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"Critical Excursions"

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Source: *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, Vol. 23, No. 473 (Jul. 1, 1882), pp. 367-369

Published by: [Musical Times Publications Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3358419>

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THE MUSICAL TIMES

AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR.

JULY 1, 1882.

SCHUMANN'S INSTRUMENTATION, AND HIS POSITION AS A SYMPHONIST:

BEING A SUPPLEMENT TO "CRITICAL EXCURSIONS."

By FR. NIECKS.

My object in making the following remarks is to inquire how far the censures pronounced on the instrumentation and form of Schumann's symphonic works are justifiable.

In connection with the composer's instrumentation I shall first advert to an English critic whose ability and honesty did not prevent him from giving vent to the astounding opinion that it was time to rescure Schumann's symphonies. The remark, although made with apparent seriousness, was probably not seriously meant, and certainly cannot have been seriously considered. It is with Schumann's orchestral as with his pianoforte style—both are at times awkward and ineffective, but his instrumentation is so inseparably bound up with the character of his thoughts that the one cannot be altered without denaturalising—nay, perhaps even in part destroying—the other. If there are musicians who think that the composer's pianoforte style could be with advantage translated into that of Beethoven, or that of Chopin, Liszt, or Henselt, I am not one of them, and this I say with all respect for and full appreciation of the eminent excellences of these styles, whose superiority as styles I shall be the last person to call in question. For the same reason which prompts me to take up this attitude with regard to any tampering with Schumann's pianoforte works, I should tremble were the greatest instrumentators of our time, Wagner and Liszt, to reproduce his symphonies according to their own notions; I should fret were the more conservative Raff to subject them to a thorough revision; and I should grieve even were Brahms or some other disciple of the master's to retouch them with a reverent hand. As a rule, pictures are not repainted unless they are damaged; repainting, in fact, is resorted to for the purpose of restoration, not amelioration. And what has hitherto been the result of this comparatively modest process of restoration? Owing to it, if we may believe the best judges, the majority of the grandest art-works of the past have come down to us spoiled and ruined. I do not think that any man of sense ever proposed that the painting of an artist of individual power should be improved by the brush of another. Imagine the execration that would be heaped on the hapless *cinquecento* critic who should have advised and the graceless *dilettante* who should have commissioned Titian to repaint or retouch the canvases of Raphael! And yet there can be no doubt that the Venetian was a greater colourist than the master of Urbino. Nor would the case be materially altered by putting in the place of Raphael a less exalted artist. It is natural to wish for a harmonious union of qualities in all their perfection, but it is wise to remember that those who have *des vertus* are rarely without *les vices de leurs vertus*.

Expressions of extravagant opinions, however, can do little harm: they resemble fireworks in their evanescence as well as in their brilliance. More dangerous are those inexact or incomplete utterances of a sober complexion whose plausibleness assures for them a ready reception and unsuspecting confidence. He who, in discussing anything with ap-

parent judicial fairness and thoroughness, censures its shortcomings severely and passes over its excellences in silence is sure to mislead many. Now this is exactly what has latterly been done as regards Schumann's instrumentation by a highly esteemed musician who is looked upon as one of our chief critical authorities, and justly so, for his professional and literary acquirements qualify him, and his practical and theoretical achievements specially entitle him to judge. Were he asked to explain his conduct he would probably answer, "Schumann's excellences are too well known to need pointing out; but it is a timely undertaking and a task worth doing to open people's eyes to his shortcomings." Although this completely exonerates the critic, it does not justify the unintentional or well-intentioned misrepresentations of his criticisms. What is the advantage of avoiding Charybdis if we are thrown on Scylla? Seeing that there never was and there certainly is not now any sign of a Schumann mania in this country, counteracting remedies seem to be uncalled for. But the fact is, we are under a wave of adverse Schumann criticism, and whilst it is passing over us we shall do well to remember a certain curious German proverb about pouring out the baby with the water.

