

8 Novel symphonies and dramatic overtures

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It is hard to imagine a more dramatic shock at the opening of a symphony than that which occurs moments into Robert Schumann's First Symphony (1841). The movement begins with a brief motto theme in trumpets and horns, assertive in rhythm and timbre, yet slightly unsettling (Ex. 8.1). It is in fact ambiguous as to tonality – it could be G minor, B flat major or even D minor. After a *fermata*, the next iteration of the motto clarifies the tonality as B flat major, with a somewhat odd emphasis of the third, D (it is much more common for the repeated note in an opening figure like this to be the fifth or the tonic).¹ Fuller orchestration (winds and strings), cadential harmony and another *fermata* set this second version of the motto as an orotund, closed-off statement (compare the much more open-ended effect of the initial two *fermatas* of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony). The motto seems to be headed on a progressive course of consolidation: first a brass declamation on a single line, followed by a *tutti*-like confirmation. But then everything falls away, into the suddenly gaping abyss of D minor. Here is the real *tutti*: trombones and timpani join angrily swarming strings; the effect freezes us as in terror. The untoward emphasis on the pitch D in the opening strain proves to have been the only hint that we could possibly find ourselves in this spot.

A move like this at the very outset of the course of a symphony is extraordinary. Beethoven included effects approaching this in several of his slow introductions (think of the lightning bolt of D minor that forms the climax of the introduction to his Second Symphony), but Schumann's D minor abyss opens up before much of anything is established, and with it his symphony crosses a crucial line: when something this arresting happens this early, we are made to hear that Schumann will hold nothing back, keep nothing in reserve. There will be no gauging of thematic material to suit the perceived needs of some long-term narrative, no sense of germinal energy, or of proto-material, no need to be heard to create the world once again. Instead there is a decided concentration of effect, which persists as the introduction continues to trade on dramatically picturesque juxtapositions. We hear the almost regal concision of the opening motto, then the abyss – trombones at full bore, deployed so soon! – followed by all those scattershot brass entrances in bars 8–14, a kind of sonic bursting at the seams. Once the music settles back into B flat, the motto rhythm wafts in the air, peaceably enough. But then a flute cadenza leads to a mysteriously charged pedal point on V/vi,

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Example 8.1 Schumann, Symphony No. 1 in B flat major, Op. 38 ('Spring'), first movement, bars 1–6

Andante un poco maestoso
♩ = 66

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system includes the following instruments: Flutes, Oboes, Clarinets in B, Bassoons, Horns in F, Horns in Bb, Trumpets in Bb, Alto Trombone, Tenor Trombone, Bass Trombone, and Timpani. The second system includes Violins I, Violins II, Viola, Cello, and Bass. The tempo is marked 'Andante un poco maestoso' with a metronome marking of ♩ = 66. The key signature is B-flat major. Dynamics include *f* and *ff*. A fermata is placed over the final note of each staff. A seven-measure rest is indicated above the Flutes, Oboes, and Violins I staves.

Example 8.1 (cont.)

The musical score consists of 13 staves. The first six staves are grouped together by a brace on the left. The first staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats and a dynamic marking of *sf*. The second staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats and a dynamic marking of *sf*. The third staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats and a dynamic marking of *sf*. The fourth staff is in bass clef with a key signature of two flats and a dynamic marking of *sf*. The fifth staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats and a dynamic marking of *sf*. The sixth staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats and a dynamic marking of *f*. The seventh staff is in bass clef with a key signature of two flats and a dynamic marking of *sf*. The eighth staff is in bass clef with a key signature of two flats and a dynamic marking of *sf*. The ninth staff is in bass clef with a key signature of two flats and a dynamic marking of *ff*. The tenth staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats and a dynamic marking of *sf*. The eleventh staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats and a dynamic marking of *sf*. The twelfth staff is in bass clef with a key signature of two flats and a dynamic marking of *sf*. The thirteenth staff is in bass clef with a key signature of two flats and a dynamic marking of *sf*. The score features various musical notations including chords, single notes, and a complex rhythmic pattern in the tenth staff.

Example 8.2 Schumann, Symphony No. 1 in B flat major, Op. 38 ('Spring'), piano reduction of first movement, bars 39–54

Allegro molto vivace
♩ = 120

which then moves to V, expanding with Beethovenian intensification into the *Allegro*. At the last instant, the horns hasten to announce the arrival of the new tempo.

What kind of *Allegro* has been introduced here? Schumann's theme sets out with predictable regularity (Ex. 8.2). It moves in eight-bar periods, with a stiff rhythmic rhyme every four bars (the rhyme is in fact the climactic point of the line, which draws even more attention to it). Four-bar phrases continue throughout the entire exposition, with one exception (right before the second theme). In fact, this regularity turns out to be something of a signature for all of Schumann's opening allegros that begin with slow introductions: the first themes from his Second and Fourth Symphonies also share this propensity for absolutely regular phrasing. The exposition of the Fourth Symphony tends to double its gestures in two-bar units, creating a distinctly additive effect, whereas the opening *allegro* theme of the Second Symphony is a study in rhythmic saturation – its dotted-rhythm motive persists unaltered through the first sixteen bars. In general, these themes are not differentiated to anywhere near the degree of *allegro* themes in the works of earlier, Classical-style composers.²

Related to this lack of differentiation within themes is the additive effect of the frequent sequences in Schumann's thematic process. Both tendencies promote a density of material that can seem cloying at times but can also be heard to create a new kind of musical energy. The relentless, Baroque-style rhythmic texture and motivic saturation, when packed into four-square rhyming phrases with Classical-style harmonic language, make for a compressed and spirited local intensity. One does not hear a steadily flowing (Baroque) texture that runs through cadences and renewed entrances like a waterway changing and diversifying its course, nor an articulated and pressurized (Beethovenian) flow that moves in waves, gathering energy for decisive arrivals. One is aware rather of a sense of constantly checked plenitude, of many full frames; the flow seems to stop and start, and at all points we are made aware of something like shortness of breath, the very sound of excitement.

