

Piano Concerto in A minor, Op. 54

Robert Schumann

Robert Schumann and his music are so full of surprises that it seems unfair to codify his life and achievements in terms of re-hashed truisms. Yet Schumann himself did characterize his musical personality as the duality of his sub-egos, which he referred to as the fiery Florestan and the dreamy Eusebius (though with a mediating Master Raro), and his music's emotions can often be broadly reduced to those extremes.

It is also true, as few commentators fail to mention, that Schumann dedicated himself almost exclusively to specific genres for extended periods, exploring their every facet before moving on to mine other lodes. He had already dedicated himself exhaustively to piano music during the 1830s and had delved deeply into the Lied in 1840 before trying his hand at symphonies (in 1841) and embarking on an infatuation with chamber music, which occupied him from 1842 (starting with his three string quartets) until 1847 (when he produced his first two piano trios).

Schumann's Piano Concerto traces its roots to about the time when the composer's interest in symphonies was yielding to his experiments in piano-and-strings chamber music. The composer himself viewed the genre of concerto as something of a crossroads. In 1839 he had written to his then-fiancée Clara Wieck:

Concerning concertos, I've already said to you that I can't write a concerto for virtuosi and have to think of something else.

At that time, piano concertos were nearly always what we would consider lightweight vehicles for showmanship, and most of their authors — Kalkbrenner, Thalberg, Herz, Pixis, and so on — have slipped to the fringe of the repertoire. Chopin's two piano concertos (1829

and 1830) and Mendelssohn's two (1831 and 1837) were exceptions to the rule, to the extent that they introduced more serious musical content while accommodating audience expectations for dazzling virtuosity.

Between 1827 and 1839, Schumann made four stabs at piano concertos, but he left all of them in fragmentary form. His quest to find how his musical ideals might work in a piano concerto began in earnest in May 1841, when he composed a one-movement Phantasie for Piano and Orchestra. It received two private run-throughs that August, with Clara Schumann (by then his wife) as soloist and with their friend Felix Mendelssohn conducting the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. That was the last the Phantasie was heard, and Schumann's attempts to publish it came to naught. It was not revived until the 1960s,

IN SHORT

Born: June 8, 1810, in Zwickau, Saxony (in today's Germany)

Died: July 29, 1856, in Emdenich

Work composed: late May through July 31, 1845, drawing partly on material composed in 1841

World premiere: December 4, 1845, at the Saal des Hôtel de Saxe in Dresden, by the Orchester der Abonnementskonzerte (the Orchestra of the Subscription Concerts), Ferdinand Hiller (the work's dedicatee), conductor, Clara Schumann, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: March 26, 1859, Carl Bergmann, conductor, Sebastian Bach Mills, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: December 15, 2012, David Zinman, conductor, Jan Lisiecki, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 31 minutes

and when it is performed today, audiences can be surprised by its high quality.

There was enough good in the Phantasie to inspire still greater things. In the summer of 1845, Schumann set about revising the Phantasie into the first movement of his full-scale concerto. What he produced was not, in fact, a highly virtuosic piece — which is to say that, although great interpreters find much to explore in it, its demands are not overwhelmingly situated in the fingers themselves. Early listeners were struck by the extent to which the piano and the orchestra interacted, as opposed to the more standard turn-taking of the forces in other virtuoso concertos of the day. This is a supremely “symphonic” concerto in the democratic way in which the soloist and the orchestra pursue

their unified intent. Nonetheless, its rather transparent scoring stands in striking contrast to that of Schumann’s symphonies themselves, which can tend toward density in their textures.

There is more of Eusebius than of Floristan in this concerto. But, despite its lack of superficial razzle-dazzle, Schumann’s only full-fledged piano concerto quickly became one of his most popular pieces, applauded not only at its Dresden premiere but also, in short order, at concerts in Leipzig, Prague, Vienna, and (before long) everywhere else.

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.

In the Composer’s Words

In 1839 Schumann published an essay on the subject of piano concertos in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, which he had founded five years earlier:



[The] separation of the piano from the orchestra is something we have seen coming for some time. Defying the symphony, contemporary piano-playing seeks to dominate by its own means and on its own terms. ... This periodical has, from its beginning, reported on just about every new piano concerto that has come along. There can hardly have been more than 16 or 17, a small number in comparison with former days. Thus do times change. What once was regarded as an enrichment of instrumental forms, as an important discovery, is now voluntarily abandoned. ... And so we must await the genius who will show us in a newer and more brilliant way how orchestra and piano may be combined, how the soloist, dominant at the keyboard, may unfold the wealth of his instrument and his art, while the orchestra, no longer a mere spectator, may interweave its manifold facets into the scene.

Robert Schumann with his wife, Clara, in 1847, two years after she gave the premiere of his Piano Concerto