

2 Life and literature, poetry and philosophy: Robert Schumann's aesthetics of music

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Robert Schumann's music is not romantic and irrational *Träumerei*; the history of the aesthetics of genius in the Romantic era is not the history of Schumann's Romantic music or aesthetics. The latter history begins in the literature Schumann read all his life, and continues in his music. To understand the history of Schumann's music, however, we need to approach it through the life, the literature, the poetry and the philosophy.

The literature in the life

Robert Schumann's aesthetics needs to be understood as a process of enculturation within an educated and cultured bourgeoisie, in terms of social history, and – as one of lifelong appropriation and reification of art, literature and music – in terms of developmental psychology. The premises of the former are to be found partly in the protestant ethic that Schumann inherited first and foremost from his father and grandfather. Schumann's father, himself the son of an evangelical (Lutheran) clergyman, was a businesslike and hardworking publisher-bookseller and an author of scholarly and bellettristic works, with a reputation that went beyond the bounds of Zwickau or Saxony. Friedrich August Gottlob Schumann was a member of what had at last come to be recognized in Germany from the 1790s onwards as the educated, cultivated middle classes, comprising government officials; judges; university professors; schoolteachers; private tutors; protestant clergy; and university-educated professionals such as physicians, pharmacists, advocates and notaries; as well as self-employed artists, writers and journalists. In sum, a community of discourse, enjoying a certain social privilege but lacking closer social integration, defined by the educational standing that distinguished it from both the less privileged and the more privileged strata of the population. Their education (or *Bildung*: the word implies a process of formation – shaping and polishing – in addition to literacy and numeracy) enabled members of these classes and professions to claim familiarity with literature, music and painting as genuinely middle-class terrain, that is, to define the arts as integral elements of middle-class identity. For these educated and cultivated middle-class people, culture was the medium in

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which they found a reflection and a realization of the meaning and the reality of life and of society: Friedrich August Gottlob Schumann found them in the medium of literature, and his son Robert found them in the medium of music.

The reason that Robert Schumann's musical aesthetics had literary roots is not only sociocultural, or familial, in that his father's cultural preoccupations necessarily influenced him, but stemmed from his individual development as well: he was still a schoolboy when he began to show an interest in literature that was well above the average. His classmate Emil Flechsig recalled that after a period of enthusiasm for Latin and Greek literature:

we got into German poetry and stopped there, and he showed a decided talent for writing verse and composing German prose, as anyone can see from the collected edition of his musical writings. We had unlimited opportunities to find out about literature: the whole Schumann house was crammed with the classics, and we were allowed to help ourselves to the soiled copies – I still have some of them.

It was a special treat when Schumann senior, who doted on his son, allowed us to go into his private library, which was normally kept locked, and where he had stored away all the treasures of the world's literature.¹

Schumann's early love of literature led him to found a 'literary society' in 1825, with ten school friends. As president, Schumann wrote the constitution himself: 'It is the duty of every cultivated person,' wrote the fifteen-year-old:

to know the literature of his own country, so it is likewise a duty for us, who already yearn to attain to higher cultivation, not to neglect German literature but to strive with might and main to acquaint ourselves with it. The aim of this society, therefore, shall be understood to be an initiation into German literature, which has so much rich material to offer us in every field of knowledge, but of which some of us, whether through neglect or through lack of means, know very little as yet.²

Schumann was also responsible for keeping a record of the reading matter the society discussed in the course of thirty meetings, up to the beginning of 1828: the list in the 'Protocoll zum litterarischen Verein' includes works by such authors as Collin, Gleim, Kosegarten, Ernst Schulze, Zacharias Werner and – not least – all the plays of Schiller except *Wallenstein*. Another notebook from a later period of Schumann's life, the *Lektürebüchlein*, lists many of the books he read between 1845 and 1852. At the time of the founding of the *Litterarischer Verein* he began to collect quotations from the books he read. By 1852 he had accumulated a file of some 274 pages with no fewer than 1,229 excerpts, which has survived under the title *Mottosammlung*.³

Schumann used some of these ‘mottos’ in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, but the collection as a whole has a private character. In compiling the *Dichtergarten* of 1853–4, on the other hand, a 750-page anthology of quotations about music, taken from the sweep of world literature from Classical antiquity to the present, Schumann intended publication.

