

What Can We Learn From Schumann the Orchestrator?

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For the student of orchestration, the symphony is a daunting taskmaster. Many more “fancy orchestration tricks” are to be found in the tone-poems of Richard Strauss, the operas of Verdi and Wagner, or the ballets of Tchaikovsky than one will discover in symphonies by Beethoven, Brahms, or even Berlioz. Nevertheless, for the true student of orchestration, one who realizes that writing for the orchestra goes beyond scoring technique and, in fact, is an integral part of the music itself, the symphony must be seen as more worthy of study for the questions it raises on those subjects.

No composer’s symphonies raise more questions than Robert Schumann’s, and for a most unfortunate reason. Alone among 19th century composers of the first rank, he is often denigrated for being inadequate to the task of setting his own music for orchestra. Fortunately for those fans of Schumann’s music, the issue is not so great that it prevents the symphonies from being performed; they are still programmed frequently. But by putting Schumann in the class of amateur orchestrator, the student of orchestration is

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steered away from the Schumann symphonies towards the greener pastures of Berlioz, Beethoven, and Brahms.

Anyone studying the craft of orchestral composition does themselves a grave disservice by “turning a blind eye” to Schumann’s “faults.” Whether or not one believes these criticisms are warranted, there are many reasons to examine Schumann’s symphonies as a student of orchestral craft. We can quickly discover these reasons by examining the various schools of thought regarding Schumann as composer, orchestrator, conductor and critic.

Those who champion or even question Schumann’s reputation as an orchestrator will find themselves running against current established thinking. Primary sources such as the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* frequently echo the long-established unkind thoughts on the subject: “Tradition has it that Schumann’s understanding of orchestral possibility was rudimentary or flawed.” The prevailing scholarly opinion is that Schumann’s orchestration impedes his symphonic ideas. A number of conductors, Gustav Mahler being the most famous, took it upon themselves to rescore Schumann’s work to make it “performable.” This is not entirely unprecedented. Mussorgsky suffered a similar indignity with his opera, *Boris Gudenov*, and Handel could never have dreamed of the “updating” of his scoring to fit late nineteenth century Albert-Hall tastes. Even Beethoven did not escape such a rethinking by Wagner. But Schumann’s symphonies have been taken on by more re-scoring than anyone else. The large number of dissertations devoted to the rescore of Schumann attests to the unusual nature of this particular type of surgery. (See the bibliography for a few examples.)

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More recently, so-called Schumann “apologists” have taken up the cause, expressing their belief that the orchestration of Schumann’s symphonies does not reflect poorly upon Schumann but simply does not come off for a number of reasons. Many of these are adherents and practitioners of the Historical Performance movement, whose restoration of Classical and Early-Romantic orchestral forces have shed a very revealing light on the possibilities inherent in the works of Schubert, Beethoven, and, of course, Schumann. While this camp is kinder to Schumann, its members are really ducking the question. Beethoven’s symphonies were not seen as flawed when played by a modern orchestra. In relegating Schumann’s orchestration to its time and place, Historical Performers simply show the other side of the coin, implying by default the inability of Schumann’s orchestration to survive in a changing ensemble.

Certain Schumann scholars have attempted to address the question in another way. By examining Schumann’s process of composition in the context of the time and place at which he composed his work, they suggest that it is not Schumann’s orchestration, but our expectations that are at fault. This is an exciting development which preserves Schumann’s reputation and adds a dimension to our perception of “standard” orchestration, casting Schumann in a kind of continuum with Berlioz and Mendelssohn as heir to Beethoven and Schubert in the further development of the symphony.

It is unnecessary for the orchestral student to take a side in this debate. Doing so will not obviate the notion that there is value in studying Schumann’s scoring. While each of these camps has a very different take on the notion of Schumann as symphonist, the one thing everyone agrees on is that Schumann’s orchestration is an issue in itself. It cannot

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be taken for granted the way Dvorak’s orchestration might be. One must wrestle with these ideas, and the reward for doing so is greater than one would expect.