Critics

Donald Francis Tovey reacted to all this excitement with ambivalence, observing Schumann's 'boyish vein of slow thought and quick expression'.³ Tovey characteristically captures something vital about Schumann's symphonic style – how it moves in quick, repeated bursts but does not give the impression of covering a lot of ground – though he chooses to present this insight in terms of immaturity. On the other hand, Tovey's reaction is properly Victorian in its faint praise: if you can't be manly, at least be boyish. But how boyish is this music? It clearly does not express the artless, buoyant exuberance of some of Mendelssohn's teenage efforts, but rather exudes the manic devotional energy of someone drawn to excess (like Schumann's beloved Jean Paul), someone unafraid to leap out onto any limb at any time. And when the medium that is thus pushed to be 'quick to expression' is a full symphony orchestra, Schumann's manic energy is heard to push uphill, a situation that brings with it the additional effect of making the listener aware of the orchestra as a massive and intractable sonic medium.

This enhanced opacity of the orchestra as a medium helps nourish one of the most common critical perceptions of this music, exemplified by Gerald Abraham's judgement that Schumann's First Symphony 'is inflated piano music with mainly routine orchestration'.⁴ The symphonies written after 1841, on the other hand, are not even granted this much; they are thought instead to suffer from a clumsy heaviness in their scoring.⁵ Performances of these symphonies by modern orchestras often evince an indistinct, muffled quality, in which bass lines can be difficult to discern. Consequently, few modern conductors perform these works without lightening the instrumentation. Schumann scholar Jon Finson has convincingly argued that

Schumann's symphonies would be much more transparent if performed with the smaller-scaled orchestra that Schumann himself would have known in Leipzig, and this proposition has been resoundingly corroborated by John Eliot Gardiner's recent recordings of the symphonies.⁶

But orchestration is not the only, or even the primary, problem for mainstream critics of Schumann's symphonies. Simply put, the 'frighteningly excitable temperament' manifest in these works has never been heard as classically symphonic. Paul Henry Lang, in comparing Classical and Romantic symphonic music (with Schumann as the leading exemplar of the latter), warns us to 'guard against mistaking excitement and sequential climaxes for symphonic development . . . [N]o other type of music shows the deep rift between the two styles and musical conceptions so clearly as does the symphony'.⁷ Most critics miss in Schumann's symphonies the cogent grandeur of the Viennese Classical style. Lang observed a lack of unity and cohesion in these works, and he also detected a lack of inner tension in their themes, which he felt had more the character of a passive phenomenon than an active force.⁸ The high valuation of criteria such as forceful coherence points of course to the presence of the Beethoven symphony as the gold standard of symphonic discourse.

On the other hand, it is not hard to see why the often relentlessly square phrasing in Schumann's symphonies would invite critics to think of the sonata ethos as a Classicistic imposition for Schumann and then to conclude that he did not know how to operate in a truly symphonic fashion. For he seems to have adopted the outward lineaments of the Classical style without absorbing its inner dramatic impulse, locally filling in eight-bar units and globally filling in the sections of sonata form. Tovey referred to Schumann's large instrumental forms as mosaics, or as coral formations, whose individual cells consist of epigrams, though he was generous enough to allow that this should not be held against Schumann: '[I]t is a harsh judgement that forbids the epigrammatic artist to pile up his ideas into large edifices: his mind may be full of things that cannot be expressed except in works on a large scale.'⁹ Tovey once again identifies something unique about these works – the paradoxical combination of epigrammatic utterance with large-scale formal setting – and yet he again employs a metaphor that has the effect of a condemnation. For his image of the mosaic clearly invokes a second-rate method of construction, closer to mechanical patchwork than to seamless, organic growth.

Hampering critical motivation to listen for what Schumann achieves rather than what he does not achieve is the fact that Schumann himself invites listeners to hear his symphonies with pieces from the Classical style firmly in mind. It is almost impossible not to hear the opening of the First Symphony, for example, in terms of other openings, to hear Schumann

‘measuring up’ to the likes of Beethoven and Schubert. Schubert’s Ninth rings in his ears, as do several of Beethoven’s symphonic introductions. Nor should we forget that Schumann the critic often exhorted his contemporaries to emulate Beethoven’s symphonies, though not through the use of literal quotations.¹⁰ In short, we cannot ignore the power or the pervasiveness of such influences. But it does not automatically follow that we should consider these influences as evidence of a lack of artistic *savoir faire* on Schumann’s part, as if he were desperately casting around for building materials from other quarries and then failing to produce similarly impressive edifices. Part of our urge to understand these pieces as failures stems from the powerfully attractive view of the history of Western music as a *Problemggeschichte*, in which composition is conceptualized as a search for solutions to compositional problems posed largely by one’s position in history. The fact that Schumann turned to the genre of the symphony only after mastering smaller forms reinforces the temptation to view his composition of symphonies as a problem to be surmounted.¹¹ Carl Dahlhaus’s discussion of Schumann’s symphonies (in his 1989 book *Nineteenth-Century Music*) is cast entirely in terms of Schumann trying to compensate for problems in his symphonic discourse, problems caused by trying to be Beethovenian without fully understanding the nature of Beethoven’s music. Dahlhaus called the undifferentiated nature of Schumann’s *allegro* themes ‘uniformity without sublimity’, contrasting it with the example of Beethoven’s Fifth and Seventh Symphonies, in which an ostinato rhythm ‘conveyed an impression of sublime uniformity’. Schumann’s mistake, according to Dahlhaus, was to make the motivic content of his themes uniform as well.¹²

It is worth following up this observation by making a direct comparison of rhythmic uniformity in Beethoven and Schumann. The *vivace* theme of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony (Ex. 8.3) is a good example of how a motoric *ostinato* rhythm can seem ubiquitous without imparting a sense of static uniformity. After Beethoven establishes the dotted-rhythm *ostinato* in the first four bars, it is enough to suggest it in the rhythm of the tune and in the sparse punctuations of the accompanying strings. Here the rhythmic *ostinato* lurks in the background as a propulsive force, while the theme seems energized by it. The effect is one of buoyancy and power to spare.