The picture of Schumann’s receptiveness to literature would be incomplete if it did not include his own literary productivity. He began to write as a schoolboy: the collection of belletristic pieces *Blätter und Blümchen aus der goldenen Aue, gesammelt und zusammengebunden von Robert Schumann* (1823) and the poems *Allerley aus der Feder Roberts an der Mulde* (1825–30) were the most substantial products. From the standpoint of musical aesthetics, the most noteworthy of his early experiments are *Juniusabende und Jultage*, *Die Tonwelt* and *Ueber Genial- Knill- Original- und andere itäten*.⁴ These testaments to the young Schumann’s literary ambitions remain largely unexplored by researchers, but his *Tage- und Haushaltsbücher*, presenting a supercharged view of his thinking and his milieu, have appeared in a scholarly edition.⁵ In the end, however, it was his writing about music that brought Schumann recognition – even a degree of fame – as a writer, not his essays or verse. He collected the criticism and other articles he had written between 1833 and 1844, while editor of the periodical he himself had founded, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, and republished them in 1854 as his *Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker*.⁶

Together with what can be learned from his letters,⁷ not least his correspondence with his wife,⁸ the examples given above demonstrate that the process of enculturation within an educated and cultured bourgeoisie was one of ‘lifelong learning’, actively pursued by Schumann, assiduous in both reading and writing from his childhood on. The importance of literature in his life was recalled by Franz Brendel, writing in 1858 that he was ‘constantly occupied with reading, carried books with him wherever he went, read poetry on walks and wherever he was alone’.⁹

The Jean Paul of music

Of all the books Schumann read in his life, none had greater significance for him than those of Jean Paul, as he himself recognized as early as 1828. He wrote in his diary:

I often asked myself where I would be if I had not known Jean Paul: because he seems to be intertwined with me, on one side at least. For I sensed him earlier: perhaps I would write exactly as I do now, but I would not avoid the society of men as much, and I would dream less. I cannot really imagine exactly what I would be like. It’s a question I cannot answer.¹⁰

Schumann appears to have been about seventeen when he discovered the writer Johann Paul Friedrich Richter (1763–1825), universally known as Jean Paul. A school essay of around that time cites the novel *Titan* in the course of considering aesthetic issues raised by the question of ‘why people are so much more upset by disparagement of their taste than by any other kind of criticism’.¹¹ As well as *Titan* (1803), Schumann of course read all Jean Paul’s great novels: *Die unsichtbare Loge*, *Hesperus* (1895), *Siebenkäs* (1797) and *Flegeljahre* (1805), to name only the most important. Jean Paul’s prose style, which cast its spell over Schumann, was aptly described by Carlyle as ‘a wild complicated Arabesque’.¹² Reviewing a biography of the German writer in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1827, Carlyle explained:

Not that he [Jean Paul] is ignorant of grammar, or disdains the sciences of spelling and parsing; but he exercises both in a certain latitudinarian spirit; deals with astonishing liberality in parentheses, dashes, and subsidiary clauses; invents hundreds of new words, alters old ones, or by hyphens chains and pairs and packs them together into most jarring combination; in short, produces sentences of the most heterogeneous, lumbering, interminable kind. Figures without limit; indeed the whole is one tissue of metaphors, and similes, and allusions to all the provinces of Earth, Sea and Air; interlaced with epigrammatic breaks, vehement bursts, or sardonic turns, interjections, quips, puns and even oaths! A perfect Indian jungle it seems; a boundless, unparalleled imbroglio; nothing on all sides but darkness, dissonance, confusion worse confounded!¹³