Let us first assume the correctness of the idea that is most prevalent today, the one a student would most likely assume in the absence of any investigation in the matter, that Schumann is an inadequate orchestrator. Given with the option of studying nearly any score by every major composer, why would a student go out of their way to seek out a Schumann symphony for study?

In the first place, as a direct result of his unorthodox scoring, Schumann’s scores look very different from those of other composers. When one is learning to read and reduce an orchestral score in one’s mind, one gets comfortable as much with standards of orchestration as with the skill of reading the music itself. One is able to hear the instruments in one’s head because one is used to seeing them in their most familiar ranges and combinations. Schumann makes a practice, however, of combining instruments in nonstandard ways and in nonstandard configurations, for example the wide gap between the first violins’ high A and the open A-string played simultaneously in bar 6 of the *Symphony No. 1*. Seeing the instruments used differently, students of orchestration have an opportunity to ask themselves if they can imagine these combinations in their heads before they hear them. Whereas one might be able to guess at the sound of the opening of Tchaikovsky’s seldom-performed first symphony because of its standard scoring, Schumann’s decisions might make the task a little more difficult. The added challenge will serve as a nice exercise for someone in the process of perfecting this skill.

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If we decide that these unorthodox combinations are ineffective, as many conductors believe they are, then we have a rare opportunity to critique the scores for ourselves. How often can one take the work of a first rate composer and find ample opportunity to attempt to improve upon some aspect of it? The situation is a kind of a lesson from Schumann, one of which he very well might approve. The opportunities to work within the constraints of his work far exceed similar opportunities in Beethoven. Derryck Cooke’s completion of a performing-version of Mahler’s 10th symphony is a comparable challenge, but in that case, the stakes are much higher, as one is trying to live up to the standard of a master orchestrator. Here, there is nothing to lose, because the symphonies can always be performed as they were written.

If one is unable to muster the courage to walk in Schumann’s footsteps, there are many examples of those who have taken the challenge in hand (some of these, as I have mentioned, are included in the Bibliography). The particularly fascinating thing about such a course of study is that no one interpretation reveals the ultimate “improvement;” these re-orchestrators differ in their choices, and it behooves an orchestration student to determine what those differences are. Doing so will reveal various approaches to orchestral writing by various people that would be harder to spot in their original compositions, much as hearing several playwrights reading a Shakespeare monologue might suggest more about those playwrights’ ideas than their original scripts would.

If one questions the prevailing wisdom of second-guessing one of the great Romantic composers of the 19th Century, one is likely to find allies in high places. A number of scholars have taken issue with the depiction of Schumann as brilliant but quixotic, a man

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who composed quickly and was thus successful in his miniatures, but hamstrung in the face of more extended work. Of course, this characterization is extended to his approach to orchestration.

One such scholar who has gone to great lengths to defend Schumann's latter-day reputation is Jon W. Finson, author of *Robert Schumann And the Study of Orchestral Composition: The Genesis of the First Symphony*. In a review of Finson's book, Michael Spitzer relates,

...Schumann is not generally thought of as either a self-critical or a symphonic thinker. In the first respect, Professor Finson...[reveals] Schumann to be 'a painstaking draughtsman, not the popularly conceived romantic composer who penned finished masterpieces in flights of inspiration. (Spitzer, 580)

Finson has examined Schumann's process for creating his symphonies and has attempted to refute many of the ideas that surround Schumann by making that process known. In a subsequent article on Schumann's 2nd symphony, Finson says,

Schumann mastered the structural demands of the symphony...He actively revised his melodic writing to promote integration of his themes into the rest of the music. And he also relied more frequently on multiple versions retained on paper to produce concision and coherence. The sketches for the last movement of Op. 61 show beyond any doubt that Schumann had developed the methods of his compositional maturity by winter of 1845. In establishing these methods, he achieved an astonishing ability to bind highly disparate material into a cohesive whole.