By contrast, the opening *allegro* of the Schumann Second Symphony (Ex. 8.4) locks theme and orchestral texture together in a unitary and repetitious rhythmic design, with the result that the melody seems burdened with the weight of the entire orchestra. Such a theme expends much more energy just to keep moving; it is not likely to achieve a sense of lift-off. But to conclude from this that Schumann’s procedure is flawed depends largely on the nature of the comparative metaphor. When one employs a mechanical metaphor having to do with power and efficiency – a metaphor that happens to work wonderfully with Beethoven – Schumann’s procedure can only

Example 8.3 Beethoven, Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92, first movement, bars 63–74

The musical score for Example 8.3 consists of two systems of staves. The first system (bars 63-74) includes parts for Flutes, Oboes, Clarinets in A, Bassoons, Horns in A, Violins I and II, Viola, and Cello and Bass. The woodwind section (Flutes, Oboes, Clarinets, Bassoons, and Horns) plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, starting with a *sempre p* dynamic and then *cresc.* The string section (Violins I and II, Viola, Cello and Bass) plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment, starting with a *p* dynamic. The second system (bars 71-74) continues the woodwind and string parts, with the woodwinds playing a melodic line and the strings providing a rhythmic accompaniment. The tempo is marked *Vivace* with a metronome marking of 104.

appear to be wasteful and ineffective. Overlooked in such an assessment, for example, is the breathlessness noted earlier.

Dahlhaus concludes his discussion by observing that Schumann's symphonic discourse founders between lyricism and monumentality: it aspires to Beethovenian monumentality as if in denial of its lyrical *Grundstimmung*. Although such a polar, dialectical pairing is a fundamental aspect of Dahlhaus's critical apparatus and appears in his writing about almost anything, such contradictory pairings abound in the general criticism of Schumann's music. For example, the contradiction felt in his music between

Example 8.4 Schumann, Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 61, first movement, bars 50–8

Allegro ma non troppo
♩ = 144

Flutes
Oboes
Clarinets in B \flat
Bassoons
Horns in C
Violins I
Violins II
Viola
Cello and Bass

p cresc.

54

sempre cresc.

the lyric and the dramatic was noted early on by Brahms: ‘The great Romanticists continued the sonata form in a lyric spirit that contradicts the inner dramatic nature of the sonata. Schumann himself shows this contradiction.’¹³

In mainstream music criticism, Schumann’s symphonies have always been caught *between* two such poles: between lyricism and drama; between Beethoven and Schubert; and, more recently, between absolute music and programme music.¹⁴ The standing perception that these symphonies lie somewhere between well-established poles indicates that there is something singular going on here, something that escapes easy classification. Unfortunately, a faint but persistent stigma clings to this quality of between-ness, apparent in formulations such as ‘neither fish nor fowl’, or in the German adjective *zweifelichtig*. One cannot trust oneself to put much critical weight onto these symphonies, for they are not securely grounded in the landscape of known quantities.

Unquestioned popularity

Given the critical reservations that have always pestered these symphonies, what could account for their unquestioned popularity? Why do even their stoniest critics stop well short of dismissing them altogether? Several recent writers have argued that, among other things, Schumann was attempting to establish a popular symphonic style that was also viable artistically. For John Daverio, Schumann’s Third Symphony (1850) successfully merged a popular style with distinctly artistic aspirations.¹⁵ (This is of course another ‘between’-style assessment, but one that is stated positively.)

Schumann had already essayed a more accessible symphonic style in 1841, with his Overture, Scherzo and Finale, Op. 52, as Jon Finson has pointed out in an illuminating study of the work.¹⁶ The absence of a slow movement, like a lack of ballast, already helps ensure that the whole will stay afloat, resisting the pull of unsounded depths. The ‘overture’ is a masterly example of a smaller-scaled first-movement type of form that is at once charming, dramatic and light on its feet. After a halting, sighing slow introduction featuring a characteristically expressive gapped turn figure (D sharp, E, C, B), a carefree, sunny *allegro* commences, which returns, however, in its second-theme area to the figure from the introduction and its minor-mode inflections. A mock *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) sequence quickly develops, culminating in a puppet-show version of the harmonic shock from the middle of the first movement of the Eroica Symphony, which then dissipates in a wistful passage. The development section is very brief, almost sonatina-like, and the movement is rounded off with a lengthy coda that

introduces new material and a more animated tempo. These proportions indicate that a different kind of sonata ethos is at work here – nothing is probed too deeply, yet the musical argument is pervasively worked out. (For example, Schumann transforms an idea from the coda of the first movement into the theme of the *Scherzo*.)¹⁷ The result is a music that is light but never flimsy, that abounds in closely worked craft but is never lofty and never ponderous. There are few other Germanic symphonies – one thinks first of Beethoven's Eighth – that operate with such assurance in this particular realm. But perhaps because the Overture, Scherzo and Finale has been hard to categorize, both as a genre (Is it a suite? Is it a symphony?) and on account of its hybrid tone, it has endured relative neglect in the concert hall.