Although Schumann himself admitted that there was a programmatic relationship between *Papillons*, Op. 2, and the end of *Flegeljahre*,¹⁴ it was in matters of form – that is, structure, rather than content – that literature in general, and the writing of Jean Paul in particular, left its mark on his early musical compositions. In general, ‘narrative episodes, rhetorical emphases, digressions, flashbacks, declamatory gestures, epigrammatic distillations and aphorisms [are] the structural forms acquired from his reading that Schumann converted to compositional ends’.¹⁵ In particular, Jean Paul’s influence on Schumann’s compositions of the 1830s is manifested in: ‘1. The propensity for brief, almost aphoristic musical statements . . . 2. A love for mystery and concealed meaning . . . 3. The quotation of thematic material from previous compositions in new ones . . . 4. The often abrupt juxtaposition of grotesque humor with elements of profound sentiment’.¹⁶

Romantic Humour and (no) Irony

Of all the influences Jean Paul exercised on Schumann, in the early and the late works alike, humour was the most important. Schumann did not just

discover Jean Paul's humour by reading his novels; he also pursued it in his *Vorschule der Ästhetik* (1804). There Jean Paul defines humour as a central category of philosophical aesthetics:

Humour, as the sublime inverted, destroys not the individual but the finite by the contrast with the Idea . . . it humbles greatness, but (unlike parody) in order to set it at the side of littleness, and it raises up littleness, but (unlike irony) in order to set it at the side of greatness and thus makes both naught, because everything is equal, and naught, in the sight of infinity.¹⁷

This definition of philosophical humour is the key, aesthetically, to the structure of most of Schumann's works. But – as the definition quoted above should make clear – Jean Paul's type of humour must not be confused or equated with the so-called Romantic irony of Friedrich Schlegel, whom Jean Paul numbered among the 'poetic nihilists'.¹⁸ Jean Paul's humour is a corrective to Schlegel's Romantic irony: it does not lose itself in the void of infinite reflection but reveals itself amenably in sentimental sensuousness. Schumann, too, made a substantial distinction between humour and irony. In terms of theory, he adopted the distinction only at second hand, above all from Jean Paul's *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, for he did not read the philosophical writings of August and Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis or Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger, but he practised the distinction in his criticism. He spoke out plainly, for instance, against the ironic, sarcastic 'Heinism' that he heard in *L'aimable Roué*, the divertissement by his one-time composition teacher, Heinrich Dorn (1836): 'But if irony once insinuates itself into our art, then we must indeed fear that it really is as near its end as some believe, if little comical comets have the power to overthrow the order of the greater solar system.'¹⁹ As an advocate of humour, Schumann was prepared to allow that there was a time and a place for Romantic irony, but at the heart of his own understanding of music he rejected it:

If one set out to oppose the whole trend of the spirit of our time, which tolerates a burlesque *Dies irae*, one would have to repeat what has been said and written for years against Byron, Heine, Victor Hugo, Grabbe and others like them. At some moments in eternity Poetry puts on the mask of irony, so as not to let her anguished face be seen; perhaps the kindly hand [of a genius] will remove it.²⁰

The process of poetic reflection

Though Schumann's humour is to be understood as a formal category in aesthetic terms, rather than one of content, that is not to say that his music should be viewed purely in terms of formal aesthetics. Certainly, as various statements testify, he did not think instrumental music should be interpreted

programmatically. There is the notorious verdict he pronounced in 1835 on Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*: 'So much for the programme. All Germany will wish him joy of it: there is always something unworthy, a whiff of the charlatan, about such signposts.'²¹ But the comment does not mean that Schumann renounced the poetic principle of music, for he went on to say:

Many people worry too much about the difficult question of how far instrumental music can be allowed to go in representing thoughts and events. They are certainly mistaken if they think that composers put pen to paper with the paltry intention of expressing, depicting, painting this or that. But the importance of fortuitous influences or external impressions should not be underrated. There is often an idea at work unconsciously alongside the musical imagination, the eye alongside the ear, and amid all the sounds and notes the eye, this ever-active organ, holds fast certain outlines that may solidify and take distinct shape as the music advances. So the more elements related to the music convey ideas or shapes that were generated with the notes, the more poetic or plastic in expression the composition will be – and the more imaginative or keen the composer's intrinsic power to conceive, the more his music will elevate or excite. Why should the thought of immortality not have struck a Beethoven as his fancy soared? Why should memories of a great, fallen hero not have inspired him to a piece of music? Why should the recollection of bygone happiness not similarly inspire another? Must we be ungrateful to Shakespeare for having drawn forth a work worthy of himself from the breast of a young composer? Or ungrateful to nature, and deny that we have borrowed some of her beauty and sublimity for our own works? Italy, the Alps, the sea, the dawn of a spring day – would anyone claim that music has never related any of these? No, even smaller, more specific images can lend music so charmingly precise a character that its ability to express such traits amazes us . . . Let us leave open the question of whether there are many poetic moments in the programme of Berlioz's symphony. The central concern remains, whether the music amounts to anything in itself, with or without text and explication, and, more importantly, whether spirit dwells within.²²