Very well. We may decide, then, that Schumann knew what he was doing and composed his symphonies quite carefully. The orchestration remains unchanged; its

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problems do not disappear with revelations of the composer's concerted effort. Yet such arguments add some weight to the idea that Schumann's orchestration is not *flawed* but simply misrepresented by the modern orchestra.

The art of Historical Performance is a relatively new development in understanding the contribution an orchestral body makes to the potential appreciation of a symphonic work. In short, these groups use period instruments and period orchestral combinations to perform works written in a particular era. For instance, the brass instruments that Schumann would have expected to play his brass parts had greater limitations than their modern counterparts, and when modern brass instruments play these lines it can be argued that the subsequent balance we hear in a modern orchestral setting distorts Schumann's intention. Perhaps the unusual sonorities of the first violin lines in the opening of the first symphony, practically inaudible in a modern setting, would emerge as a result of having natural horns above them.

Orchestral forces are also affected by Historical Performance. Schumann's orchestra in Zwickau was a particular size ensemble with a smaller string component than that of a modern orchestra. When the symphony is performed using a matching number of string players, controlled by a conductor in the know, woodwind lines which seem incompetently written may prove to become a contributing factor in the overall blend.

Though there are some who would argue that Historical Performance will make a tremendous difference in *all* cases, it is probably safer to say that, as Schumann's orchestration has been problematical with a modern orchestra in a way that Beethoven's has not, Historical Performance will more radically affect the dissemination and appreciation of Schumann's work than it will for Beethoven. If this is the case, it is again

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an advantage for the orchestration student. Here we have an excellent opportunity to study the effect of such forces on the transmission of a work, something that may be taken for granted by a beginning student due to the standardization of the orchestra. In fact, a student may come to discover by hearing the same music in different size ensembles that a particular scoring which would be ineffective in an orchestral work would serve very well in a chamber setting.

Furthermore, Historical Performance provides an ideal opportunity for a student to discover the relevant history of the evolution of the orchestra and of its instruments. While this subject may be pursued solely on its own merit, it has particular relevance here. The study of how composers have changed their approach to writing for the orchestra based on differing types of ensembles and instruments will eliminate a lot of confusion for the student who wishes slavishly to imitate the early Romantics' technique. Many of the early Romantics were very clever in their strategies for overcoming the limitations of the instruments at their disposal. Beethoven, for instance, in his Overture to *Egmont*, writes a passage for two horns (E-flat and F), two clarinets, and bassoon in which the voice-leading of the horns seems very awkward; if one is aware that Beethoven's horns were natural horns and could not play any note they pleased, but were restricted to the harmonics of a certain key, then one will see that they had to be given only the notes in a D-flat major chord which were available to them, leaving the bassoons to fill out the rest. In this way, Beethoven achieves a rich chord which, today, could easily be undertaken by four valve-horns but which, in his time, was not possible. Such strategies will not be recognized for what they are unless one appreciates the difference between the modern orchestra and the one at the turn of the 19th century, and any student

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who seeks to blindly emulate these procedures may be using an inefficient means to achieve what would today be a straightforward end.

Students of orchestration must come face to face with the realization that the music they write is dependent upon the forces of the orchestra available to *them*, and Schumann’s music brings the point home more obviously than any other Romantic symphonist. It is unwise to take today’s orchestral forces for granted by thoughtlessly stretching the capabilities of the ensemble. Furthermore, it is useful to understand how music written for forces at hand may or may not translate note-for-note to other types of settings.

Still further defenses can be found for Schumann in the realm of historical context. Keeping current musicological research in mind, one may argue that Schumann’s music is not meant to be heard in the same way that his predecessors’ music was, that he used a particularly “Romantic” approach in which he deliberately scored his symphonies to create an effect of opaqueness. It follows that the clarity which we admire in Beethoven and Berlioz was not a goal of Schumann and that, by expecting such clarity of him, we undercut his overall musical purpose.

