

23. Schumann

Kinderscenen, Op. 15: Nos 1, 3 and 11

(For Unit 6: Further Musical Understanding)

Background information and performance circumstances

Robert Schumann (1810-56) wrote *Kinderscenen* in 1838 at the age of 28. It was one of a number of imaginatively titled and unusually constructed sets of piano miniatures which he composed around that time. *Kinderscenen* (commonly translated as 'Scenes from Childhood' although more accurately as 'Children's Scenes') is a collection of thirteen short pieces of which we study three in Anthology No. 23 (Nos 1, 3 and 11).

The Romantic movement

The Romantic period, to which Schumann and these pieces belong, was a period of fundamental change in music – change that sometimes led in apparently contradictory directions. As well as being a time of innovation and daring in compositional techniques, there was a shift to music with extra-musical influences – perhaps a programmatic purpose, a poetic connection, a literary theme or a representation of national identity. At the same time, the romantic emphasis on people as individuals rather than as members of society could lead to introspection and a sense of isolation.

Both these developments are reflected in the titles and content of some of Schumann's piano miniatures, for example:

- *Papillons* ('Butterflies') is a set of waltzes inspired by the novel *Flegeljahre* by Jean Paul.
- *Carnaval* is a portrait of Schumann and a number of his close friends and artistic heroes. The characters all belong to what Schumann called his *Davidsbund* - 'League of David'. In this he was recalling the Biblical King David, killer of the Philistine giant Goliath – the word 'Philistines' being applied then as now to people with no appreciation of the finer points of the arts. As well as real people, the supposed 'League' included two imaginary characters that Schumann had created – fiery Florestan and reflective Eusebius – who represented two sides of his own complex and unstable personality.
- *Nachtstücke*, ('Night Pieces'), *Waldscenen* ('Forest Scenes') and *Fantasiestücke* ('Fantasy Pieces') reflect both the Romantics' love of nature and their inward-looking preoccupation with the world of the imagination.
- *Kinderscenen* reflects yet another strand in Romanticism: a new way of looking at childhood. Far from being considered as trainee adults given to tiresome bursts of misbehaviour, children could be seen as having access to insights and experiences lost in adulthood. William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* (including 'The Lamb', set by Tavener in NAM 32) were published in 1789. 'Heaven lies about us in our infancy', wrote William Wordsworth in 1802 in his 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood'. Schumann's music is about children, not for them to play (he wrote the quite different *Album for the Young* for that purpose). His deep love of contemporary poetry, and his identification of the composer with the poet, is demonstrated in the final piece in *Kinderscenen*, entitled 'The Poet Speaks' – a moving portrait of the meditative adult

looking back on his memories of childhood. We should not, however, take these memories too literally. Schumann said that he wrote the music before he attached specific titles to the various movements.

Piano construction

The first half of the nineteenth century was a period of great change in piano construction. In the time between Schumann's birth and the composition of *Kinderscenen* some major developments had taken place. Two are very relevant to us here: the invention of the iron frame, and the use of felt rather than leather to cover hammers. The former would allow for greater resonance and sustaining power and the latter altered the tone to give a mellower and less strident quality. Some aspects of these pieces reflect the changes – for instance, the gentle melodic lyricism of No. 1 and, to a lesser extent, No. 11. The vibrant sustained bass open fifths in No. 3 (bars 13 and 14) would not have had the same effect on an earlier instrument. It is also worth remembering that the modern-day instrument on which we now hear these pieces is different again. The sheer power and volume of today's grand pianos would probably have seemed quite shocking (or thrilling!) to Schumann – something worth bearing in mind in any performance.

Virtuosity and domestic music-making

The technical improvements to the piano were closely associated with two divergent tendencies – one public and one domestic – in the way keyboard music was performed. The new instruments' increased power and range of expression meant that they could be used in larger rooms and concert halls. Piano recitals became the fashion, and listeners – whether the rich in their salons or middle-class audiences at the ever-increasing number of public concerts – loved nothing better than a virtuoso. Huge efforts were made to acquire the most dazzling technique. Leading teachers (such as Schumann's teacher Friedrich Wieck) commanded high fees and published volumes of exercises and studies. At the same time, sales of smaller pianos for domestic use soared, and amateur players and singers created a huge demand for accessible music – piano solos, duets and songs with piano accompaniment. Schumann subtitled his *Kinderscenen* 'Easy Pieces for Piano'.

Schumann and Clara Wieck

Sometimes a link between a composer's life experiences and his music is a less than convincing analytical path to follow (for instance, some of Mozart's jolliest music was written at times of deep despair), but in the case of Schumann there is plenty of evidence, even to the extent of specific titles, to prove that his music was often a reflection of his personal life. By 1838, Schumann had settled on the career of composer; any thoughts of the virtuoso performing career he had yearned for had been dashed. He was deeply in love with Clara Wieck (daughter of his former piano teacher) and, a year before, had asked her father for her hand in marriage. This was refused and a legal battle had commenced. A letter to Clara at this time shows his feelings, when he writes despairingly, 'all these nights of anguish, sleepless with the thought of you, and all this tearless grief'. Schumann eventually prevailed in his lawsuit and he married Clara in 1840. Of course, three short piano pieces cannot possibly contain all of Schumann's conflicting emotions of the time, and we will never know his precise thoughts at the moment of composition, but there are perhaps hints of the combination of joy and anger, expectation and frustration which his personal life clearly contained.

Performing forces and their handling

In terms of general piano writing, there are features that place these pieces stylistically in the Romantic period.

