



Classics Concert Insights Lecture

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SCHUMANN, CARNAVAL (1835)



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“With Robert Schumann Romanticism came to full flower.” (Schonberg)

FEATURES OF THE ROMANTIC ERA:

- **Composer’s need for self-expression overrides other concerns.**
- Unrestrained emotion.
- **Emergence of formless music.**
- Nationalism.
- Exoticism.
- **Program music.**
- Preoccupation with the supernatural.
- Ever enlarging orchestras, ever lengthening works.
- Emergence of the modern conductor.
- **Miniatures.**



ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810-1856):

- Born in Zwickau, Saxony, Germany. Father bookseller and novelist. Displayed early interest in music, age seven.
- As teenager influenced by the novels of Jean Paul Friedrich Richter, now obsolete, known simply as Jean Paul.
- Lost his father, 1826, at age 16. Mother encouraged him to go to law school.
- Began studying piano with Friedrich Wieck, in Leipzig, 1830.
- Right hand injury derailed piano career.
- *Papillions* 1831. Free form, thirteen movement piano music, made of dances that represent a masked ball, inspired by a Jean Paul novel.
- *Die Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (“New Journal for Music”), 1834. Began career as a music critic with this magazine.

- Engagement to Ernestine von Fricken, summer of 1834, daughter of a Bohemian noble, and Wieck's piano pupil. The ill-fated relationship ended in 1835 when Schumann discovered she was illegitimate.
- In love with Clara Wieck, a piano prodigy and his teacher's 15 year old daughter, 1835. She is destined to become "*the most outstanding woman pianist of the nineteenth century*" (Ostwald).
- **Carnaval, 1834-35**, inspired by Ernestine von Fricken. Like *Papillions*, a free form piano piece, but more elaborate.
- Marriage proposal to Clara Wieck, 1837; results in lawsuit by her father who opposes the union. Resolved in 1840 and the two wed.
- Compositional output: 1832-39: piano period; 1840: lieder (song cycles); 1841- 1854: orchestral and chamber works, four symphonies, a piano concerto.
- 1853: discovers Johannes Brahms, then 20 years old.
- 1854: Suicide attempt, jumps off a bridge into the Rhine River. Confined to an insane asylum in Bonn from thereon, where he died in 1856, age 46.

SCHUMANN, THE PIANO COMPOSER:

- Schumann was primarily a composer for the piano. His later orchestral works have been criticized by some as being too "pianistic".
- In his piano compositions of the 1830's, "*Schumann made a conscious effort to create music unlike any of his contemporaries.*" (Jensen)
- Schumann composed for his friends and music intellectuals rather than the general public. They were rarely played in his lifetime.
- Many of his compositions were difficult, considered unplayable in their time. Schumann composed "*without any regard to the human hand.*" (Jon Nakamatsu)
- "*Mood, color, suggestion, allusion – these were important to Schumann...(more so)...than writing correct fugues, rondos or sonatas.*" (Schonberg)
- With regards to program music, Schumann was skeptical of music's ability to transmit specific extra-musical material with accuracy. He commonly assigned programmatic titles after he created his music, not vice-versa.
- In *Carnaval*, Schumann sought to express a "*soul state*" created by the music, emotions and moods that could be portrayed by sound.

HISTORY OF CARNAVAL, THE CIPHER:

- Schumann had a keen interest in ciphers, number symbolism and musical/word puzzles, as did many other Romantic Era composers.

- Carnaval originated from Schumann's discovery that Ernestine von Fricken's hometown Asch (now Aš in the Czech Republic), was a musical word, that also contained the composer's own name in it.
- A - E flat – C – B, in German, translates to **A – S – C - H.**
- A flat – C – B, translates to **As – C - H.**
- E flat – C – B – A, translates to **S – C – H – A.**
- These sequences also spell out the composer's name, Robert **A**lexander **S**chumann.
- The sequence is also found in the German word *Fasching*, meaning carnival.
- NOTE: these notes are not musical motives but rather sequences worked into larger melodic units, usually in the beginning of most movements. They are not easy to hear. In this regard, they are truly ciphers.
- Schumann began composing Carnaval in December 1834, completed in 1835.