By this time the reader will no doubt be losing all patience, and calling upon me to come to the point and state plainly what I have to say on the matter under discussion. Well, Schumann's orchestration is neither faultless nor on the whole exemplary. We meet in it with details which would surprise one everywhere except in the scores of the most inexperienced; and much in it is open to the reproach of dulness and heaviness. Of this sombreness of tone-colour we notice little or nothing in the first symphony, but his predilection for it increases with his years. In connection with this point we must not overlook the fact that the lack of brilliance and transparency is for the most part attributable to and in keeping with the character of the underlying thought—is, in fact, as far as interpretation goes, a felicitous effect, not a disastrous defect. Schumann's personality as reflected in his works may not always be absolutely pleasing; but, as in life so in art, we must respect individual singularities if we wish not to suppress individuality altogether, and level humanity to one vast expanse of tedious uniformity. Even if I were a more lukewarm lover of Robert Browning's poetry than I am, I should still think it preferable to have a Browning than a second Tennyson in his stead. Moreover, Schumann's instrumentation not only deserves something else than unmitigated blame, but even something better than benevolent sufferance and faint approval; for besides comparatively ineffective passages there are others where the composer shows himself a master in this particular branch of his art, and in not a few even an originator of novel effects of the greatest beauty. How much that is lovely, characteristic, and picturesque was given, and in part for the first time revealed, to the world in "Manfred" and in "Paradise and the Peri"! In more than one direction Schumann extends by means of his much-abused instrumentation the sphere of music; he makes us breathe new atmospheres, and initiates us into unapproached mysteries. One of his grandest deeds is the moving picture, unfolded in the overture to "Manfred," of the personality and inward struggle of the central figure of Byron's weird and fascinating creation—a picture which owes so much of its power to the impressive tone-colour. It would make too long a list to enumerate all the orchestral beauties of the symphonies; I shall confine myself to pointing out two passages which, like the overture to "Manfred,"

are distinguished by a peculiarly Schumannesque complexion—namely, the variation with violin solo of the *Romanze*, and the trio of the *Scherzo* in the D minor Symphony. “As regards orchestration,” says Ambros, “Schumann followed entirely the same path as Mendelssohn, however one might say that he did not so frequently make use of transparent tints; of charming effects and blooming euphony he was not less capable.” The latter part of the learned and *spirituel* historian’s remark is doubtless true; and we may add that whilst Schumann’s tone-colour is generally inferior to Mendelssohn’s in transparency, he surpasses his rival often in depth, which, however, degenerates sometimes into turbidity. If it holds good at all that Schumann followed, in the matter of instrumentation, the path of Mendelssohn, it holds good only with regard to the B flat major Symphony. In this first orchestral work the composer’s individuality manifests itself, but not so distinctly as in the subsequent ones, where, indeed, his style of instrumentation undergoes a considerable change. Reissmann—who holds that Schumann, because of his conception of the various instruments as melodious parts, even those that are not so by their nature, never acquired the proper orchestral polyphony—says that in the B flat major Symphony, “the first completely successful attempt to introduce the new romantic contents into the older forms,” the instrumental element, out of which the motive seems to grow, accommodates itself to the dominating idea of the symphony; but that afterwards, when the composer endeavoured to transfer the whole new pianoforte style with its wealth of harmonies and chords to the orchestra, the latter lost not unfrequently for the ear the clearness and comprehensibility which it still retained for the eye.

Abroad, nothing is to be found comparable to the absolute reprobation of Schumann’s orchestration which British critics seem to have made their speciality. I have already alluded to the proposals and strictures of two of them. A third, whose sweet reasonableness as well as undoubted conscientiousness I have always regarded with particular satisfaction, startled me not long ago by instancing Chopin and Schumann as parallel cases, their orchestral works standing equally in need of rescoring. It is impossible that the critic, who admires Schumann, saw at the time the injustice and perniciousness of the remark. As he is a man possessed of knowledge and experience, the only explanation of the otherwise hopelessly unsolvable riddle I can think of is that fancy and pen ran too fast for reflection to keep up with them. The difference between Chopin and Schumann is in reality quite enormous: the former made in his younger days a few attempts at writing for the orchestra (two concertos and some less notable pianoforte pieces with orchestral accompaniments), but did not advance beyond the stage of tyroship; the latter, on the other hand, wrote a very large number of important works both for the orchestra alone and for the orchestra with solo instruments, solo voices, and chorus—works which are not kept alive like those of Chopin by something outside the orchestra. Indeed, few composers have, as regards instrumentation, made a more brilliant *début* than Schumann with his first orchestral work, the B flat major Symphony, which fact is a striking proof that he was specially gifted also in this respect. That Schumann did not neglect the study of instrumentation, but, on the contrary, prosecuted it even later in life most assiduously, may be seen from certain entries in his *Theaterbüchlein*, a note-book which contains his impressions of the operas heard by him in Dresden during the years 1847-50. After hearing Boïeldieu’s “Jean de Paris,” he writes, “The instrumentation