Daverio hears the Third Symphony as a kind of popular epic, a formulation that indicates a mix of the popular and the exalted.¹⁸ Each of the symphony's five self-contained movements reflects the rest of the symphony not by assuming an indispensable function in a teleological process but through picturesque contrast. Schumann's movements are more like paintings in a well-appointed gallery than psychologically consequential stages of a multi-movement Classical-style sonata. A walk through the gallery of the Third Symphony leads from the wind and waves of the first movement to a scene of merry rusticity, followed by an engaging yet undemanding *intermezzo*, the antique ceremony of the fourth movement, and the regally jaunty finale, whose coda looks back at the rest of the symphony in a pulsing whirl. Each stage along the way is unburdened with the weight and thrust of the whole and yet each has the heft of a confidently captured image, or *Stimmung*.¹⁹

Returning to an earlier observation about the way Schumann's *allegro* themes breathlessly fill a succession of four-bar frames, we might now say more globally that the picturesque involves the deployment of musical content that sounds as though it is filling in a space rather than creating a space. We are not compelled to wonder about the shape or extent of the space, but we are free to listen to how it is being filled: the intensive local coherence noted above keeps the listener 'in the frame'. Each movement of the Third Symphony has an appealing self-sufficiency that is never in danger of alienating the rest of the symphony: these are all paintings by the same artist.

Nor have picturesque effects gone unheeded in the other symphonies. Ludwig Finscher, for example, thinks of the middle movements of the First Symphony as *Tagstück* and *Nachtstück*.²⁰ In the Fourth Symphony, the onset of the *Romanze* seems to step out of the trajectory of the first movement directly into some enchanted nocturnal realm. But the Third Symphony

is more relaxed with this way of proceeding; it carries fewer signs of working hard to be a progressive symphony in the great tradition. This sense of staying within itself could answer for the more sanguine critical appreciation of the Third Symphony.

Something like this may also account for the general tendency to consider Schumann's symphonic middle movements to be his most successful, for they are less marked by the dramatic strain of the Classical style than the far more fraught opening and closing movements. Not a small part of the charm that influenced the symphonist in Brahms resides in Schumann's movements of *mezzo caraterre*, such as the A flat movement of the Third. Schumann seems keen to capture oblique moods in these movements, as far from the inward thrust of soul searching as from the outward thrust of dramatic action.

Even when Schumann is intensely dramatic, he is dramatic in a new way. The extrovert drama so abundant in the first movement of the Third Symphony is never heavy-handed or overwhelming but is more closely related to the type of drama found in the Overture, Scherzo and Finale. For one thing, a refreshingly smaller scale becomes apparent with the lack of a repeating exposition. And a complex dramatic effect is achieved when Schumann marks his recapitulation with a so-called 'arrival six-four sonority'. The use of this harmonic topos gives the recapitulation an enhanced dramatic reality as an arrival, but it also means that it will seem smaller-scale than most recapitulations, which usually arrive at the home dominant and then make much ado of resolving onto the tonic as a long-awaited homecoming. The 'arrival six-four' would seem to be too breathless and melodramatic for this important formal juncture, but for a movement on the scale of this one it works well as a way to reproduce the *in medias res* excitement of the opening bars.

The dramatically urgent lyricism of those opening bars belies the ready dichotomy of lyric and dramatic so often invoked in Beethoven-influenced criticism of nineteenth-century music (Ex. 8.5). The melody bursts forth in full sail, billowed by bracing winds that blow across the bar lines. The lack of a portentous slow introduction is an immediate clue that this will be a different kind of symphony. Instead we are pushed immediately into the midst of adventure, in the manner of a nineteenth-century popular novel. Here is excitement of a sort different from the other allegro themes: the melody ramps up through the tonic E flat triad, overshooting the fifth with an irrepressible shout of joyful excitement on the C; it then returns to E flat in a sinuous descent, only to leap back up to C and B flat at the end of the phrase. Hemiola effects reinforce the sense of boisterous enthusiasm. This theme is differentiated in its parts and thus contrasts distinctly with the

Example 8.5 Schumann, Symphony No. 3 in E flat major, Op. 97 ('Rhenish'), first movement, bars 1–17

Lebhaft
♩. = 66

1

Flutes
f

Oboes
f

Clarinets in B \flat
f

Bassoons
f

Horns in E \flat
f

Trumpets in E \flat
f

Timpani
f

Lebhaft
♩. = 66

I
Violins
f

II
Violins
f

Viola
f

Cello
f

Bass
f

Example 8.5 (cont.)

The image displays a musical score for Example 8.5 (cont.), consisting of 12 staves. The key signature is two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The score is written in a multi-measure rest format, indicating a longer line of music. The notation includes various instruments such as strings, woodwinds, and brass, with complex rhythmic patterns and melodic lines. The music is written in a multi-measure rest format, indicating a longer line of music.

more typical Schumann thematic construction in which the same motive appears in each bar. The result is a less contained kind of energy and a longer line.

To an even greater degree than the Overture, Scherzo and Finale, Schumann's Third Symphony effectively combines drama, lyricism and the picturesque, resulting in an ambitiously appointed popular style that – miraculously – never condescends.

Example 8.5 (cont.)

The musical score consists of 12 staves. The first four staves (1-4) are in the upper register, likely for strings or woodwinds, and feature melodic lines with slurs and accents. The fifth and sixth staves (5-6) are in the middle register, possibly for woodwinds or strings, and feature block chords and rhythmic patterns. The seventh staff (7) is in the lower register, likely for piano, and features a tremolo effect. The eighth and ninth staves (8-9) are in the lower register, likely for piano, and feature rhythmic patterns. The tenth and eleventh staves (10-11) are in the lower register, likely for piano, and feature rhythmic patterns. The twelfth staff (12) is in the lower register, likely for piano, and features rhythmic patterns. Dynamics are marked 'sf' throughout the score.

