fantastical buildings in the imaginary space of their sound world, thereby acquiring a genuine weightlessness and timelessness. The legacy of an age that was religious in its inspiration lies primarily in the unique contribution of the transcendental, which is achieved through mystic contemplation and ecstatic uplift.

Of the three Bach works you performed on Live & Encores*, the Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue seems to have exerted a special fascination for the Romantics.*

Indeed, the Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue is a visionary work that looks far beyond its age in terms of its formal design, its structure, its character, and its inherent musical language. Even today it continues to point the way forward. This Romantic interpretation proved influential. As a young virtuoso, Johannes Brahms used to launch his concerts with the Chromatic Fantasia, while Liszt also performed the work at his recitals. Schumann and Chopin (both born in 1810) also held Bach in highest esteem in a special way and saw themselves as inspired by him in their own works throughout their lives. Schumann saw in Bach the origin of all combinatorics in music, while for Chopin Bach meant greatness, order, and tranquility, but also homeliness in the past. He himself mastered the laws of logic and construction and, unlike many of his contemporaries, gave his works a classical structure over and above the Romantic element. However, what Schumann himself especially thought and wrote about the Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue we don't know, as we don't have any material. In the early 1900s, Max Reger even prepared an organ arrangement: Bach's highly expressive work, which is surely one of his most personal, has retained its fascination across the centuries.

It has also been frequently reprinted with interpretative additions and performance markings. In his own edition of the work, the Romantic Bach interpreter Ferruccio Busoni drew a distinction between the final passage in the coda and the recitative. Let's have an intensive look at bars 75 through 79 in the Fantasia: This is the coda of the recitative, which starts in bar 49. While a truly free form of musical language begins here, in the combination of harmonic-dramatic tensions and virtuoso monophonic passages, the music reaches its climax from bar 75 onwards in a five-bar coda over a pedal point on D♮ that features a series of chords of the diminished seventh descending over the span of an octave, with the scales of each figure being varied with filigree delicacy and accompanied by playful ornamental figures in the upper voice. It is from this sense of sinking into a feeling of gloomy resignation and rampant imagination that the subject of the ensuing fugue emerges, a line that rises stepwise from A♮ to C♮.

So what begins in the Fantasia in a tonal language of improvisation ends here, in a rhythmically fixed, visionary form. Just as the final section of the Fantasia harnesses together such remote keys as B♭ Minor and C♯ Minor, so in the central section of the Fugue, Bach goes beyond fixed key relationships, which have a real directness for the listener, allowing the latter to find a purchase. Bach introduces his subject, which is however not fully chromatic, in B Minor in bars 76–83, then in E Minor in bars 90–97, combining both entries with a modulation to a particularly remote tonality.

By "combinatorics" do you mean the sort of "games" composers play with inversions, augmentations, retrogrades, mathematical manipulations…?

"Manipulations"—no, that's not the right direction. It's an aspect of the inner laws, proportions, and the natural consequence of an awareness of the state of harmony between all existential aspects of art and music.

Can you draw any parallels, structural or otherwise, between the Bach Fantasia and Schumann's Fantasie*?*

No, from a philosophical point of view the Bach and Schumann fantasies are separate entities. There are no parallels. However, it is evident that, stylistically, Schumann's piano works belong to a transitional period that was inspired by Bach's polyphony and conditioned by the successors and imitators of Viennese Classicism and particularly Beethoven. The elements of Schumann's style that make him original and great, and which are uniquely characteristic of him, can be viewed in two ways. His compositional inventiveness took him far beyond the harmonic progressions known until his time; on the other hand, he discovered in the fugues and canons of earlier composers a Romantic principle. He saw counterpoint, with its interweaving of voices, as corresponding to the mysterious relationships between external phenomena and the human soul and, being a Romantic composer, found himself impelled to express these in complex musical terms.

The challenge of finding adequate musical and intellectual substance to fill a large-scale form was one which Schumann had never fulfilled better than in the *Fantasie* in C, op.17; indeed, in the field of piano music he never again equaled this achievement. For these reasons the ambitious *Fantasie* in C occupies a special place in Schumann's *oeuvre* and is a reflection and mirror of my own personality. It is arguably the boldest and most uninhibited work he ever wrote, and not only because it is dedicated to Franz Liszt, the boldest and most uninhibited piano virtuoso of all time. It also harks back to a freer and more improvisatory conception of sonata form anticipated by Beethoven. Moreover, this homage to Beethoven carries the telling subtitles "Ruins," "Triumphal Arches (Trophies)," and "Crown of Stars (Palms)." Their primary intention is to serve as a reminder of the glory and triumph of genius, its palms of victory, and its immortality in the starry firmament of high creativity. In the rarefied world of Romantic sensibility and personal passions, such aspirations had to find the only possible way open to them to achieve the same high accolade. This uniquely personal Romantic language is clearly audible in the lines by Friedrich Schlegel that Schumann later chose as the motto for the whole work instead of naming the individual movements:

Through all the tones in the
many-colored dream of the earth,
one single tone can be
discerned by the secret listener.

However, Bach's Fantasia is not inspired by literature or mystical "visions." It's really something "absolute," which is compressed in a structural form.

Can you expand on your concepts of "human realism" as opposed to "decorative surface" or "falsely introduced transcendence," interpretive approaches that you feel have been mistakenly applied to Bach? Is this relevant to Schumann as well?

