

# Symphony No. 2 in C major, Op. 61

Robert Schumann

By the time he wrote his C-major Symphony, in 1845–46, Robert Schumann had already completed his Symphony No. 1 (*Spring*); his Overture, Scherzo, and Finale (essentially a symphony without a slow movement, which Schumann spoke of as his “symphonette”); and the first version of his D-minor Symphony (which eventually become his Symphony No. 4). He therefore had quite a lot of experience as an orchestral composer.

Nonetheless, his creative life was imperiled. He had begun to show signs of serious mental and physical illness, and by August 1844 he hit rock bottom. Clara Schumann wrote of her 34-year-old husband:

Robert could not sleep a single night. His imagination painted him the most fearful pictures. Early in the morning I usually found him bathed in tears. He quite gave himself up.

If his bouts of melancholy prior to this crisis could be dismissed as just part of his personality, phobias and mood swings began to rule his existence following that attack.

Through much of 1845 he immersed himself in the study of counterpoint and composed only short, academically inspired movements. But then came the day when he wrote, in a letter to Felix Mendelssohn: “Drums and trumpets in C have been blaring in my head. I have no idea what will come of it.” What would come of it, one imagines, was the fanfare-like motto that opens the C-major Symphony and recurs again in that work’s *Scherzo* and near the end of its finale. Getting the notes on paper was not easy at first, but gradually Schumann recovered the will to continue. Writing again to Mendelssohn, in September 1845, he reported:

All writing is a severe strain on me. ... I itch and twitch every day in a hundred different places. A mysterious complaint — whenever the doctor tries to put his finger on the thing, it seems to take wings.

Suddenly, in the second week of December, Schumann’s creative juices started to flow, and in the space of about three weeks he composed the entire symphony, at least in its essentials. He approached the orchestration as a separate step of the composition process and turned to the task early in the new year. But his physical and psychological problems resurfaced. In February 1846, he experienced a continual ringing and roaring in his ears, so debilitating that it forced him to take a break from his orchestration. Hoping that a vacation might bring some sort of reprieve, he traveled with Clara to the

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## IN SHORT

**Born:** June 8, 1810, in Zwickau, Saxony (Germany)

**Died:** July 29, 1856, at Endenich, near Bonn

**Work composed:** mostly in three weeks near the end of 1845; the entire piece was drafted by December 27 of that year and the orchestration occupied Schumann from February through October 1846

**World premiere:** November 5, 1846, in Leipzig, with Felix Mendelssohn conducting the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** January 14, 1854, Theodore Eisfeld, conductor

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** July 23, 2017, at Bravo! Vail in Colorado, Alan Gilbert, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 37 minutes

town of Maxen, not far from their home in Dresden. As bad luck would have it, their quarters there afforded a view of a nearby insane asylum. This predictably inspired further panic in Robert, since, of his many phobias (blindness, heights, death, poison, metal, and so on) the fear of insanity was among the most intense — and, it would turn out, very well-founded. The Schumanns quickly moved on to Norderney, one of the East Frisian Islands in the North Sea, and there Schumann was finally able to proceed with his orchestration in a more relaxed state.

He would later write to Georg Dietrich Otten, a musical colleague in Hamburg who introduced the work in that city:

I wrote the symphony in December 1845, when I was still ill; I feel that people are bound to notice this when they hear the work. ... Only in the final movement did I begin to feel my old self again, but it was only after I had completed the whole work that I really felt any better. Otherwise, as I say, it reminds me of a black period.

One doubts that listeners — modern listeners, at any rate — would react to the piece in the way Schumann assumed. Certainly this symphony is not an autobiographical study in illness or depression. On the other hand, its general flavor is distinctive in a way that is hard to put one's finger on: there is, overall, a feeling of hard-won affirmation and triumph.

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## Pondering Schumann's Second

Julius Harrison, writing in Robert Simpson's anthology *The Symphony*, characterized Schumann's symphonies this way:

Unequal in their instrumental presentation, and too often failing [in their outer movements] to drive home many finely conceived ideas to their logical conclusions, they remain the most debatable of all symphonies composed by the great masters of the nineteenth century.

In the April 1984 issue of the scholarly journal *19th Century Music*, the musicologist Anthony Newcomb offered an insightful reading of Schumann's Second Symphony in terms of what he argues is Schumann's logic. "Clearly it is not the text, but our way of understanding the text, that has changed," he writes, and goes on to clarify that Schumann approached the symphony as a sort of musical *bildungsroman*, as the musical equivalent of 19th-century novel, a progression of specific ideas or sound symbols quite separate from the abstracted play of sonata forms and tonal structures. Indeed, many critics contemporary to Schumann reviewed his music by assuming that this was precisely the case.



Robert and Clara Schumann, in 1847, the year after his *Symphony No. 2* was premiered

**Instrumentation:** two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings.

*An earlier version of this note appeared in the programs of the San Francisco Symphony and is used with permission. ©James M. Keller*

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## The New York Philharmonic Connection

Schumann is one of those special tastes that can send casual shipboard acquaintances rushing into each other's arms or it can make enemies of otherwise loving friends. But nobody will deny Schumann's great gifts: the inspired lyricism that soars out of his best works, the uncanny stream of newnesses that succeed each other in such profusion, the warmth, the singing tides, the rhythmic ingenuities and the daring experimentalism.

So said Leonard Bernstein in a 1957 analysis of Schumann's Symphony No. 2 that he prepared for a music appreciation recording distributed by the Book-of-the-Month Club. His movement-by-movement exegesis was not simply an explanation of the symphony, but a fervent attack on the composer's critics and a defense of Schumann's orchestrations, which musicologists had begun to decry almost as a reflex. The accompanying recordings had been made four years earlier with the Stadium Concerts Symphony Orchestra, which was actually the New York Philharmonic in its summer guise.

The "Stadium" in the Orchestra's name was Lewisohn Stadium, located in west Harlem, which was the Philharmonic's summer home, 1922–64. Tickets could be had for 25 cents (or \$1.50 for a front-row table). Built in 1915, the sprawling limestone amphitheater, modeled after ancient Roman coliseums, was used for City College athletic events during the academic year, but come June it was transformed into one of New York's favorite concert venues, with the Philharmonic as the house band and featuring an array of classical and popular artists. It was at the Stadium that Bernstein first conducted Schumann's Second Symphony in 1947.

When Bernstein signed a Decca recording contract in 1953, the label wanted to use the Philhar-

monic at the Stadium. But the Stadium was not an acoustically appropriate recording venue and Carnegie Hall at that time had no air conditioning. Rehearsals for the Stadium generally took place at 10:00 a.m. on the morning of the concert. This led to a somewhat crazy schedule that would be unimaginable today. On the morning of June 24, the Orchestra rehearsed the Schumann symphony at the Stadium for the 8:30 performance that evening. Following the concert, the players were whisked downtown for a recording session at Carnegie Hall that began at midnight. Breaking up around 2:00 a.m., Bernstein and the players had barely a few hours of sleep before beginning the next day's rehearsal at the Stadium, for an entirely new program of Latin American music.



— The Archives

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*Bernstein rehearsing the Stadium Concerts Symphony Orchestra (aka the New York Philharmonic) at Lewisohn Stadium*