To support or refute such a point we must refer to multidisciplinary historical studies of the period. One such essay by Berthold Hoeckner presents the case that the Romantic ideal relied heavily on the idea of “distance”, manifest in literature, painting, and music of the time.

When Schumann took inspiration from Schubert’s *Symphony Number Nine*, in which the symphony undergoes a transition from the formal structures of Beethoven to its Romantic descendants, he appraised this work with the eye of the flowering Romantic

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movement. Hoeckner describes the concept of “distance” and its importance to Romanticism in general, and Schumann’s music in particular by refining the connection between novels of the time, landscape paintings, and the type of composition to which Schumann aspired. “Within the larger shift from imitative to expressive aesthetics in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the increasing prestige of instrumental versus vocal music paralleled that of landscape versus history painting. At issue in music was the status of verbal language, in painting, the position of the human subject within the world on the canvas.” (Hoeckner, p. 92) As regards Schumann in particular: “In the distant view of the Viennese landscape, [Schumann] looks for the authorial intention behind Schubert’s symphony, suggesting ‘how such works can be born precisely in these surroundings.’ But by remarking that ‘different times of line choose too differently in the texts and pictures they attribute to music,’ he also admits the possibility that music is open to multiple readings...” (Hoeckner, p. 75)

Hoeckner reminds us that Beethoven’s model, whereby a theme is explored and dissected, only to be rejoined by the end of a movement, has a particular effect upon us so that we come to understand the entire movement of a Beethoven work only at its close. This is a purely intellectual approach to the music, devoid of most external associations. Even in the Pastoral Symphony with its program, its bird-calls and its peasant orchestra, the motivic relationships take precedence; we are invited to think more about the music than the countryside.

Not so in Schumann, argues Hoeckner. Schumann the critic, the literary figure, the appreciator of fine arts, wants to put so much more into his symphonies than his own contrapuntal constructions. “Thus Schumann rehearses and reflects upon various

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interpretive approaches: the historicist and psychological search ‘behind,’ the phenomenological investigation ‘within,’ and the listener’s response ‘in front of’ the musical text.” (*Ibid*).

A student of orchestration who is unfamiliar with the idea of listening to music in this way may be lacking the resources with which to fully understand Schumann’s music, and by extension the orchestral methods which he employed in the service of that music in order to communicate it to his audience. One such audience-member, Franz Brendel, described Schumann’s piano music as follows: “Schumann’s compositions can often be compared with landscape paintings in which the foreground gains prominence in sharply delineated clear contours while the background becomes blurred and vanishes in a limitless perspective; they may be compared with a misty landscape, in which only here and there a sunlit object stands out. Thus the compositions contain certain principal passages, then other passages that should by no means stand out clearly, and are intended only to serve as background. (*Hoekner*, 95)

One might say that because Schumann’s music is substantially different in form and substance from a classical or pre-Romantic symphony it *requires* a different approach, one which would be rewarded by a greater appreciation of those who know how to listen to it. In fact, Schumann’s audience fully appreciated his efforts.

...contemporary reviews agree overwhelmingly in lining up Schumann’s new symphony of 1846 with Beethoven’s Fifth...The particular evolving pattern of mental states in [these two works] identifies as a ‘principal type of small and large instrumental music in the nineteenth century:...the expression, reinforced by sound symbols, of a psychological evolution, such as suffering followed by healing or redemption.’ Early critics heard Schumann’s second as belonging to this general, even this specific type. This was not just an incidental but an essential part of its meaning...