It is a common tendency nowadays to falsify the welded-in musical content of a composition just to attract attention. And yes, with Bach in particular, one runs the risk of distorting the inner truth: extreme tempos, no matter in which direction, extreme dynamics, culminating in a "decorative surface" or "falsely introduced transcendence."

And, yes: "For in art we are not dealing with a mere or pleasant performance, but … with an unfolding of truth"—an ideal proposed by Hegel in the third section of his *Aesthetics*. This pointing out of inner, real truth in art has been lost today and has fallen victim to PR machinery.

To my knowledge, your Fantasies *recording may be unique for its use of two interchangeable keyboards to affect dramatically the sound and even the interpretation. In other words, for some pieces, two differently voiced mechanisms were alternately "plugged in" as required. I wonder if anyone has thought of doing that before? It's not only an inventive solution but actually very practical; otherwise, you would have to choose from available instruments to find the best one for each desired interpretation, and what if there weren't two suitable ones at hand? If you had limitless disc space available, would you have liked to extend this practice to the rest of the program? Are you tempted to pursue this in other recordings?*

I really had been inspired by the possibilities of two totally different voicings of these two keyboards, and so it was a challenge to deliver several interpretations. I really do know exactly the interpretative possibilities of a composition and its inner connections and structures. The second keyboard, with its darker sound and more fundamental intonation, was not ideal for each of the works performed, but for those where I used it, this sound opened up a new world.

This realization inspired me (and challenged all of us) to create two completely different interpretations of some works by exchanging the keyboards, e.g. the *Arabeske* and also "Des Abends" from the *Fantasiestücke*, op.12.

In this way, I also showed the variety and complexity of interpretive possibilities depending on instrument and acoustics. In the end, three SACDs were produced. A special feature of the second disc is the further interpretation of the *Arabeske* using the darker and warmer sound of the alternate keyboard, and at the end of the disc—as if closing a circle—a completely different interpretation of "Des Abends," a quasi-transition to the darkness of the *Nachtstücke*, op. 23, that opens the third disc and introduces the late pieces by Schumann.

What are your thoughts about interpretation in general? How does "good taste" intersect with "artistic freedom?" Is it possible to be "right?" Think of Wanda Landowska's quip, "You play Bach your way and I play it his way." Can there be such a thing as a performance free of personality?

No, every artist must develop and have his or her own personality and identity. And this holds true in every respect—sound, rubato, dynamics, pedaling etc., to name but a few. When Horowitz, Gould, Michelangeli, or Landowska played, you could recognize who was playing after just a few notes. It was the extremely strong personality that was expressed. But beyond personality, at the deepest level, it is in always laying bare the truth of the composition and the composer's intention that great and real art resides. It would be a lie to Art to ignore or falsify that intention of inner truth.

This recording was made after years of intensive study of Robert Schumann's oeuvre*. Can you synopsize what you learned during that time? How has it deepened your understanding of the music and the composer himself?*

I actually immersed myself in Schumann and his morbidity. The climax, finally, was making the recording in Berlin itself: During the recording process I worked as if in a trance. I merged with the great acoustics of the Teldex Studio and with the unique instrument and the respective composition. In discussions with Julian Schwenkner and the comparison of various editions and originals of the works, I took Schumann to a special level: Robert Schumann at the highest level, interpreted in his disjointedness, intricacy (despite classical structure in form, in his vision), eccentricity, and mor-

bidity, from the early works up to the *Gesänge der Frühe*, op. 133.

Among other things, I dealt extensively with Robert Schumann's fictitious illness and studied the notes of the pathologist Hans Bankl, who studied Schumann's brain. Schumann is the representative of a trend to replace logical thinking, rationalism, with a new form of understanding intuited by writers such as Gérard de Nerval, Hölderlin, and Charles Lamb. Anyone who listens attentively to Schumann's music will recognize this illogical, irrational, almost crazy aspect. However, we remain in the realm of commonplace banalities if we do not specify exactly how he succeeds in conveying this impression to us. We may feel the effects of the methods he uses—perhaps they will resonate a deep sensation in us—but we cannot say that we understand them.

So everything in Schumann's work was planned at the highest level. Hence my personal conviction that Schumann was never ill, but was always misunderstood: The Biedermeier period did not permit his phantasmagorias. Bettina von Arnim also considered Schumann to be healthy during a visit to Endenich, but the doctor treating him to be ill (Ernst Burger: *Robert Schumann*. Schott, Mainz 1999, p. 329).

You re-recorded Schumann's op. 17 for Fantasies *not long after performing it live on the previous release. What prompted your decision to do so?*

This has to be understood in connection to *Live & Encores* (which really was produced live in April in the Fazioli Concert Hall in Sacile). It was later, from August 28th to September 2nd, 2023, that I recorded my Schumann project, *Fantasies*, in the renowned Teldex Studios in Berlin.

This production pursues a completely different goal: While *Live & Encores* represents an immediate, spontaneous impression of a concert program, displaying a variety of stylistic elements from Bach to Mendelssohn through the High Romanticism of Schumann to Chopin, the studio production concentrates exclusively on Robert Schumann and attempts to illuminate the inner germ cells of the music in its expressiveness and explosiveness, and to bring it to its limits.

Listening to the leisurely unfolding of the Fantasie*'s third movement on the new recording got me thinking about the interplay between tempo and interpretation.*

The question of "speed" is always of crucial importance. Even small differences in tempo and rubato result in a different sense of interpretation and thus understanding. The supporting acoustics of the Teldex studio inspired me to emphasize completely different aspects of the third movement, as the sounds merged in a different form than in the Fazioli concert hall. And of course there was the instrument itself: Everything merged into a new, inner, great whole.

