BEETHOVEN'S INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC

Translated from E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Kreisleriana*
with an introductory note

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

E. T. A. HOFFMANN is an important figure in the background of musical history of whom we have gradually lost sight in spite of his significant relationship to the course of musical events and to those greater creative personalities by whom he was overshadowed. Hoffmann is known today chiefly for the part he took in the German literary movement of the first quarter of the nineteenth century. He also has a small place in the history of musical composition as the composer of the opera *Undine*, which had a successful run in Berlin in 1816. But his importance in the history of music does not come from the value of his numerous musical compositions which, curiously enough, coming from such a professedly radical romanticist in matters of music, follow the conservative methods of Spontini rather than the more progressive romantic style of Weber. Hoffmann did, however, exert a powerful influence on composers, critics, and the musical public through his literary writings in which he emphasized what at that time had little recognition in musical criticism, the romantic interpretation of music.

Ernst Theodor Wilhelm Hoffmann was born at Königsberg in 1776, six years after Beethoven was born, and died in Berlin in 1822, five years before Beethoven's death. He changed the Wilhelm in his name to Amadeus as a testimony to his enthusiasm for the works of Mozart. Trained to be a lawyer but possessing unusual gifts for both music and drawing, his life was one long vacillation between the sober career of a *Kammer-Gerichts-Rath* and the bohemian existence of a romantic artist. During the last years of his life in Berlin this romantic dualism of his nature expressed itself in days spent over ledgers and police records which he kept with exemplary conscientiousness and nights spent in the most fantastic revelries at Luther and Wegener's *Weinhaus*.

In 1803, Hoffmann was serving as a district attorney at Warsaw, which had been ceded to Prussia in 1795. In a letter to a friend, he wrote, "—a gay world, full of magic visions, shimmers and flickers about me—it seems as if something great must soon come of it—some kind of an artistic creation must appear out of the chaos!—whether it will be a book—an opera—a painting—*quod diis placebit*. . ." and in his diary he writes, "Was I born to be a painter or a musician? I must put the question to the president of the senate or the prime minister; they would know!" As a matter of fact, at this time in Warsaw Hoffmann seemed to be making a highly successful combined use of his varied talents. Besides satisfactorily and faithfully performing his official legal duties, he conducted orchestral concerts in a newly opened concert-hall which he had helped to plan and on the interior decoration of which he had demonstrated his skill as a painter. His friend Hitzig wrote of his success as a conductor:

His tempi were fiery and fast but without exaggeration, and people used to say afterward that if he had been able to show what he could do with a good orchestra, it would not have been easy to find a conductor to surpass him in the interpretation of Mozart. He had already at that time brought out a Beethoven symphony (*Eroica*?) for which he was filled with admiration.

Partly as a result of some caricatures which he had drawn of his superiors, Hoffmann lost his government position and took up music as a profession. It was in 1809 and 1810 while he was eking out a bare existence as musical director at the theatre at Bamberg that the first of his *Kreisleriana* papers appeared in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* at Leipzig. These with other fantastical musical essays were published in book form at Bamberg in 1814, and it is from this time that Hoffmann's literary career really dates. His fame as a teller of weird stories spread through numerous translations into other countries, particularly into France. Balzac, Théophile Gautier, Gérard de Nerval, and George Sand extolled him, and his praises were sung in verse by Alfred de Musset in *Namouna* in 1833. Carlyle helped to introduce him to English readers by translating *Der goldne Topf*. In some ways the weird fancifulness of his style may be compared to the style of Edgar Allan Poe, though W. C. Brownell in his *American Prose Writers* considers Hoffmann more human than Poe. Scott in an essay *On the Supernatural in Fictitious Compositions*¹ spoke

¹The Foreign Quarterly Review, No. 1. July, 1827.

of Hoffmann's stories as the feverish dreams of a diseased brain, comparing them to the visions which are produced by the immoderate use of opium and concluding that they were the result of the condition of Hoffmann's broken-down physique. But Scott lacked the sense for the weird and the supernatural which was such a characteristic element in the romantic imagination. Hoffmann's use of the supernatural was, like Coleridge's, the result of the exaltation of the imagination over the intellect and falls directly in line with his romantic interpretation of music as shown in the essay on *Beethoven's Instrumental Music*.