Overtures and endings

To hear Schumann's most concentrated dramatic writing, however, one must turn to his overtures. The first of these, the 1847 overture to his opera *Genoveva*, is perhaps the most gripping in its dramatic trajectory from doubt to faith, or darkness to light. This trajectory can be conveniently summarized in musical terms as the transformation of the sixth-scale degree from

an anguished minor ninth at the very outset to a downright thrilling major ninth near the end. The repeated leaps to this latter ninth, A, from the tonic, C, create one of the most electrifying dramatic effects in all symphonic literature, rivalling the much more famous dénouement at the end of Beethoven's Third Leonore Overture. Throughout, this well-paced overture is rich in dramatically telling details, from the suspensions in its theme to the bass-line drama at the end of the development (the slipping down of the massed F sharps to F at the central hinge of the development is a relaxed version of the celebrated move from F sharp to F in the coda of the finale of Beethoven's Eighth Symphony). The phrasing of themes is less regular, the rhythm more varied than in most of Schumann's other symphonic *allegros*. The major-mode horn call in the second-theme area makes for an extremely effective thematic contrast, one that speaks from within the sonata ethos. In fact, the pacing at both local and global levels puts Schumann's ability to write a dramatic sonata form beyond doubt.

The *Manfred* Overture (1848–9) is easily Schumann's best-known overture, standing out for its concentrated passion and imaginatively deployed dissonance. Throughout much of the overture, Schumann indulges his tendency to double gestures in two-bar units – but here it captures an aspect of Manfred's forever pacing, self-tortured personality, unable to break out, to sing. The harmonic orientation of the overture underscores this portrayal by continually brooding around the dominant. The whole offers a matchless example of maintaining a charged atmosphere of anxiety, and the storms that eventually break out bring no redeeming relief. The somewhat later overture to Schiller's *Bride of Messina* (*Die Braut von Messina*, 1850–1) also features much writhing around the dominant, but without the sharply etched material of *Manfred*.

Two of the overtures, *Faust* (1853) and *The Bride of Messina*, begin with a thrusting upward gesture, like a Romantic shout of the soul, and several begin in the minor and end in the major: *Genoveva*, *Julius Caesar* (1851) and *Faust*. The latter two do not enjoy the same dramatic effect as the *Genoveva* overture, unfortunately, for their themes are less distinctive. Finally, the 1851 overture to Goethe's *Hermann und Dorothea* is essentially a varied treatment of the *Marseillaise* theme (Goethe's epic plays against the background of the French Revolution) and has never made much of a mark in the concert hall.

Three of Schumann's overtures serve as entrées to actual music-theatrical works (*Manfred*, *Genoveva*, *Faust*), but the remaining three are free-standing overtures to literary works by Schiller, Shakespeare and Goethe. These latter overtures make up a compositional project that bears some relation to the literary tone poems of Franz Liszt: namely, an attempt to bear musical witness to canonic works of Western literature (though the works for which

Schumann provides overtures are all dramas, with the exception of Goethe's *Hermann und Dorothea*, which is a kind of bourgeois epic).

Admiration for Schumann's overtures is uneven, and even the most admired among them cannot claim the status of a generally beloved work. On the other hand, critics have not been at pains either to justify them or apologise for them – as a genre less directly consequential to the identity of the great German symphonic tradition, they do not come under the same scrutiny as his symphonies.

As dramatic compositions, the overtures enjoy the advantages of single-movement construction: each has the potential to be heard as a unitary effusion. Schumann's Fourth Symphony aspires to something similar, though on a larger scale, and this ambition is often treated as a progressive feature in his conception of the symphony, relating the Fourth to the First and Second Symphonies, which are also heard as developing a more organically cohesive and progressive kind of cyclical form than has been detected in the more popular orientation of the Third Symphony and the Overture, Scherzo and Finale.²¹ There are distinctly tangible thematic transformations between movements in the First and Second Symphonies – but such transformations are more acute and exposed in the run-on, formal design of the Fourth.

For example, the theme from the first movement's slow introduction reappears in a section of the second-movement *Romanze* and is varied in the theme of the third-movement *Scherzo*. The introduction to the finale draws on the turn figure of the first movement's *allegro* theme, while the finale's *allegro* theme brings back the three accented chords that signal the presence of D major toward the end of the first movement (at rehearsal letter L). In addition, neither first movement nor finale recapitulates its opening theme, thus neither enjoys within itself the traditional warrant of closural resolution granted by the so-called 'double return' of Classical-style sonata form.²² Undercutting the internal self-sufficiency of the outer movements in this way allows Schumann to create a more interdependent symphonic form, in which the four movements lean on each other as four episodes in one large and variegated design. In fact, no single movement save the finale is permitted to close in a traditional fashion: the concluding sections of the first movement recapitulate a lyrical theme from the development, now in D major, crowned with regal double-dotted rhythms; this leads to an arresting D minor chord in the winds signalling the onset of the *Romanze* movement, which ends by pausing on the dominant of the subsequent *Scherzo*, which itself ends unusually with a repetition of the *Trio*, poised on the flat-sixth of the ensuing introduction to the finale. This introduction (often heard as influenced by Beethoven's Fifth and influencing Brahms's First) then moves to a D major *allegro*, which takes up and broadens the D major conclusion of the first movement.