(to which now my attention is chiefly directed) is everywhere masterly—the wind instruments, particularly the clarinets and horns, are treated with predilection and nowhere overpower the voices; the celli are already here and there treated with effect as independent parts.” The instrumentation of Cimarosa’s “Matrimonio Segreto” he characterises likewise as masterly, but finds that of Marschner’s “Templer und Jüdin” somewhat lacking in clearness, and calls that of Auber’s “La Muette” (“Masaniello”) abominable. Weber’s “Euryanthe” evokes from him enthusiastic expressions such as “How the instruments sound! They speak to us from the innermost depth.”

A few words respecting the composer’s relative position as a symphonist shall bring our excursions into the wide tracts of Schumann-criticism to a conclusion.

In a letter which appeared in the *Signale* in 1877, Hans von Bülow says, “In spite of my admiring sympathy for Schubert’s symphony, and for some movements (II., 1, 3; III., 1, 4, &c.) of Schumann’s symphonies, I hold that Mendelssohn’s Scotch Symphony takes the first rank as a finished (*abgeschlossenes*) work of art.” Suppose we grant the incontrovertibility of the judgment, viz.—that the unity of contents, the symmetry and lucidity of form, and their mutual correspondence are more perfect in Mendelssohn’s work than in any one of Schubert’s or Schumann’s—does it entirely and finally dispose of the question concerning the relative value of these masters’ works? Not at all. The question is not so simple, and consequently not so easily decided. And even from the purely artistic, or let us rather say formal and technical, point of view much diversity of opinion would be possible. For, unfortunately, there are no laws of taste, and in the absence of a code of laws, as Schiller justly remarks, the critic must either be silent or become judge and legislator at the same time. Hence individual liking and disliking determine the balance. Indeed, we are face to face with a problem of great complexity, which, like all art-problems, cannot be worked out in figures and demonstrated with mathematical precision. In a comparison of Mendelssohn and Schumann, for instance, the question is not of form and formlessness or of emptiness and fullness, but whether the lesser fullness and preciousness of contents and superior form of the one is preferable to the greater fullness and preciousness of contents and sometimes inferior form of the other. Not the cut and make alone, but also the cloth, has to be taken into account. Brendel, treating of these composers in his “History of Music,” remarks, “Mendelssohn pays outward regard to what is effective; with him this fine discernment of what is becoming predominates. Schumann follows the dictates of his inner nature, and the new is something that springs forth unconsciously.” Or, as one may say in other words, Schumann shows us more of the man, Mendelssohn more of the artist. Hence “Schumann awakens more immediate sympathy; Mendelssohn gives the impression of the finished and classical.” The genesis of Schumann’s and Mendelssohn’s symphonies illustrates the character of the composers and their works. Whilst Schumann began the composition of a symphony with enthusiasm and finished it with impatience—his Symphony in E flat, No. 3, for instance, was sketched and scored between November 2 and December 9, 1850—Mendelssohn conceived their parts at different times and carried them about for years: he received the first impulse to write the A minor Symphony in Scotland in 1829, mentions it frequently in his letters, but had not finished it till January 20, 1842; he began the A major Symphony

in Italy in 1830, brought it to a first hearing at a Philharmonic Concert in London on May 13, 1833, and died without having published it. But are the contents of Schumann's symphonies really superior to those of Mendelssohn's? As the choice is not between good and bad, the way in which this question will be answered depends on our individual temper and habitude. If we prefer emotional intensity and the glow and stir of romanticism, we shall give it to Schumann; if we prefer gentler moods and the restraint and serenity of classicism, we shall give our vote to Mendelssohn. Speaking of romanticism and classicism I cannot pass on without noting that Schumann is a romanticist with classical tendencies—Mendelssohn a classicist with romantic inspirations. Much has been written on those two great contemporary composers, and often the one has been abused for the glory of the other; whereas it would have been better to find out their peculiar virtues, and to "rejoice in the possession of two such fellows," as Goethe thought those people ought to have done who disputed whether he or Schiller were the greater poet.