What about Schumann's controversial metronome markings?

This is a sensitive subject. The Schumann editors of our day are faced with the question of whether they should retain the metronome markings of the original editions unchanged, add their own suggestions, or undertake completely new metronome markings. The decision on this controversial problem stands and falls with the question of whether the thesis that Schumann's metronome may have been defective deserves to be believed or not. The fact that no metronome in Schumann's possession has survived until today naturally makes the answer to this question more difficult.

The first evidence for this "defective metronome" thesis was a letter from Brahms to Clara Schumann dated April 25, 1861, in which he wrote: "We have already talked about the existing metronome. So you want to do it after all? I think it is both impossible and unnecessary; just as I believe less in Schumann's false metronome than in the uncertainty of its purpose." (*Clara Schumann – Johannes Brahms: Briefe aus den Jahren 1853–96*. Leipzig 1922, Vol. I, p. 359). Apparently, Clara Schumann had already expressed the suspicion in 1861 or earlier that her husband's metronome had given a false indication. As Clara Schumann was regarded as highly authoritative on all matters relating to her husband's work, her suspicions were believed without hesitation and without asking for exact proof. As early as 1869, Hans von Bülow wrote in the preface to his edition of the Cramer Etudes that "Schumann is said to have metronome-marked according to a defective Mälzel during an entire production period...." There are countless examples which prove that Schumann's metronome markings are to be seen—and thus applied—relatively and not absolutely.

Have you heard of pianist Wim Winter's double-beat theory, which argues that Beethoven's metronome markings (and those of other composers of the time) should really be played at half the

indicated speed?

This is also a serious subject, surely one worthy to think about. However, whether these works "should be played at half (!) the indicated speed"—for my personal taste, it's much too extreme.

I'd be remiss if I didn't ask you to tell us something about the Fantasie*'s disc mates:* Kreisleriana, Fantasiestücke, Arabeske, Nachtstücke.

Oh, of course. Let's start with *Kreisleriana*, because there we already experience the abstruse world of Schumann. If we take a look at Schumann's *Tagebuch* (Diary) we find the *Mitternachtsstück* in the first volume, a moving and chilling testimony to Schumann's abysmal world of thought, expressions of primal personalization that impressively convey the coldness of death, but also the closeness to death of Schumann's imagination. They could well have served as a model for the last, oppressive moments of the *Kreisleriana*:

"The two stars gleamed magically over the death-bows and the weeping willows and the cypresses whispered their language softly to each other. The graves towered silently above the flowers that swayed in the wind and the monuments cast great long shadows, like the hands of time or eternity, and they said: 'See, we show where you once but lie.' The moon shone silently, and in the ether long swan songs sounded monotonous and gloomy; the earth lay there, formless and silent and slumbering. 'Selene, Selene,' it called outside the window of the tomb of the dead. Selene raised herself up; she looked shyly into the moon, then she flung up her arms and wanted to embrace the moon. Her bosom beat high and loud, like clockbeats. Her long white nightdress was open, and hung carelessly over her body; her long hair fell down wildly and gloomily. Selene ran quickly across the grave and read the epitaphs. 'Here rests a broken heart' read the illuminated one. She sat down, smiling, on the grave-hanger. Now a skeleton came walking down the church aisle; she heard the bones rattling; but she was unable to get up. The skeleton came closer and sat down beside her and wrapped its arm around her body. 'You want a kiss,' she said shyly. The skeleton laughed and gave her an icy kiss, and then went away. 'I must have sinned!' she cried. Then she got up and went into the church and climbed around on the gallery; the skeleton sat at the organ and played a waltz; the moon went down. Selene went into the tomb of the dead. It was silent and still and she slumbered."

Interestingly, Schumann had dedicated *Kreisleriana* to Frédéric Chopin, who however did not honor this composition accordingly. Apparently, the form-conscious Pole found the fantasies inspired by E. T. A. Hoffmann too disjointed, too eccentric, too confused.

And now, let's have a look at the *Gesänge der Frühe*, op.133, the last work that Schumann himself prepared for printing. On February 23, 1854, one day before he threw himself into the Rhine, he wrote to the publisher, F. W. Arnold, "I do not wish to publish the *Fughetten* (op. 126) because of their mostly melancholy character and offer you another, recently completed work, *Gesänge der Frühe, 5 Characteristic Pieces for Pianoforte*, dedicated to the poet Bettina von Arnim. These are pieces of music that depict the feelings as the morning approaches, but more as an expression of emotion than painting…."

Schumann is probably alluding to Beethoven, who gave his Sixth Symphony the motto "More emotion than painting." However, the connection between the work and the poet Hölderlin (1770–1843) and the figure of Diotima created by him seems even more important: The autograph of the *Gesänge der Frühe* is headed "An Diotima." It is probably no longer possible to determine whether Schumann was thinking of Diotima in general as a symbolic figure well known to Romanticism or whether he wanted to refer directly to Hölderlin's Diotima poems. Perhaps the two dark final lines of the poem *An Diotima*—"Your sun, the fairer time, has set / And in frosty night hurricanes now bicker"—had a foreboding meaning for Schumann. According to the entries in his housekeeping book and in the list of compositions (where it is only referred to as "Diotima"), the work was composed between the 15th and 18th of October 1853, i.e., around four months before Schumann's mental derangement. And Clara Schumann noted in her diary on 18 October, "R. has composed *5 Frühgesänge*—quite original pieces again, but difficult to comprehend; there is a very special mood in them." The reasons why the supertitle *An Diotima* was finally dropped and the work was dedicated to Bettina von Arnim are not known. Bettina von Arnim, together with Joseph Joachim, was a guest in Düsseldorf ten days after Schumann completed *Gesänge der Frühe*. In May 1855, she vis-

ited Robert Schumann in Endenich. Schumann wrote to her afterwards, "I would be delighted if you, honored lady, heard the *Gesänge der Frühe* from my Clara. She will also send you the songs. Would you grant me your favor to come for a long time."