The first of these [reviews], by Alfred Dörffel, praises the symphony as the high point of Schumann's output...The answering review by E[duard] Krüger, in the *Liepziger Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* of 31 May and 7 June, likewise praises the symphony...and gives a particularly rich thematic description of the 'bold' and 'insistently effective' finale, which Krüger praises for its 'sharply drawn outlines'...Moscheles's reaction was set down after his second hearing of the piece, at which point he felt 'more and more that [Schumann] follows boldly in Beethoven's footsteps...The young Brahms, in a letter to Clara Schumann of 14 December 1855 [Brahms 1927, 160]...asserts that 'the symphony is my favorite of the five (obviously including in that figure the Overture, Scherzo, and Finale, op. 52). (Newcomb, 234-6)

Listeners of the time had no trouble with Schumann's methods, and it is only later, as the aesthetics changed that Schumann's reputation as an orchestrator began to change as well.

Bernard Shaw (in a review dated 28 February 1890) and Felix Weingartner (1904, 31) disclaimed interest in Schumann's symphonies altogether. Abert...sees in the Second the clear intention to imitate the '*hochpathetischen* Beethoven symphony,' but finds that the realization falls far short of the intention, particularly because of formal problems in the first and last movements...W.H. Hadow (1911, 221) finally takes the typical twentieth-century approach to these movements: he tries to parse them in terms of the formal procedures of circa 1800. He is inevitably puzzled, and puzzlement leads to dissatisfaction. He condemns both the first and last movements of the Second (together with those of the D-Minor symphony) for 'vagueness of outline,' thus precisely reversing Krüger's and Spitta's judgments.

From here forward, commentators tend either to condemn the Second (and especially its last movement) or to ignore the work altogether...Busoni (letter, 1915), Karl Nef (1921), Olin Downes (1935), Werner Korte (1937), Abraham (1938), and Schauffer (1945) all find the piece weak – or worse. Of these, Abraham's important survey of nineteenth-century music, often republished, was the most influential.

Of the post-war critics, Mosco Carner's view of the symphonies, published in a Schumann symposium of 1952 (Carner 1952), has surpassed even Abraham's in influence...Carner finds the symphony deeply flawed...A number of critics and commentators pick up both Carner's analysis and his judgment. (Newcomb, 239)

Watching the evolution of critical opinion as it relates to one particular genre of a Schumann's output, we are struck by the difference the perspective of decades, or

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centuries, can make. Most of the time, highly praised works by minor composers tend to lose their status while underappreciated works by greater ones gain (or, as in the case of certain composers like Berlioz, wait to be appreciated more fully). In this rare instance, a major portion of the output of a first-rank composer has fallen into controversy even while those works remain in frequent circulation.

It is profoundly instructive to the student composer to understand the contribution of the extra-musical associations of a work and to recognize the extent to which a work's perception relies upon its context. It is a cautionary lesson, perhaps, to the person who desires to orchestrate "just like Tchaikovsky" or "just like Berlioz" simply because these composers are iconoclasts of orchestral technique. However greatly one might wish to dismiss John Cage's 4'33'', in that composition, as in all works of music, the listener plays a role. Without proper understanding of the context in which a work was created and in which it is performed, a listener may fail to get the full benefit of what that work has to offer. The "opaque" orchestration of Robert Schumann may serve as an excellent example. If we go into a performance of one of Schumann's symphonies with open ears and evaluate the overall effect of what we are hearing, rather than simply finding fault with what we were expecting to hear, we may discover that the medium of orchestral performance, even of a Romantic work, can offer us more experiences than we might have suspected. Among those who will benefit most from this kind of listening are the composers of tomorrow.

Obviously there is plenty of room to argue over Schumann, and this gives his music an added appeal. One must take sides over the symphonic output of Schumann

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in a way that is absolutely unnecessary with Beethoven (at least today). This necessity of investment in Schumann is in itself a kind of education. Because Schumann's process is so much more apparent to us, we see his humanity. In Ravel or Brahms, composers who took great pains to hide their process and revealed no human flaws in their works, we must read between the lines to find the person, or invest simply in their biographies. Sharing Schumann's humanity by witnessing his compositional struggles, even wrestling with them, we may come to share his ideals, be able to participate in his process, have no choice but to live with him and grow with him. In that sense, he becomes a kind of teacher rather than simply a model.

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