The whole is a complex design: for one thing, though the first movement's exposition is left hanging and unresolved formally, the D major section at the end of the movement concludes with a hurried transfiguration of the opening *allegro* theme. Aspects of the first movement reconvene in the finale, and yet it will not do simply to hear the finale as a recapitulation of the first movement. Linda Roesner thinks of it more as an 'ongoing, joyful expansion' of the first movement, while Mark Evan Bonds hears affirmation rather than resolution, on the grounds that we have already heard the breakthrough to D major in the first movement.²³ Bonds argues convincingly for the symmetry of the outer movements, as opposed to a distinctly teleological design. In this way, Schumann creatively 'misreads' Beethoven's Fifth Symphony – unlike Beethoven, whose finale crowns the entire symphony with an unimpeachable transformation of C minor into C major, Schumann's finale does not take on the burden of resolving the entire symphony.²⁴ There is no comparable burden at this point in Schumann's conception, for we have already heard a transformation to D major in the opening movement. The finale amplifies the conclusion of the first movement; it does not itself somehow conclude the first movement. This situation allows us to detect a different symphonic ethos at work here, one that is more epic than dramatic: instead of teleology and resolution, we hear symmetry and affirmation.

The very endings of Schumann's symphonic finales also reflect this different kind of weighting. Though the frenetic *stretto* concluding the Fourth Symphony is unmistakably climactic, it does not feel like the fulfilment, or final resolution, of some overarching plot (as happens, say, at the end of the *Genoveva* overture). Instead, a sudden power surge galvanizes the orchestral machine, and we hear a final burst of manic energy, a feverish exaltation both exhilarating and exhausting. The movement – and with it, the symphony – ends not because a teleological process has found its final term, but because there is no greater level of local intensity available.

The one symphony that arguably presents a teleological thematic transformation is the Second, with the 'serenely confident' theme that appears halfway through the finale and holds sway in various permutations from then on.²⁵ (See Ex. 8.6b.) This theme represents an unclenching, a clarification (or 'Clara-fication', if we are to credit the usual extramusical reading). Such a function is reflected in its discursive shape. Compared to the opening gesture of the finale (Ex. 8.6a), a rocket-like propulsion to the dominant (as if time speeds up here, reaching the dominant in a moment rather than a minute), the symphony's concluding theme makes an easy, almost inconsequential, climb to the tonic (not from $\hat{5}$ but from $\hat{6}$) and then glides from there down to $\hat{3}$, outlining a contented sigh (its underlying line can be construed as a simple descent: $\hat{6}-\hat{5}-\hat{4}-\hat{3}$, as in Ex. 8.6c). In concert with a last word like this one, the orchestra does not get more frenzied toward the end

Example 8.6a Schumann, Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 61, fourth movement, bars 1–12

(a) **Allegro molto vivace**

$\text{♩} = 170$

Example 8.6b Schumann, Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 61, fourth movement, bars 394–401

(b) ³⁹⁴

Example 8.6c Schumann, Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 61, fourth movement, bars 394–7

(c)

but seems to solidify and broaden.²⁶ This is a different sort of narrative culmination, more the sound of sated happiness than of fated triumph.

Novel symphonies

Throughout this chapter, we have observed that Schumann's symphonies ask us to attend primarily to small-scale, local utterance rather than to more overarching rhythms of dramatic development. And yet one does not simply hear additive chains of material; there is an abundant sense that one is in

the midst of an expansive and consequential enterprise. The combination of epigrammatic utterance and local intensity with large instrumental forces and large-scale formal design amounts to the creation of a new symphonic manner. Is there a way to construe this new manner that does not automatically invoke an unfavourable comparison to the more firmly established symphonic ethos of Beethoven and Brahms?²⁷

Schumann the critic may give us a clue. In his well-known review of Schubert's C major Symphony, he applauds Schubert's vivid proliferation of ideas, enchanting orchestral colours, and acute expression of individual details, all in the service of creating a world of the greatest expanse and purview. Schumann's famous remark about the 'heavenly length' of Schubert's symphony is intended to compare the plenitude of that symphony to the rich diversity of content Schumann finds in the novels of Jean Paul.²⁸

Arnfried Edler, in an insightful essay, shows how this valuation of broadly inclusive novelistic diversity finds expression in Schumann's own symphonies. As Edler observes, Schumann's symphonies notably include different characteristic 'tones', such as the conversational, the folk-like (*Volkston*), the sublime, the religious, the elfin mood of Nature (*elfenhafte Naturstimmung*) and the *Romanze*.²⁹ The sublime is now only one of many possible types of symphonic content (and not even *primus inter pares*). Following Anthony Newcomb's lead, Edler claims that the alternation of these characteristic 'tones' is more decisive for Schumann's symphonic enterprise than the establishment of a network of motivic relations between themes. The technical forms and processes of the classical tradition become a 'fading background' upon which these more essential thematic transformations take shape.³⁰ This new field of action appropriates the Classical-style symphonic categories of grandeur, unity and relational richness without losing the refined psychological differentiation gained in other intervening genres, such as the Romantic art song or the character piece.³¹

Edler's and Newcomb's insistence on the primacy of the play of characters in these symphonies reverses the usual terms of the debate over Schumann's symphonies. In this view, the classical symphonic tradition becomes a means rather than an end for Schumann: instead of a self-conscious, classicizing and necessarily flawed attempt to emulate the esteemed Viennese school on the part of a composer whose greatest musical gifts are more distinctly manifest in smaller genres, we may now hear the forms and processes of the Classical style as a kind of medium through which Schumann might attain the diverse plenitude he so valued in Schubert and Jean Paul.