More than almost any other work, the *Gesänge der Frühe* represent the style characteristic of Schumann's last creative phase. This is emphasized by the close relationship between the main themes from both framing pieces, whereby the sequence of keys (D Major, D Major, A Major, F♯ Minor, D Major) already represents a cyclical concept. Using subtle techniques of transformation, variation, and polyphonic juxtaposition of individual motif particles, Schumann achieves a close interlocking of all five pieces, whose themes are based on a single core motif, introduced in unison at the beginning. The structure is intensified by further interweaving and clear reminiscences (for example between pieces No. 1 and No. 2, as well as No. 2 and No. 4). The third piece represents a central climax due to its greater expansion in movement and tonal range as well as its concise rhythm. A rhythmically clearly structured, mostly four-part passage of chordal writing (especially in No. 1 and No. 3) creates a highly explosive change of mood, with quasi-preludial passages and ones in which melodic voices interlock closely with those of the accompaniment. The difficult accessibility of this complex work has led many pianists to give this opus a wide berth.

You always pursue the highest standards of musicological research and technical execution in your performances, and you're no less exacting when it comes to recording technology. To render Fantasies *as vividly as possible, you chose Dolby Atmos, a system requiring an unusual number of microphones.*

To produce the complexity and multidimensionality of Dolby Atmos, 14 microphones were required. Jupp Wegner of Teldex Studios is a pioneer in Dolby Atmos, and I think the spatiality is excellently emphasized. In my production Teldex used outstanding equipment: a series of Coles 4038 and Royer R121 ribbon mics as well the classic Neumann M48 tube mics, amongst others.

When recording in a studio, do you miss the presence of an audience?

It's quite an obsession with me to communicate in the moment with my audience. I don't only play for them; it's something I want to give back to them. I feel how each listener in the audience is listening to me: I feel the warmth, for example, and I give it back to the entire audience. I feel the intensity of hearing, of listening. This is like electricity, and this I give back to the audience. It's very stimulating.

Recording in a studio? You cannot compare this situation with a live experience. The tension is completely different. I admit that the tension in a concert in front of an audience drops in a positive sense after just a few notes have been played. You communicate with the audience. That's the secret behind it. By contrast, in a studio recording you have to maintain the tension over many days—the concentration must never let up. With *Fantasies*, it also stimulated constant debate and discussion—in a positive sense—with my excellent producer and long-time friend Julian Schwenkner. We compared several different editions of the respective works and tried to combine different interpretations. Working in a studio at this level has a completely different purpose and intention. In contrast to a concert situation, where the moment is the decisive factor, a studio production focuses on eternity.

You probably know of Glenn Gould's experiments with recording perspective in his Scriabin recordings. Would you be interested in trying something similar?

Absolutely! Gould was already a pioneer and visionary and revolutionized recording techniques. This is the way! It's also my way.

Is the so-called "Tristan chord" you identify in Schumann's Fantasie *found in other Romantic music? Do you think that the meaning you've attributed to it—death, transfiguration, spiritual bliss—would have occurred to you if you didn't know Wagner?*

Yes, absolutely. Visionary composers knew the "Tristan chord" already much earlier, before Wagner. In bars 212–215, for example, Schumann uses this chord in his *Fantasie* in C, op. 17. However, due to the harmonic relationships, it is mixed up enharmonically: Instead of G♯, Schumann writes A♭, and instead of D♯ Schumann writes E♭—an outburst of the highest passion at the most decisive point in the composition. Schumann himself described the *Fantasie*'s opening movement as the "most passionate" of all his works. This was a significant remark, but the circumstances of the work's genesis should not be overlooked, especially when it is being performed. There

is no question of insipid sentimentality about it. Indeed, structurally speaking, the world of *Tristan* is already omnipresent in the first movement. In the development section the theme starts as if heard from far off, "as if re-telling a legend," and first occurs in the dominant minor before appearing in more decisive form in the main key of C. It reaches its *fff* climax on an unresolved suspended chord that is identical with the famous "Tristan chord," the accented A♭ of which is still present in the C Minor of the soothing postlude. With the second reprise of the main theme we encounter Schumann's most audacious inspiration, an interrupted cadence suspended harmonically over three bars.

And consider Chopin in his Ballade in G Minor, op. 23, bar 124: Here too it occurs, in *fff*, at the most emotionally extreme passage of the Ballade—and enharmonically here too, due to the harmonic context. Likewise, there is Bach in his Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue in bars 59–60. Here, in my interpretation, it is played *ppp*, at a highly sensitive and intimate point in the music.

The "Tristan chord" in Wagner only became so famous because it was not continued harmonically, even though it was in a prominent position right at the beginning of the composition. In all other composers, it was or is integrated into a larger harmonic context.