In other words, Schumann objected not only to the particular programme of the *Symphonie fantastique* but to programmes generally, because they restrict the listener's imagination. For the same reason he chose for his own music only titles 'that suggest the mood of the piece as a whole'.²³ Titles such as those of the pieces in *Kinderszenen*, Op.15, 'came into existence later, of course, and are really nothing but more precise pointers for performance and comprehension'.²⁴ This remark of Schumann's risks being misinterpreted, insofar as it suggests that the titles are fortuitous extras lacking any connection with the musical substance of the pieces. Quite the reverse: the titles are important components of the compositions, and have as much connection with the music as titles have with poems. 'If poets do it', Schumann

wrote in a review of Ignaz Moscheles's *Charakteristische Studien*, Op. 95, 'if they seek to wrap [*verhüllen*] the meaning of the whole poem in a title, why should musicians not do it too? Only let such indication through words be done sensitively and cleverly: it is the very thing that will reveal the musician's cultivation.'²⁵ For Schumann, therefore, poetic titles fulfil the same function in music and in poetry. By indicating the composer's intention, they awaken the recipient's interest in a piece of music that promises to be more than a fugue or a sonata, which their titles signal as pure forms. At the same time, by connotation and association, titles direct the recipient's interest in a specifically unspecific direction, that is, they lend wings to a player's or a listener's imagination, without restricting its freedom. So when Schumann writes that musicians, like poets, 'seek to wrap the meaning of the whole poem in a title', his meaning is deliberately ambivalent: titles simultaneously unwrap and wrap the meaning and content of a composition, titles allow listeners and players to discover the meaning of the music by covering it and vice versa, titles present the recipient with a Romantic puzzle to solve.

The aesthetic function of the titles is important because the poetic principle of Schumann's understanding of music is essential to the titles: they stand detached from the music, as a kind of *tertium comparationis*, and denote a process of reflection that starts in the composer's thoughts and emotions and crosses over into the responding thoughts and feelings of the recipients. This open-ended reflection process widens the boundaries of the piece of music, in that it dialectically mediates between the composer's creation and the responsive re-creation of the listener.²⁶ Schumann himself described the process of reflection on the part of the re-creating – and post-creating – listener in his essay on Schubert's C major Symphony.

Often, when I looked down on [Vienna] from the mountains, it occurred to me that Beethoven's eyes may well have wandered at times searching for the distant Alps, that Mozart may often have dreamily followed the course of the Danube, which seems to disappear into the trees and shrubs at every bend, and that Papa Haydn will often have gazed at the spire of St Stephen's, shaking his head at its dizzy height. The images of the Danube, St Stephen's spire and the distant Alps, compressed into one with a faint Catholic aroma of incense lying thereover, and we have an image of Vienna itself; and if the whole enchanting landscape lies spread out before us, then surely strings stir within us that would never have sounded otherwise. With Schubert's symphony, and the bright, burgeoning, romantic life within it, the city springs up before me today, clearer than ever, and again I understand how this is the setting in which such works can be born. I will not try to give the symphony a foil, different generations choose too differently among the underlying texts and images . . . But if we only want to, it is easy to believe that the exterior world, bright today and darkening tomorrow, often touches the inner being of poets and musicians; and if we want to acknowledge that

more lies hidden in this symphony than a beautiful song, more than merely sorrow and joy such as music has expressed hundreds of times before – that it leads us, rather, into a region where we cannot remember ever having been before, then we need only listen to this same symphony. Quite apart from the masterly musical technique of the composition, here also is life in every fibre, colours in all their finest gradations, meaning everywhere, the keenest expression of the individual, and finally, a romanticism poured out over the whole such as we already know from elsewhere in Franz Schubert. And the heavenly length of this symphony, like a fat, four-decker novel, perhaps by Jean Paul, which can never end, and for the best of reasons, namely to let the reader continue with creating it afterwards . . . Everywhere, you feel that the composer was in control, and that you will surely come to understand in time how it all coheres. The impression of certainty is conveyed immediately by the magnificent romantic introduction, even though as yet everything still seems wrapped in mystery.²⁷