In fact, the Classical style is perhaps ultimately more important to Schumann as a historical reality, one that he can refer to along with all the other 'characters' he is keen to include in the world of his symphonies. And this is, of course, not the only such historical reference. In texture and composite

Example 8.7 Schumann, Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 61, first movement, bars 1–8

Sostenuto assai
♩ = 76

1

Flutes

Bassoons

Horns in C

Trumpets in C

Alto Trombone
Tenor Trombone

Sostenuto assai
♩ = 76

I
Violins

II

Viola

Cello and
Bass

rhythm, as well as through the occasional and always highly marked presence of an archaizing style of counterpoint, Schumann's symphonies also invoke the high Baroque. No one has ever pointed to these latter references as evidence of a failed act of emulation – they are rather conceived as acts of homage. Perhaps we have been too quick to understand the challenge Schumann faced as one of measuring up to his immediate and powerful predecessors. Instead we might ask: what does Schumann get from appropriating these different historical elements?

Critic Michael Steinberg has observed a 'deliciously antiqued' sound in the *Romanze* from the Fourth Symphony, and a general effect of 'antiquing' can be said to apply to much else in Schumann's symphonies.³² The

Example 8.7 (cont.)

The musical score for Example 8.7 (cont.) is presented in two systems. The first system begins with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and two additional staves. The grand staff shows a melodic line in the treble clef and a more active line in the bass clef, both marked with *pp* (pianissimo). The two additional staves provide harmonic support. The second system continues this texture, with the grand staff showing further development of the melodic and bass lines, and the additional staves providing accompaniment. The score is characterized by its intricate counterpoint and atmospheric quality.

atmospheric opening of the Second Symphony is perhaps the most telling concentration of an historical aura (Ex. 8.7). Here Schumann creates a uniquely textured world, whose quietly engaging counterpoint begins *in medias res* with solemn brass declarations and mystically murmuring strings. The reference in the brass to the opening of Haydn's 104th Symphony maintains a wonderful presence here: not exactly in the foreground, not exactly in the background. In this setting, it sounds like the tune of a chorale prelude, except that it appears immediately and is not much of a tune, more a kind of motto, until it eventually becomes a line moving from G to D. Schumann's texture holds these elements together in a kind of suspended flux, free from the usual gravitational requirements of well-defined bass and treble roles. This effect is all the more remarkable when one considers that Schumann has also created a transhistorical counterpoint between Bach and Haydn.

Nor are such references confined to this extraordinary opening. Schumann names Bach in the second trio of his *Scherzo* movement (see the first violin part, seven bars into the *Trio*),³³ and he invokes Bachian counterpoint (as well as that of Mozart's 'armed men' from *The Magic Flute* (*Die Zauberflöte*)) in the B-section of the slow movement.

These instances, as well as the many oblique references to Schubert and Beethoven throughout, mark Schumann's symphonies as among the first to manifest a thoroughgoing intertextual sensibility, a sensibility that reaches across different historical epochs. This sensibility is of a piece with the tendency to include and develop the different 'tones' observed by Edler and Newcomb. These are works that reflect and absorb myriad facets of the world around them, personal and historical. Picturesque, episodic, more spatial than temporal, more epic than dramatic, Schumann's symphonies are above all permeable and open rather than relentlessly and hermetically coherent. Hence, they are much looser in construction globally; they are less about motivic transformation than thematic transformation (which is by nature a looser kind of transformative process). As in the Classical style, contrast is extremely important, but Schumann employs it more as a way to profile his highly characteristic musics than as a dramatic spur, or as something to be transcended with an overmastering resolution. There is, throughout, an emphasis on local materiality rather than long-range instrumentality, on content rather than function.

The fullness of Schumann's symphonic designs is in line with the German Romantics' anti-rational urge to understand (and transform) the world around them through an all-embracing *Poesie*. Toward the end of her study of Schumann's *Dichterliebe*, Beate Perrey cites Novalis's view of the Romantic novel:³⁴

The novel is about life – represents *life* . . . The novel as such does not contain a particular result – it is not an image and a fact of a *sentence*. It is a vivid realization – the realization of an idea. But an idea cannot be captured in one sentence. An idea is an *infinite series* of sentences – an *irrational quantity* – unpositable . . . incommensurable.

Like the Romantic novel so avidly theorized by Novalis and others, the symphony in Schumann's hands became a nearly all-inclusive genre without 'a particular result'. No other instrumental genre could aspire to a similar range nor maintain the same proud station as a grand statement.

By hearing Schumann's symphonies adopt the material grasp and loose flow of the Romantic novel, we find yet another way to understand Schumann as a literary composer, a composer who not only wrote in a high style about music, but who wanted to compose dramatic overtures based on

works of literature, and who was often in the business of alerting his listeners to those moments when ‘the poet speaks’.³⁵ (In this, we may somewhat fancifully see him as E. T. A. Hoffmann’s opposite: the writing composer over against the composing writer.) But whereas from other Romantic artists and theorists we might expect self-conscious irony, or even world-weary, sardonic sophistication, we are met at every turn with Schumann’s bright-eyed, feverish ingenuousness. His musical prose is always aroused, always the opposite of phlegmatic. This undisguised intensity belies the notion of Romantic irony, or reaches perhaps another level of irony. Above all, we are made to feel that the material in Schumann’s symphonies forms a personal history – he is an artist who relentlessly included everything that affected him in his art. The ubiquitous force of his personality holds his symphonies together, animates these passionate novels of inclusion. For we always feel his presence, bustling us through the vivid scenery of his artist’s life.

*

That Schumann’s symphonies have hitherto resisted that final elevation, refusing to speak for the German nation or for some other overriding collective, has of course barred them from the highest stream of the symphonic tradition, which runs directly from Beethoven to Brahms. Instead, critics have kept them in a *cordon sanitaire* of condescension. This has allowed us to continue to love them like children, and it may well prove impossible to watch them grow up.