The full title of the two volumes published in Bamberg in 1814 is: *Fantasiestücke in Callot's¹ Manier. Blätter aus dem Tagebuche eines reisenden Enthusiasten. Mit einer Vorrede von Jean Paul*. Among the contents is a ghost story about Gluck containing a description of the overture to *Iphigenia in Aulis* and a fantastic dream picture of a performance of Mozart's *Don Juan*. There are six essays under the general title *Kreiseriana* of which *Beethoven's Instrumental Musik* is No. 4. The name *Kreiseriana* comes from the weird figure of the Kapellmeister Johannes Kreiser around whom the subject matter centers. It is not known why Hoffmann chose the name Kreiser. The description of his character—a struggling musician at odds with the world, ranting against the philistinism of musical society and rhapsodizing about his art—is obviously autobiographical.²

The essay on *Beethoven's Instrumental Music* is important as a contemporary criticism of Beethoven and as a demonstration of the growing tendency in music towards the romantic as opposed to the classic point-of-view. As an appreciation of the *Fifth Symphony* this essay is very remarkable when contrasted with the contemporary criticism which considered the *Third* and *Fifth Symphonies* as a falling off from the *First* and the *Second*. Philip Spitta has said:

Hidden in the *Kreiseriana* there is a power of extraordinary force which has permeated all the writing about music during the century. The pictures of the three great Austrian instrumental composers which Hoffmann has drawn and placed next to one another are conceived with such deep-seeing musical insight and portrayed with such successful

¹Jacques Callot, celebrated French etcher, engraver, and caricaturist (1592-1635).

²Sir George Grove in his Dictionary in an article on Jacob Böhner gives this man the credit of being the original from whom Hoffmann drew the portrait of Kreiser. Dr. Edgar Istel in the recent Reclam edition of the *Kreiseriana* does not mention Böhner. It is more likely that the character is drawn principally from Hoffmann's own experiences.

poetic power that they are as effective to-day as when Hoffmann sketched them.¹

Hoffmann's appreciation of the imaginative qualities in music made a strong appeal to those composers who were striving not so much to get away from classical forms as to make music more personal and more poetically suggestive. In 1820, Beethoven sent Hoffmann his greeting in these words:

I am aware that you interest yourself in my work. Allow me to say that it pleases me very much coming from a man gifted with such exceptional talents as you: I wish you all that is beautiful and good.

Schumann in his youth immersed himself in the imaginative, eccentric world of Jean Paul and Hoffmann, who, indeed, got many of his ideas from Jean Paul. Just as the *Papillons* is a reflection of Schumann's enthusiasm for Jean Paul's novel *Die Fliegeljahre*, the *Kreisleriana* and the titles of some of Schumann's other pieces such as *Nachstücke* and *Fantasiestücke* testify to his reading of Hoffmann's writings. The general character of Schumann's *Kreisleriana* suggests admirably the rhapsodic outpourings of the Kapellmeister Kreisler of Hoffmann's sketches.

Hoffmann was one of the earliest writers to influence Wagner. As early as 1827, Hoffmann's stories with their background of Dresden life fascinated Wagner, and they continued to attract him all through his life because they took him back to the time when he was a struggling artist among the familiar scenes of city life which Hoffmann described. As remarkable as was Wagner's appreciation of Beethoven's genius, Ernest Newman in his recent book on *Wagner as Man and Artist* reluctantly admits that Wagner was stimulated in his worship of Beethoven by Hoffmann. It can be shown that Hoffmann also anticipated many other of Wagner's ideas on art.

The essay on *Beethoven's Instrumental Music* is a revision of an article by Hoffmann in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* (xii. Jahrgang, No. 40, July 4, 1810) on the Beethoven *Fifth Symphony* and the *Trios*, Op. 70, which had been published the year before by Breitkopf and Härtel. The essay as it now stands was first published in 1813 in the *Zeitung für die elegante Welt* in Leipzig and afterwards reprinted in the *Fantasiestücke in Callot's Manier* when the collected *Kreisleriana* and other essays were published together for the first time.

¹Deutsche Rundschau, Dec., 1892, *Über Robert Schumanns Schrift.*