But whilst it is impossible to determine to which of the three symphonists—to Schubert, Mendelssohn, or Schumann—precedence is due, we can declare unhesitatingly, and without ignoring their peculiar merits, that Beethoven is superior in rank to one and all of them. Schumann has been called the "heir of Beethoven." This, however, is a mere rhetorical flourish. There is no other kinship between them than that existing between all honestly and nobly striving musicians; and no other connection of predecessor and successor than the temporal one. Their respective individualities may be thus characterised. In Beethoven intellect and imagination are evenly balanced, or, if not quite evenly, with a slight inclination towards the side of the intellect; in Schumann, on the other hand, the imagination predominates decidedly over the intellect. Again, Beethoven is always master of himself and his art; Schumann allows himself to be carried away by the one or the other. Or, rather, in Beethoven man and artist check each other; in Schumann sometimes the man gets the better of the artist, sometimes the artist of the man. Schumann had neither Beethoven's subtlety of thought and powerful mental grasp, nor his masterly craftsmanship; still, unless stricken with utter blindness, we cannot fail to recognise the charm of his genius. For, although not a hero and prophet like Beethoven, he was a personality of great nobleness and richness; and if as a symphonist he did not advance beyond the point to which his predecessors had cut out a new road, he opened at least many lovely and romantic paths into the surrounding country. In short, although in the rear of Beethoven, Schumann, if not ahead of, is abreast with the best of the post-Beethoven symphonists; and this distinguished position is assured to him by the truly living contents of his works, the outcome of a beautiful and significant individuality.

"PARSIFAL"

AN ANALYSIS OF WAGNER'S FESTIVAL DRAMA

By F. CORDER.

(Concluded from page 311.)

We are now to suppose that the strange youth *Parsifal* has wandered away from Monsalvat, beyond the mountains to *Klingsor's* magic castle, in which the second act takes place. There is a short prelude of an agitated and sinister character, principally formed on two motives which have appeared

casually in the first act, during *Gurnemanz's* explanations, but which we refrained from quoting then to avoid complication. These are—



the "magic-spell" motive, and—



the several phrases of which, either together or separately, characterise the magician *Klingsor* himself. These two motives, together with the *Kundry* figure (No. 7), form the unpleasant material of the opening scene—a strange, wild conception, both in drama and music. *Klingsor*, sitting in his tower and surrounded by the mysterious implements of his craft, becomes conscious that the "pure fool" is approaching his domain. By his spells he accordingly summons the spirit of *Kundry*, whose body lies locked in magic sleep in a thicket on Monsalvat, to his side. From what ensues, we glean some more particulars of the wild woman's history. She is that Herodias who, according to tradition, demanded and obtained John the Baptist's head, and was doomed to eternally wander the earth in consequence. Wagner, however, with a view of concentrating the interest, rather boldly makes her crime that of having laughed at Christ on the cross. While half her life is spent in serving the Knights of the Grail, she becomes from time to time subject to the power of *Klingsor*, and, as one of his sirens, has seduced many a knight from the path of virtue—*Amfortas* among them. In vain she writhes, and howls, and moans: *Klingsor* compels her to obey him, and now to use her arts against the approaching foe, *Parsifal*. Her torture is all the greater, as she knows that the one who successfully resists her sets her free.

Parsifal now approaches, and *Klingsor*, looking over the rampart, describes how he attacks the garrison of besotted knights, putting them speedily to flight, and forcing an entrance. *Kundry* is dismissed to her task, and the scene changes to the lovely magic garden of the castle. Bands of houris, awakened by the alarm, rush in from all sides, wildly exclaiming. This wonderful choral scene is for sopranos only, in as many as eighteen separate groups, and frequently in twelve real parts. A peculiar restless, chromatic figure, repeated almost incessantly for forty bars, is the chief feature here:—



No. 9 is added to it when *Parsifal* appears upon the walls, and looks down in astonishment upon the maidens, who at first assail him with reproaches, but soon, recovering the loss of their lovers, coax him to join their gambols. They adorn themselves with