CARNAVAL, OVERALL STRUCTURE:

- Schumann entitled this work: “ *Carneval, scènes mignones sur 4 notes pour Piano. Op. 9*” (Carnaval, tiny scenes over four notes for piano, Opus 9).
- The music is an assortment of miniatures, 21 movements, for solo piano, depicting the goings on in the carnival of Lent.
- The music leaves the listener with the impression of a kaleidoscope of varying sounds and moods, seemingly disorganized on the surface, while in actual fact it is carefully composed and well-organized.
- The kaleidoscope effect is aided by constantly varying rhythms. No two are the same.
- Jon Nakamatsu calls it “*organized chaos.*”
- All of the movements, except #1 *Prèambule* and # 17 *Paganini*, are derived from the A.S.C.H. motive.
- There are two halves to the composition, the first dominated by the A.S.C.H. motive, the second by As.C.H.
- *Lettres Dansantes* (#10: A.S.C.H. –S.C.H.A.) effects a transition in the middle.
- The score has a section entitled *Sphinxes*, not intended to be performed, that gives the key to the cipher of the music.
- Flanked at each end with a ceremonious marches as introduction and finale, *Carnaval* has two types of music: dances and character depictions.
- The movements do not stand alone, but rather, are grouped in pairs, and one triplet, based on similar subjects or music. Some like-movements appear in symmetrical positions in each half of the composition.
- Each movement has a label. While this seems to demand literal programmatic interpretation, many scholars warn against such an exercise.
- The finale rounds out the composition by recalling the introduction.
- Performance is demanding and requires considerable pianistic virtuosity.

CARNAVAL:

1. Prèambule (A flat; Quasi maestoso)

- Derived from *Variations on a Theme by Schubert*.
- A – B – Coda.
- A: Ceremonial sounding march with dotted rhythms, presented in three variations.
- B: A fast, lively dance, also in three variations, the middle one slower, quieter.
- Coda: Brief closing music, derived from the march theme, but with a different rhythm. It is loud and emphatic, and comes to a firm conclusion. This coda will return in the last movement to conclude the entire work.



2. Pierrot (E flat; Moderato):

- A *Comedia dell'arte* stock character, *Pierrot* is the sad clown, pining for the love of *Colombine* who leaves him for *Arlequin*. The role eventually evolved to pantomime. In the 19th century, *Pierrot* also became the alter ego of alienated artists.
- The music is a repetitive, slow dance, with an aura of chromatic mystery. Two stark themes a & c are each accompanied by an obsessively persistent three-note response, b.
- “b” is E-flat-C-B, derived from the S-C-H-A motive.
- The movement is in two sections, separated by a fermata, each section ending with a codetta derived from “b”.
- Phrasing: ab x4 – cb x4 – ab x4 – codetta- fermata. The sequence now reverses: cb x4- ab x4 – codetta. The a’s alternate a-a’-a-a’, while the c’s stay the same.



3. Arlequin (B flat; Vivo):

- Another *Comedia dell'arte* stock character, the harlequin was an agile and nimble clown, performing acrobatic acts audiences expected. He was *Columbine*'s lover.
- This movement provides a more energetic, nimble counterpart to *Pierrot* with which it is coupled.

- Also repetitive, the music is characterized with frequent melodic leaps, grace notes, and abrupt variations in tempo. These tones paint the agility of the character depicted.
- The themes are variations of “c” and “b” from *Pierrot*.
- “b” is again persistently repetitive.
- A-B-A-B-A structure; “A” the acrobatic act; “B” a slow intermezzo in between each act. There is no coda or other concluding device; the next movement abruptly follows.

4. **Valse Noble** (B flat; Un poco maestoso):

- A slow, lyrical waltz, inspired by Clara Schumann’s *Valse Romantique* Opus 4.
- A-B-A structure.
- “A” presents the waltz theme. “B” is a slower, more lyrical counter-melody.
- *Valse Noble* provides a brief intermezzo between the *Pierrot/Arlequin* couple and the *Eusebius/Florestan* couple to follow.

5. **Eusebius** (E flat; Adagio):

- A character in a Jean Paul novel, *Eusebius* represents Schumann’s introverted, repressed side. “*The dreamer*” (Kramer).
- Music consists of variations on a single theme, a quiet, slow, lyrical melody, with sparse accompaniment.
- Phrase structure is aa – a’a – a’a – a’a, all with nearly identical melody, harmony and rhythm.
- Nonetheless, the listener actually hears a ternary, A-B-A structure.
- “B”, the second of the “a’a” pairings, is louder and more ornate, with thicker texture and pedal added. It therefore stands out as different.
- “*The dry, soft sound of the piano without pedal is private, withdrawn into itself; in the middle, the passionate nature of the music breaks through ...only to withdraw again in the end.*” (Rosen)

6. **Florestan** (G minor; Passionata):

- Another character in a Jean Paul novel, *Florestan* represents Schumann’s fiery, impetuous side. “*The man of action*” (Kramer).
- Music consists of variations on a waltz theme from *Papillons*, Schumann’s 1831 piano composition.
- In two parts. The first features a fast, passionate melody alternating with slower, more *Eusebius*-like music. The second half is all passionate, rising in tempo and dynamics, ending inconclusively.
- Contrasting the opposite ends of the composer’s personality, the music implies the fiery side overcoming the introspective.