So, music and meaning are an endless theme, a mysticism, a mystery.

SCHUMANN *Kreisleriana,* op. 16. ***Fantasie in C,*** op. 17. ***Arabeske,*** op. 18 (two versions). ***Fantasiestücke,*** op. 12, Books I and II. ***Fantasiestücke,*** op. 12: No. 1, *Des Abends*. ***Nachtstücke,*** op. 23. ***3 Fantasiestücke,*** op. 111. ***Gesänge der Frühe,*** op. 133 • Burkard Schliessmann (pn) • DIVINE ART 25753 (3 SACDs: 153:28)

Ever the seeker, pianist Burkard Schliessmann revisits the magical, mystical world of Robert Schumann in this latest release. Captured in superlative sound (and in Dolby Atmos via 14 microphones at Teldex Studios, Berlin), his Steinway instrument is caught magnificently by producer Julian Schwenckner and engineer Jupp Wegner. A pianist in the tradition of the greats, Schliessmann mixes a real appreciation and respect for tradition before him with exemplary insight into Schumann's music, all wrapped in the latest technology. He used a piano (Steinway D-612236) with two keyboards, each with complete mechanics and hammers. One was brighter sounding, one darker.

Here, Schliessmann presents an exploration of the more phantasmagoric aspect of Schumann's output. His playing is characterized by complete linear clarity married to a 360-degree harmonic understanding (from immediate detail through to large-scale structure). So it is that Schliessmann can characterise each and every element of *Kreisleriana*. Many of the traits identified by Peter J. Rabinowitz in his review of Schliessmann's MSR *Kreisleriana* (*Fanfare* 34:3) are present here: crystalline clarity, and a fierce intellectualism combined with the most refined expression. Listen to Schliessmann's "Sehr innig und nicht zu rasch" (track 2). The legato is perfect, but so is the definition of each note of the upper line, while each element of the inner voices and bass is itself heard as a perfectly judged independent entity heard in heavenly accord. Schumann's achievements here are magnificent; and so is Schliessmann's realization.

Schliessmann's Schumann is far from that of an eager young pup; "Intermezzo I" of *Kreisleriana* is impulsive yet superbly articulated. The music flows. At times one hears references to orchestral sounds: sequences of intervals that might imply a pair of horns, for example, all invoked by the myriad colors at Schliessmann's disposal. This, coupled with his understanding of process, is what makes this performance. There are inevitable points of contact with the earlier MSR recording, but this is deeper; plus, the Divine Art sound is markedly superior. Audiophiles will doubtless concentrate on the sonic excellence, but musicians can revel in the far deeper rewards offered by Schliessmann. He takes risks in the sixth movement, allowing the music to unfurl ever so slowly, and how they pay off. This is Schumann at his most profound. Schliessmann is just as exciting in the seventh movement ("Sehr rasch") as in the earlier MSR recording, but his articulation is clearer (aided of course by the superior recorded sound: One can really hear the difference in this movement particularly). The finale is, in line with the present release's core ethos, properly fantastical, with the displaced bass creepily stalking to the jittery upper line. How gloriously rich, too, is the bass register. Fine though the MSR version of the finale was, here on Divine Art Schliessmann truly honors the fantastical, adding a hint of grotesquerie.

I reviewed a previous *Fantasie* by Schliessmann as recently as *Fanfare* 45:4 (May/June 2022: *At the Heart of the Piano*). There, the *Fantasie* was heard in the context of Liszt's B-Minor Sonata, so comparisons between the works were apt. Here, it is heard within Schumann's universe only, and so one tends to concentrate on the composer alone. With an expert ear (and foot) for pedaling, Schliessmann reveals both inner lines and significant bass shifts with total confidence and zero unnecessary blurring. In this most recent version, power meets a core of iron. Schliessmann is unafraid of eschewing the sustaining pedal where others cling as if drowning pianists to a piece of flotsam, and the results are often revelatory. The supremely analytical recording does document the odd pianist's sniff, but that's part of the feel of performance here. Far more impressive is the almost organ-like sound at times; the processional of the second movement, "Mäßig," is full of majesty, as if Schliessmann relates a fairy tale. Narration is a key aspect to Schumann's output (whether tethered to a specific premise or not), and Schliessmann is a natural storyteller. This is a marriage made in heaven. In the work's final panel, the pianist takes more time than previously, allowing the lines to uncurl, supported by a glorious legato. With local melody and crepuscular harmony, the effect is truly magical; and how the piano's upper register sparkles like starlight.

The second disc opens with Schumann's *Arabeske*, a piece that encapsulates in miniature all that makes Schumann's piano music special: the intimacy, the sense of rightness, the deft counterpoint. Schliessmann presents it delicately, as the *Fantaisie*'s whispered afterthought. It is in the realm of the miniature and the shorter movements that Schumann shines, of course, and such is then case here, with each movement of op. 12 expertly imagined by Schliessmann. The second, "Aufschwung," certainly has power, but again the ear is led to felicities of counterpoint and inter-voice dialog. Rubato is often a problem in "Warum?," and yet here it is as natural as can be. It was "Warum?" that appeared on Schliessmann's *Live & Encores* release (*Fanfare* 47:4) which leads me to speculate Schliessmann has a soft spot for this movement. It certainly sounds like it: The "zart" (tender) element is certainly there, and how that contrasts with "Grillen," which here sounds more experimental than any other performance I know, pointing way forward to the late works. The second book of op. 12 begins with a stormy "In der Nacht"—a controlled tempest of the heart perhaps, with sudden crescendos implying stabs of emotion. There are risks galore here, and they all pay off. Contrasts in "Fabel" are marked, more so than any other performance I know, and of course that juxtaposition is so perfect for Schumann. The trickiest movement in a technical sense is surely "Traumes Wirren," and here Schliessmann creates some wonderful textural contrasts between pedalled and clean sonorities. The final "Ende vom Lied" exudes restrained nobility.