Notes

1. For a fascinating account of the different versions of this opening figure, see Jon Finson, *Robert Schumann and the Study of Orchestral Composition: The Genesis of the First Symphony*, Op. 38 (Oxford, 1989), pp. 87 ff.
2. It was not uncommon, however, for Haydn to follow a slow introduction with a theme characterized by a similar degree of rhythmic regularity. See, for example, the opening *Allegros* of Symphonies 93, 102 and 103.
3. Donald Francis Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis: Symphonies and Other Orchestral Works* (Oxford, 1989), p. 483, in his essay on Schumann’s Fourth Symphony. Compare as well Michael Steinberg on the ‘almost frighteningly excitable temperament’ in Schumann’s Fourth Symphony: Steinberg, *The Symphony: A Listener’s Guide* (New York, 1995), p. 520.
4. Gerald Abraham, *The New Grove: Early Romantic Masters 1: Chopin, Schumann, Liszt* (Macmillan, 1985), p. 183.
5. These include the Second Symphony (1845–6), Third Symphony (1850), and final version of the Fourth Symphony (1851). The initial version of the Fourth Symphony was completed in 1841, after the First Symphony.
6. Finson, *Robert Schumann and the Study of Orchestral Composition*, pp. 138–143; John Eliot Gardiner, conductor, with the Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique, *Schumann: Complete Symphonies*, Archiv CD recording, 1997.
7. Paul Henry Lang, *Music in Western Civilization*, with a new foreword by Leon Botstein (New York, 1997), p. 817.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 818.

9. Tovey, *Essays*, p. 470 (in his essay on Schumann's First Symphony). Tovey's sense of mosaic-composition is heightened because of his own sensitivity toward phrase structure – this was how he tended to parse music.
10. Mark Evan Bonds, *After Beethoven: Imperatives of Originality in the Symphony* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), p. 114. In the chapter here cited, Bonds traces Schumann's ambivalence toward the influence of Beethoven's symphonies.
11. Lost in this view is the fact that Schumann sketched his symphonies very quickly; he certainly did not agonize with the original conceptions. See John Daverio, 'Robert Schumann', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London, 2000).
12. Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Branford Robinson (Berkeley, CA, 1989), p. 159.
13. Cited by Lang, *Music in Western Civilization*, p. 817; originally cited in Oswald Jonas, *Das Wesen des Musikalischen Kunstwerks* (Vienna, 1934), p. 191.
14. Cf. Ludwig Finscher, "'Zwischen absoluter und Programmusik': Zur Interpretation der deutschen romantischen Symphonie", in *Über Symphonien: Beiträge zu einer musikalischen Gattung*, Festschrift Walter Wiora, ed. Christoph-Helling Mahling (Tutzing, 1979), pp. 103–15; and Anthony Newcomb, 'Once more "Between absolute and program music": Schumann's Second Symphony', *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 7/3 (1984), 233–50.
15. John Daverio, *Robert Schumann: Herald of a 'New Poetic Age'* (New York, 1997), p. 465.
16. Jon Finson, 'Schumann, popularity, and the Overture, Scherzo, und Finale, Opus 52', *Musical Quarterly*, 69 (1983), 1–26.
17. See Daverio, *Robert Schumann*, p. 236.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 466.
19. But it is important to keep in mind Linda Correll Roesner's view of the coda, and consequently, the Third Symphony *in toto*, as a culmination for Schumann of the art of motivic coherence. See Roesner, 'Schumann', in *The Nineteenth-Century Symphony*, ed. D. Kern Holoman (New York, 1997), pp. 43–77.
20. Finscher, 'Zwischen absoluter und Programmusik', p. 111.
21. Linda Correll Roesner's view of the Third Symphony as a culmination of Schumann's art of motivic coherence is written against the grain of the received view of this symphony. See note 19, above.
22. Bonds, *After Beethoven*, p. 132.
23. Roesner, 'Schumann', p. 54. Bonds, *After Beethoven*, p. 132.
24. Bonds, *After Beethoven*, pp. 132 f.
25. The phrase 'serenely confident' is from Anthony Newcomb's path-breaking analysis of the Second Symphony. See Newcomb, 'Once more', p. 247.
26. This effect of broadening is much like the process that occurs at the end of the first movement of Schubert's 'Great' C major Symphony (and there are other marks of that symphony here as well).
27. From the standpoint of musical form, Joel Lester's magisterial review of Schumann's sonata forms goes a long way toward counteracting the received view that Schumann was somehow inadequate as an architect of large-scale form. See Lester, 'Robert Schumann and sonata forms', *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 18/3 (1995), 189–210.
28. Robert Schumann, 'Die 7te Symphonie von Franz Schubert', *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, xii (1840), p. 83.
29. Arnfried Edler, 'Ton und Zyklus in der Symphonik Schumanns', in *Probleme der Symphonischen Tradition im 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Siegfried Kross and Marie Luise Maintz (Tutzing, 1990), p. 194.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 201. Edler cites Newcomb, 'Once more', p. 240.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Steinberg, *The Symphony*, p. 522.
33. Noted by Finscher, in 'Zwischen absoluter und Programmusik', p. 112. Newcomb finds an additional B–A–C–H citation later in the movement: see 'Once more', p. 247.
34. Beate Julia Perrey, *Fragmentation of Desire: Schumann's 'Dichterliebe' and Early Romantic Poetics* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 219.
35. See also John Daverio's interpretation of Schumann's musical dramas as 'literary opera', and specifically his *Faust* as a 'musical novel'. Daverio, *Robert Schumann*, Chapter 10, pp. 329–87.