7. **Coquette** (B flat; Vivo):

- Depicts a flirtatious girl.
- A brief, slow introduction seems to conclude *Florestan*.
- The music consists of variations on a dance tune with a skipping-hopping rhythm, and melodic leaps reminiscent of *Arlequin* (their rhythms are in reverse).
- Ends conclusively.

8. **Rèplique** (B flat – G minor; L'istesso tempo):

- Means “reply”, a response to the flirt.
- Partner piece to *Coquette*, “*which it follows like a stray coda*” (Kramer). .
- Begins with the same brief introduction as *Coquette*.
- The *Rèplique* melody is slower, more contemplative. Interspersed throughout are *Coquette* rhythms –skips and hops – suggesting that she is there, still flirting.
- NOTE: *Coquette* and *Rèplique*, as a couple, foreshadow the more cartoonish *Pantalon et Colombine* later in the work, both representing sexual tension.

Sphinxes:

- Not meant to be performed, this is a set of three bars with no key, tempo or dynamic indications.
- The notes configure to S-C-H-A, As-C-H, and A-S-C-H. A key to the cipher.
- NOTE: Some famous pianists (Rachmaninoff, Horowitz) have included it in their recordings.

9. **Papillons** (B flat; Prestissimo):

- Means “butterflies”. This is unrelated to Schumann’s earlier work by the same name.
- Very fast tempo and fluttering rhythm, tone paint the wings of a butterfly.
- Three variations on a main melody (a) and counter melody (b), each phrased a-a-b-b.

10. **A.S.C.H. – S.C.H.A: Lettres Dansantes** (E flat; Presto):

- Means “dancing letters”.
- A fast, syncopated dance tune is repeated with minimal variation.
- Neither of the named motives fully appear in the tune
- Despite the label, the tune starts with the sequence: As-C-H-C-As.
- After four repetitions, the tune is varied with a rise in dynamics and slower tempo.
- Similar interruptions occur four more times, each after a two repetitions of the main tune.
- Ends with a single concluding note.
- NOTE: As in *Eusebius*, the composer displays his tendency to create variation via dynamics and tempo, rather than the melody.



11. **Chiarina** (C minor; Passionato):

- Refers to Clara Wieck, then 15 years old, eventually to become Schumann's wife.
- Consists of variations on an impassioned dance melody with a unique agitato rhythm.
- Dramatic rises in dynamics, and occasional slow tempi with rubato, inject passion into the piece.
- This is a "love letter". He was already in love with her, while engaged to Ernestine.



12. **Chopin** (A flat; Agitato):

- An evocation of the great pianist, and one of Schumann's earliest discoveries.
- A gentle, lyrical melody, initially presented loud, subsequently repeated slower, softer.
- Accompaniment is dramatic arpeggios, adding a dramatic flourish to the melody.
- The tune fades away with an open cadence, the accompaniment subsequently disintegrating into its individual notes, also fading.
- "A *faux nocturne that mediates between Chiarina and Estrella.*" (Kramer)
- While Schumann respected and admired him, Chopin did not feel the same about +++
- Schumann's music. He was insulted by this movement, which he considered a parody of his music.



13. **Estrella** (F minor; con affetto):

- Depicts Ernestine von Fricken, Schumann's then fiancée.
- Very brief. A-B-A format.
- "A" is a passionate melody, "B" a softer interlude.
- A closed cadence provides conclusive ending to the *Chiarina-Chopin-Estrella* triplet, two passionate outer melodies with a lyrical middle.

14. **Reconnaissance** (A flat; Animato):

- "Recognition" during the masked ball, the "unmasking" of the lovers, Schumann and Ernestine.
- Variations on a lively dance tune with a rollicking accompaniment. A-B-A Structure.
- "A" presents the dance and offers variations on the theme in A-flat Major.
- A steady, staccato left hand accompaniment imparts a merry, playful mood to the music.
- "B" is a slower, more ornamented version of the theme in B Major. Now the accompaniment is legato, making the mood more serious, ponderous.
- "A", returns to the original, fast, spry theme, back in A-flat Major.
- A brief coda fades the music away in an open cadence.
- Note: as in *Eusebius* and *Lettres Dansantes*, music in this movement creates the impression of a ternary structure through varying tempo, dynamics and harmony, even though there is no new contrasting melody. The movement can thus also be viewed simply as variations on one theme.