There are two performances of the *Arabeske* and of "Des Abends" from *Fantasiestücke*, op. 12, one on each keyboard. The second *Arabeske* is warmer, its contrasting lyrical sections being perhaps more inviting. The first "Des Abends" is part of the complete set and is beautifully voiced, pure as spring water. The second again is inevitably mellower; but what is interesting his how Schliessmann in the second instance finds just as much clarity of melody as with the first. Both shine, perhaps the first like a white pearl and the second like its black counterpart.

For all of the interpretative and technical victories of the first two discs, it is the final one that is really special, and truly elevates this set above the rest. Schliessmann performs the op. 23 *Nacktstücke* with an impeccable sense of rightness. Schumann exhibits a real sense of exploration in his op. 23. These four E. T. A. Hoffmann-inspired movements exhibit a whole world from caprice to dream, all elevated not just by Schliessmann's playing but by the tremendous presence of the recording (try the richness of the bass at the opening of the third piece). The flowing final panel stands in high contrast to the *Urschrei* that opens the first of the op. 111 *Fantasiestücke*. Penned in 1851, this late set of pieces was written just a few short months after the composer's appointment at Düsseldorf. Schliessmann gives a tremendous performance of all three pieces, muscular in the first, almost hymnic in the second, a prayer-like meditation with a fearless exploration of the darker crannies of the psyche, casting a shadow over the final "Kräftig und sehr markiert."

Finally, there comes Schumann's criminally neglected *Gesänge der Frühe*, the last work Schumann himself prepared for publication. In his notes, Schliessmann posits a link between this piece and Hölderlin's *Diotima*; either way, his performance is extraordinary, eclipsing my previous

top recommendation of Piotr Anderszewski on Erato. It is Schliessmann who captures the elusive and entirely individual world of late Schumann to perfection. If I have one wish for this set, it is that Schliessmann's performance will bring Schumann's op. 133 to a wider public. There is a sort of satisfying symmetry to the indication of the fifth and final movement, "Im Anfang ruhiges" (op. 133/1 is marked "Im ruhiges Tempo"). Under Schliessmann's fingers, the music seems to strive for an unknown other, and yet the search emanates from a heart at peace. This is a truly satisfying reading.

In his booklet notes, Schliessmann posits that the key to understanding Schumann's phatasmagoria is via his vocal music, and Schliessmann specifically cites the composer's setting of Heine in the op. 24 *Liederkreis* (No. 3, "Ich wandelte unter den Bäumen"). Later on, he writes on the relationship between Eichendorff and Schumann (via "Zwielicht" from the op. 29 *Liederkreis*). The booklet indeed makes for fascinating reading, but it is the music itself that matters. Burkhard Schliessmann, in his finest offering yet, offers a homage to Schumann for the ages. **Colin Clarke**

⬇ **SCHUMANN** ***Kreisleriana,*** op. 16. ***Fantasie in C,*** op. 17. ***Arabeske,*** op. 18 (two versions). ***Fantasiestücke,*** op. 12, Books I and II. ***Fantasiestücke,*** op. 12: No. 1, *Des Abends*. ***Nachtstücke,*** op. 23. ***3 Fantasiestücke,*** op. 111. ***Gesänge der Frühe,*** op. 133 • Burkard Schliessmann (pn) • DIVINE ART 25753 (153:28) Reviewed from a WAV download: 44.1 kHz/16-bit

In 47:4, I reviewed a Divine Art set (25755) of Burkard Schliessmann performing a mix of works by composers near and dear to him: Bach, Chopin, Mendelssohn, and Schumann. At the time, I was not aware that a new three-disc set from Schliessmann was in the offing, one devoted exclusively to Schumann. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised, for Schliessmann's love of Schumann's music has been a lifelong one that runs deep.

Since the previously cited set already included selections by Schumann, my first order of business was to determine if there were any duplications between the two releases. The short answer is a qualified "yes." Both the earlier album and the new one at hand contain the complete *Fantasie* in C, op. 17, which is generally regarded as one of, if not the, most important and technically challenging of the composer's works for solo piano. They are not, however, the same performance. The earlier recording was captured "live" in March of 2023, while the present recording, as attested to by Schliessmann in his album note, is a studio production made five months later in August of 2023.

There is also one other minor overlap in programming, but it doesn't really count because it's just an excerpt, an outtake if you will, from a much larger work. In the "live" recording, Schliessmann treated us to what amounted to an "encore" with the inclusion of the third number, "Warum?" from the composer's *Fantasiestücke*, op. 12. Here he gives us the *Fantasiestücke* in full.

True to its title, *Robert Schumann Fantasies*, the new set under review addresses itself to the composer's catalog of "fantasy" and related-type pieces. So, I suppose the place to start is with a definition of the genre or typology. Britannica.com succinctly defines a musical fantasy—with all of its linguistic variants based on country of origin and musical period—as "a composition free in form and inspiration, usually for an instrumental soloist." Not very helpful, as that could apply to almost anything. By that definition, Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* could be a fantasy. Wikipedia refines it a bit further for us, stating that a "fantasy is a musical composition with roots in improvisation, and that like the impromptu, it seldom follows the textbook rules of any strict musical form."