Essentially, this review of Schubert's Great C major Symphony contains the kernel of Schumann's understanding of music; it describes the production and reception of music as a cohesive process, and rejects the formalist view of a supposedly 'absolute music' as a delusion. The open-ended process described by Schumann, emanating from the creating composer to be continued by the post-creating listener, is of course not restricted to the meaning or interpretation of titles and headings. The process of reflection may begin with them but it does not end there. As Schumann's music criticism clearly states, music, if it is poetic, creates opportunities enough to give the recipient's imagination wings. If it fails to do so, perhaps because it exhausts itself in empty virtuosity, as in the piano works of Kalkbrenner, Herz and Hüntten, for example, it is not poetic but prosaic. 'Prosaic' was Schumann's verdict on the music about which much was written in the early 1830s, in the pages of the Leipzig *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, although there was nothing more to say about it than that it had nothing to say. That was the reason why Schumann founded a 'new journal for music', the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, in 1833, to champion the poetic music of the time, the music that would help to usher in 'a young, poetic future at last'²⁸ – or, 'a new poetic age at last'.²⁹

Schumann's rejection of the culture of the prosaic was a critique of a society that trivialized and commercialized music by treating it as a commodity, an entertainment medium. His proclamation of a culture of the poetic was socially utopian, for it entailed an alteration in the role and position of music that would require an alteration in society. Schumann's dream, then, was of a new musical mythology, of a society that would define its identity, among other ways, by means of musical discourse, in that it would have the spirit and the time to realize an *advance* in the spirit of the time. In this sense, Schumann's aesthetics of music is Romantic and revolutionary.