15. **Pantalon et Colombine** (F minor; Presto):

- Stock characters in Comedia Dell'arte. *Pantalon* is a miserly merchant, old, greedy, and lecherous. He is usually represented with a costume featuring a large phallus. He chases after the saucy, pretty servant *Colombine*, *Arlequin's* girlfriend.
- A-B-A structure.
- "A" is fast and scurrying, in exaggerated staccato. It represents *Pantalon* in lusty pursuit.
- "B", *Colombine* is based on the "A" theme, slower and with exaggerated legato.
- When *Pantalon* returns in decapo, it is cut off by *Colombine*.
- A fermata and two firm concluding chords complete the abrupt end of *Pantalon's* quest.

- Colombine, gentle as she is, interrupts the symmetrical phrasing expected in the decapo, thus, highlighting a sense of intrusion. “*Colombine, indeed, is always cutting Pantalon short.*”(Kramer)
- This movement is coupled with *Reconnaissance*, and can be interpreted as a parody of it. The movement also provides a cartoonish counter-point to *Coquette & Replique* from the earlier half of the work, both depicting sexual tension.

16, 17. **Valse Allemande** (A flat; Molto Vivace) – **Intermezzo: Paganini** (F minor; Preso):

- “German Waltz”. Occupies a mirror image position in second half of *Carnaval* to *Valse Noble* from the first half.
- This is the only movement in *Carnaval*, in which a separate movement, *Paganini*, appears as an intermezzo, giving an impression of encountering the violin virtuoso amidst the dance.
- The waltz theme, “a”, is a quiet lyrical melody with triple meter accompaniment. A louder, march-like melody, “b”, still in triple meter, provides contrast. An emphatic codetta, “c”, also appears twice.
- Phrase structure is: a-a-b-a-c--b-a-c.
- *Paganini* follows without a break, a loud, energetic contrast to the gentle waltz.
- *Paganini* is a fast, busy melody, reminiscent of *Pantalone*, requiring pianistic virtuosity. It ends with loud, emphatic chords, and in an open cadence.
- Note: the steady beating rhythm of *Paganini* with irregular syncopated beats interspersed, anticipates Stravinsky 80 years before he came along.
- After a fermata, *Valse Allemande* returns, with a-a-b-a-c phrases, also concluding emphatically.
- The two waltzes and *Paganini* combine to create an A-B-A structure.
- *Paganini* and Schumann did not personally know each other. The Italian virtuoso was at the height of his reputation during the composition of *Carnaval*. Schumann had seen him perform, admired him, and composed some piano music inspired by *Paganini*.

18. **Aveu** (F minor – A flat; Passionato):

- Literally translated as “confession”, Schumann referred to this as an “*avowal of love*”.
- Quiet and lyrical. Phrase structure: a-a-b-a-b'-a.
- “a” remains the same; “b”, derived from “a” is varied only in tempo, “b” slower than “b”.

19. **Promenade** (D flat; Con Moto):

- This is “*the walk, such as is taken in German balls, arm in arm with your partner.*” (Schumann, in a letter to Ignaz Moscheles, 1837)
- A-B-A-Coda.
- “A”, a triple meter dance, consists of four variations on an antecedent-consequent phrase. Music is calm,

- “B”, derived from the consequent of “A”, is quieter and offers dissonant contrast.
- “A” returns, louder, more ornamented, and rhythmically altered.
- Coda fades out with rhythmically altered motives from “A”.
- NOTE: There is no rhythm or other tone painting device in this movement to imply a promenade. This is a good example of how the programmatic content of the work cannot always be interpreted literally.

20. **Pause** (A flat; Vivo):

- The label is misleading. Not only is there no pause, the music begins fast and loud.
- It functions as an introduction to the final movement.
- A variation of the *Prèambule* coda leads the music hanging on an open cadence.
- The final march follows without a pause.

21. **Marche des “Davisbündler” contre les Philistins** (A flat; Non allegro):

- *Davisbündler* was an imaginary society of Schumann’s, advancing the cause of Romantic aesthetics.
- The sequence of events is: *Davisbundler* March – *Philistines* – *Prèambule* Finale.
- Starts with a loud, heroic march, in $\frac{3}{4}$ meter, with full pedal. Phrasing is a-a-b-a-b-a.
- A new energetic theme, *Philistines*, appears in variations. Interspersed within these motives from the *Prèambule* are quoted.
- NOTE: unlike *Pantolon et Colombine*, there is no struggle between the *Davisbundler* and *Philistines* themes, and the former does not appear to overcome the latter. They merely stand in contrast of each other.
- The music then leads to the finale featuring a return of the *Prèambule* coda, now with a convincing conclusion.