The fantasy, as practiced by Schumann and other 19th-century composers, is a construct of the Romantic period, but conceptually and contextually the language of musical fantasy extends back to the late 16th and early 17th centuries, manifesting itself in the organ and keyboard works of Sweelinck and Frescobaldi, and a bit later in the fantasias of Bach. The difference between those fantasies and the ones we find in Schumann and the musical Romantic in general is that the later-period examples are often, if not invariably, associated with descriptive imagery, poetic verse, and/or storytelling. In other words, the 19th-century fantasy is a subset of program music. For Bach, a fantasia was about the improvisatory style of the music, its textural contrasts, surprising harmonies and progressions, and displays of technical virtuosity. It's doubtful that Bach had any extra-musical motives in mind.

So, let's pursue the model of the Romantic fantasy stated above and see if it applies—or doesn't—to some or all of Schumann's works in Schliesssmann's collection.

In *Kreisleriana*, op. 16—composed originally in 1838 and revised in 1850—Schumann asks the listener to imagine in the eight numbers that make up the piece, the deteriorating sanity of the musical genius Johannes Kreisler, the fictional *Kapellmeister* invented by the early Romantic author E. T. A. Hoffmann. Did Schumann foresee his own descent into madness when he wrote the piece? That's a question for another day. Here we're confronted with an early example of Schumann's dueling personalities, as expressed by the music's sudden and violent swings between storm and calm, fear and euphoria. We meet these characters again in others of Schumann's works in the guise of the composer's ego and alter ego, Florestan and Eusebius.

Can *Kreisleriana* be listened to as abstract music, without prior knowledge of Hoffmann's creation of the imaginary musical genius who loses his marbles? Probably, because music does not communicate to us on a higher cognitive level. Its means of communication is more primitive and more powerful, going directly to the "lizard" part of the brain that holds sway over our emotional responses. But the point here is what *Kreisleriana* meant to Schumann and what he hoped it would mean to us. It's music about love, passionate and manic. The wild mood swings in the piece mirror the composer's daydreaming about finally being with his beloved Clara, and his fits of pique over her father trying to keep his daughter and her young suitor apart.

Fantasiestücke, op. 12, preceded *Kreisleriana*, but only by a matter of a few months. Composed in 1837, it too originally drew inspiration from a short story by E. T. A. Hoffmann that appeared in the same collection of the author's novellas in which *Kreisleriana* was published. Like its *Kreisleriana* companion, Schumann's op. 12—with the musical content and contrasts of its eight numbers and the poetic titles he gave them—also expresses his feverish fantasies about Clara and his impatience at not being with her. The layout, however, of op. 12 is a bit different. The eight pieces are divided into two books of four numbers each. Schumann omitted a planned ninth piece, originally intended for the *Fantasiestücke*, from the final draft. It's untitled and wasn't published until 1935, when it was logged in the composer's catalog as RSW:op12:Anh (H/K WoO 28).

Schliessmann does not play the orphaned piece, but he does do something interesting. At the end of disc two, he repeats the first number of op. 12, *Des Abends*. The pianist explains in a paragraph of the album note that "the recording features two different interpretations of some works, such as the *Arabeske* and *Des Abends* from the *Fantasiestücke*, op.12, by exchanging the keyboards. This demonstrated the influence of the instrument and acoustics on interpretation. The second SACD includes a unique rendition of *Des Abends*, creating a transition to the darkness of the *Nachtstücke*, op. 23, introducing the late pieces by Schumann."

Stepping back another year to 1836, we come to the *Fantasie* in C, op. 17, the most ambitious and largest in scope of the composer's clutch of early fantasy works for solo piano. This is regarded, and arguably so, as Schumann's greatest work for the instrument. As works of this genre go, however, it seems to have lost its original motivation as yet another expression of the composer's loins longing for Clara when work on the composition became entangled in a project to raise funds for a memorial statue of Beethoven to be erected in Bonn. Schumann's contribution to the enterprise would be the money to come from the first 100 copies of the *Fantasie* sold. But it didn't work out quite as planned. Schumann's *Fantasie* was so ... well ... fantastical and so difficult that no publisher it was offered to would touch it. Schumann finally dedicated the finished work to Liszt, Breitkopf & Härtel took a risk on it, and the rest is history. As noted earlier, this is the one work duplicated in full between Schliessmann's earlier "live" recording and this one, so, further on, it will be interesting to compare the two performances.

Now, *Kreisleriana*, the *Fantasiestücke*, and the *Fantasie* in C are three of the "biggies" among Schumann's early fantasy-type works. Schliessmann of course, does not include all of the composer's works in the genre. Missing from this compilation are works as such *Carnaval* (1834–35), *Kinderszenen* (1838), *Novelletten* (1838), *Faschingsschwank aus Wien* (1839), and *Waldszenen* (1848–49), to name five. It all goes back, of course, to how one defines or categorizes "fantasy." However, there are other works to choose from, some not as often heard, and from among them, the pianist gives us *Arabeske*, op. 18 (1839), *Nachtstücke*, op. 23 (1839), *3 Fantasiestücke*, op. 111 (1851), and *Gesänge der Frühe*, op. 133 (1853).