Notes

1. Emil Flechsig, *Erinnerungen an Schumann, um 1875*, quoted after Ernst Burger, *Robert Schumann: Eine Lebenschronik in Bildern und Dokumenten*, in collaboration with Gerd Nauhaus and the Robert-Schumann-Haus Zwickau (Mainz, 1999), pp. 36. Emil Flechsig, 'Erinnerungen an Robert Schumann, aus dem Manuskript erstmalig vollständig veröffentlicht vor seiner Urenkelin Hilde Wendler', in *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 117 Jg., Heft 7/8, pp. 392–6 (392).
2. Robert Schumann, Heinrich Rothe *et al.* 'Protocoll zum litterarischen Verein', in Martin Schoppe, *Schumanns 'Litterarischer Verein'*, in *Robert Schumann und die Dichter: Ein Musiker als Leser*, Katalog zur Ausstellung des Heinrich-Heine-Instituts in Verbindung mit dem Robert-Schumann-Haus Zwickau und der Robert-Schumann-Forschungsstelle e.V. in Düsseldorf, prepared by Bernhard R. Appel and Inge Hermstrüwer (Düsseldorf, 1991), pp. 21f.
3. Leander Hotaki, *Robert Schumanns Mottosammlung: Übertragung, Kommentar, Einführung*. Rombach Wissenschaften: Reihe Litterae; Band 59 (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1998).
4. Frauke Otto, *Robert Schumann als Jean Paul Leser* (Frankfurt am Main, 1984), pp. 25–43, 66–75, 109–14.
5. *Robert Schumann Tagebücher*, 4 vols. vol. I: 1827–38, ed. Georg Eismann (Leipzig, 1971; Basel and Frankfurt am Main, n.d.). Vol. II: 1836–54, ed. Gerd Nauhaus (Leipzig, 1987; Basel and Frankfurt am Main, n.d.). Vol. III: *Haushaltbücher, Teil. I*, 1837–47, ed. Gerd Nauhaus (Leipzig, 1982; Basel and Frankfurt am Main, n.d.); *Haushaltbücher, Teil. II*, 1847–56, ed. Gerd Nauhaus (Leipzig, 1982; Basel and Frankfurt am Main, n.d.).
6. Robert Schumann, *Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker*, 2 vols., ed. Gerd Nauhaus, reprint of the 1854 Leipzig edn (Wiesbaden, 1985).
7. Robert Schumann, *Jugendbriefe von Robert Schumann*, after the originals communicated by Clara Schumann (Leipzig, 1885). Robert Schumann, *Robert Schumanns Briefe. Neue Folge*, ed. F. Gustav Jansen, 2nd improved edn (Leipzig, 1904).
8. Clara Schumann, *The Complete Correspondence of Clara and Robert Schumann: Critical Edition*, ed. E. Weissweiler, trans. H. Fritsch and R. Crawford (New York, 1994).
9. Franz Brendel, "'R. Schumann" Biographie von J. W. v. Wasielewski, Zweite Besprechung', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 25 (1858), 139.
10. *Robert Schumann Tagebücher*, vol. I, ed. Eismann, p. 82.
11. Quoted after Kristin R. M. Krahe, 'Robert Schumanns Schulaufsatz: "Warum erbittert uns Tadel in Sachen des Geschmacks mehr, als in andern Dingen?"', in *Robert Schumann und die Dichter*, pp. 36ff. Translation by Mary Whittall.
12. Thomas Carlyle, 'Jean Paul Friedrich Richter', in *The Works of Thomas Carlyle in Thirty Volumes*, 30 vols., vol. XXVI: *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays I* (London, 1899), p. 19. [1827 originally published in *Edinburgh Review*, no. 91, 'Jean Paul Friedrich Richter's Leben, nebst Characteristic seiner Werke, von Heinrich Döring, Jean Paul Friedrich Richter's Life, with a Sketch of his Works, by Heinrich Döring, Gotha, 1826']
13. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
14. Robert Schumann, Brief an die Familie vom 17.4.1832, in *Jugendbriefe*, pp. 166ff. Translation by Mary Whittall.
15. Bernhard R. Appel, 'Robert Schumann als Leser', in *Robert Schumann und die Dichter*, p. 13.
16. Eric Frederick Jensen, 'Explicating Jean Paul: Robert Schumann's program for Papillons, Op. 2', *Nineteenth Century Music*, XXII/2 (autumn 1998), 133f. Erika Reiman, *Schumann's Piano Cycles and the Novels of Jean Paul* (Rochester, 2004).
17. Jean Paul, *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, ed. Norbert Miller (Munich, 1974), p. 125.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 31ff.
19. Robert Schumann, 'H. Dorn, "L'aimable Roué", Divertissement (C-majeur) oe. 17', *Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker von Robert Schumann*, ed. Martin Kreisig, 2 vols., vol. I, 5th edn (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1914), p. 185.
20. Schumann, 'Sinfonie von H. Berlioz', in *Gesammelte Schriften. Ibid.*, p. 85.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 84f.
23. Robert Schumann, 'Ferdinand Hillers Etuden', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, p. 49.
24. Robert Schumann, 'Brief an Heinrich Dorn vom 5.9.1839', in *Robert Schumanns Briefe*, ed. Jansen, p. 170.
25. Robert Schumann, 'Charakteristische Studien für das Pianoforte von I. Moscheles', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, p. 361.

26. Ulrike Kranefeld, *Der nachschaffende Hörer: Rezeptionsästhetische Studien zur Musik Robert Schumanns* (Stuttgart–Weimar, 2000).
27. Robert Schumann, 'C-dur-Sinfonie von Franz Schubert', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, pp. 462ff.
28. '... endlich eine junge, dichterische Zukunft': from the original version of Schumann's article 'Zur Eröffnung des Jahrganges 1835', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 2 (1835), 3.
29. '... endlich eine neue poetische Zeit': from the revised version of 'Zur Eröffnung des Jahrganges 1835', published in Schumann, *Gesammelte Schriften*, and adopted by Martin Kreisig in the fifth edition (1914).