In the category of 19th-century fantasy, and especially in the works of Schumann, lines blur. "Fantasy" encompasses and is encompassed by a number of related genres: character pieces, tone paintings, mood enhancers, and even compositions with no extra-musical intent, designed solely for the purpose of virtuosic display and technical one-upmanship. An example of the latter is Schumann's Toccata in C, op. 7 (1830, revised 1833), still regarded to this day as "one of the most ferociously difficult pieces in the piano repertoire" (Richard E. Rodda).

As noted earlier, there is a duplication between the earlier "live" recording version of the *Fantasie* in C, op. 17, and this new studio recording of the piece. In execution, interpretation, and timings, Schliessmann's readings of the first two movements are uncannily similar. Only in the concluding movement does one hear a significant variance. Here the pianist is more mindful of Schumann's *langsam getragen* (borne more slowly):

Live version:	12:45	8:09	8:18
New version:	12:50	8:11	9:03

There is, however, another difference which, to my ear, seems to cast a more nuanced textural and coloristic effect on the music in the new performance, one which goes beyond the more elaborate recording setup employed for the studio recording. That difference, I think, relates to the instruments used. For the earlier "live" performance, Schliessmann played a Fazioli F278 concert grand. For the current studio performance, he played a Steinway D274 concert grand. In past reviews, I've been very impressed by the sound of Fazioli pianos, but in this case, it's the Steinway that seems to lend greater clarity or precision to Schumann's unique keyboard manner and to give stronger expression to his flights of fantasy.

Mentioned earlier, too, was that for the *Arabeske* and the repeat of *Des Abends* from the *Fantasiestücke*, Burkard exchanges keyboards. On first reading that, I thought it an odd way to say that he switched to a different piano. But a deeper dive into the album notes revealed the reason that the word "keyboards" was used here. The keyboards are two but the piano is one, having been fitted with a second keyboard, much like a two-manual harpsichord, I imagine. I quote from the note: "There were two different keyboards in use, different in voicing and intonation, provided by a flying case."

The recording itself, it should be noted, is very high-tech, above and beyond most high-tech, state-of-the-art SACD recordings. Fourteen microphones were employed to capture Schliessmann in Dolby Atmos, "a revolutionary spatial audio technology for the most immersive sound experience."

Burkard's pianism is, as always, a thing of beauty to behold, at once limpid and limned, while always equally as constant in attention to the demands and details of the score as to the emotions and expressive gestures the written notes imply. The fusion of technical mastery and musical insight to this degree combine to produce artistry of the highest caliber.

In my experience, Burkard Schliessmann's Schumann may be equaled by two or three pianists past—Richter, Horowitz, and especially Arrau—but he is not surpassed by any of them. **Jerry Dubins**

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Robert Schumann, in his all too short and troubled life, managed to compose a significant amount of truly great piano music. Most of it is comprised of collections of short pieces. Some of these are thematically related, others were composed together, and nearly all had either titles or creative tempo markings. A good example of his creative process can be found in a letter to Clara, where he wrote "I've finished another whole notebook of new pieces. I intend to call it *Kreisleriana*. You and one of your ideas play the main role in it." Subtitled *Fantasien für Piano-Forte*, they serve as the opening work in this huge program from Burkard Schliessmann. He gives the program a simple title of *Fantasies* and includes almost every major opus by Schumann that uses or is related to the term "Fantasy." They were written in two timeframes: the early works in 1836–39 and the later ones in 1851–53.

All of these works here require a quite advanced level of pianism. Schumann started his musical

life with the goal of becoming a virtuoso and his early pieces especially are quite difficult. Due to problems with his hand, he abandoned his own concert career and seemed quite satisfied that Clara Wieck would champion his music and was likely a better pianist, even before they got married in 1840. She would outlive him by 40 years and edited, published, and frequently performed his entire *oeuvre*. She is probably the one most responsible for his music being appreciated today as a foundation of the piano repertoire.

Most of the music here has been an integral part of Schliessmann's repertoire for the better part of his career, and he has recorded a few pieces like *Kreisleriana* and the *Fantasie* before. Clearly he has much more to say about Schumann. He even gives us two different performances of the *Arabeske* and a second one of *Des Abends*, the first of the op. 12 *Fantasiestücke.* As with his other recordings, Schliessmann contributes an extensive, thought-provoking essay. He makes considerable references to poetry and Schumann's songs as they relate to his piano music, as well as each of the specific pieces here.

Without hesitation I recommend this recording, not only for those who value great and probing performances of Romantic piano music, but also for anyone with a love for great music from any era or instrumentation. The *Fantasie*, op. 17 is the largest work on the program and arguably Schumann's greatest piano piece. Its difficulties are renowned, especially the middle movement. This performance is, in general, more lyrical and passionate than most. There is no sense of showing off in the big contrary-motion leaps, but of shaping and phrasing the top melody over a firm bass line. A high point of the three CDs is the bass line in the final movement. I have never heard it as both the foundation and a beautiful melodic line. It is a revelation. There are many, many moments all through these pieces that repay careful listenings. This will certainly be my reference recording for all of the works here.

Divine Arts gives us its expected state-of-the-art recording: SACDs in customarily excellent recorded piano sound. Producer Julian Schwenkner and engineer Jupp Wegner worked with Schliessmann, employing 14 microphones for a Dolby Atmos experience. Every nuance of the performances is captured with a clarity that could only be matched by being present in the recording studio. **James Harrington**