- In No. 1 the two hands generate three clearly identifiable textural layers. The middle layer is divided between the hands. (When Beethoven used this texture in the 'Moonlight' sonata of 1802, a locus classicus of emerging romanticism, he assigned the triplets entirely to the right hand, giving octaves to the left hand like orchestral cellos coupled with double basses. The sensation for the player is very different.)
- Note the importance of the sustaining pedal. 'Pedal' is specified in general at the start of the pieces; unlike Chopin – another pianist–composer who was almost his exact contemporary – Schumann rarely gives very precise directions on the use of the sustaining pedal. It is possible to play all the notes of *Kinderscenen* No. 1 unpedalled, but the effect is thin without the halo of resonance that the pedal provides. The unusual effect in bar 16 of No. 3, on the other hand, is impossible without pedal, as four notes spanning nearly two octaves have to be sounded in the left-hand part.
- In the accompaniment of No. 3 the left hand leaps in dramatic fashion between bass notes and chords rather in the manner of the later jazz 'stride bass' style. This type of layout, divided between groups of instruments, had been used for orchestral accompaniments in the eighteenth century. Transferred to a harpsichord it sounds very jolting, but on a piano, with its greater resonance and dynamic variety, the right balance between the parts can be achieved.
- Eighteenth-century music, whether Baroque or Classical, typically (though not invariably) has a 'bass line' that is not the principal melody, and is played in the bass or tenor register. Romantic music was scored with much greater freedom – the bass could have the melody, or the whole musical texture could move into the treble register. So we see left-hand melodies in *Kinderscenen* No. 1 and No. 11, and a wholly treble texture at the beginning of No. 11.
- *Kinderscenen*, while far from 'childish', is intended to present somewhat naïve pictures, and a highly challenging pianistic style would not be appropriate: it is not a work representative of full-blown romantic pianism. Of all the movements, No. 10 shows the most advanced pianistic style. Its title, '*Fast zu Ernst*' ('Almost too serious'), can be applied in two ways: to a child taking life with unusual gravity or to the musical style, almost too intense for this group of pieces.



Notice the more remote key; the curious time signature, which at a slow tempo gives the impression of putting apparently short notes under a microscope; the perpetual syncopation of the melody; the wide range of the left-hand arpeggios; the overlap of the thumbs; the extremely precise notation of the final chord; and the necessity of the sustaining pedal. Notice, too the general layout of the part-writing, which subsumes the horizontal movement of parts in a fluent and idiomatic pianistic texture.

General comments

Before commencing an analysis of each piece in turn there are some features that relate to and appear in all of the pieces; to avoid unnecessary repetition later on, they can be mentioned here. These general features are:

- functional harmony and tonality
- Melody-dominated homophony
- simple rhythms, typically established and maintained for a whole piece
- diatonic melodies
- balanced phrasing, as these are 'songs without words' (the title under which Mendelssohn chose to publish his own short piano pieces) that could accompany lines of lyric poetry
- clearly defined cadences
- modulation to related keys
- mainly diatonic harmony with occasional chromatic chords
- use of simple duple time signatures for all three pieces. Other pieces in the set use simple triple and quadruple.

Structure

There is a nostalgic simplicity in the rounded binary form that Schumann chose for many of the movements of *Kinderscenen*. This was the typical form for Baroque dance movements; it survived through the Classical period in the minuets of symphonies. In his other collections of miniatures Schumann often favours unitary form (with a single span), ternary form (ABA) or a freer structure of contrasting sections.

No. 1 – Von fremden Ländern und Menschen ('Of foreign lands and people')

- Rounded binary form: (A:BA) with each part repeated.

No. 3 – Hasche-Mann ('Catch-me-if-you-can')

- Rounded binary form (A: BA) with written out repeat of opening four bars but conventional notated repeat of the ensuing BA section.

No. 11 – Fürchtenmachen ('Frightening')

- Symmetrical rondo form (A B A C A B A). Each section is 8 bars long but the B section consists of 4 bars repeated.

Tonality

No. 1 – Von fremden Ländern und Menschen

- G major.
- Modulation to E minor at bar 12 but resolution to tonic is surprisingly avoided (see the section on Harmony).

No. 3 – Hasche-Mann

- B minor.
- Modulation to G major at bars 9-10.
- Emphatic dominant preparation at bars 15-16.

No. 11 – Fürchtenmachen

- The key seems to waver between E minor and G major.
- E minor is suggested by initial I-Vb progression at the start but the chromatic lower parts blur the sense of key.
- G major is established in bars 3-4, continuing to the imperfect cadence in bar 8.
- '*Schneller*' (Faster) section starts in E minor, confirming this with a cadence in bar 9, then continues sequentially to C major in bar 12. The accented B in bar 12 wrenches the key back to towards E minor.
- Transient modulations, via secondary dominants, to A minor in bars 21-22 and B minor in bars 23-24.

Harmony

No. 1 – Von fremden Ländern und Menschen

- Perfect cadences, e.g. bars 21-22.
- Chord V usually has a 7th added. Dominant 7th chords are heard in first inversion (bar 2), root position (bar 7) and third inversion (bar 13).
- Diminished 7th chord in bar 1².
- Unusual progression in bars 11²-12: instead of the expected II-V-I progression in E minor the harmony shifts unexpectedly to a G major triad when the D# (leading note of E minor) slides down to D natural. After a momentary bare fifth, the triplet inner part completes the chord.
- 4-3 suspension in the inner part writing of bar 7.
- The root progression in bars 9-12 follows a circle of fifths (E-A-D-G (with B as the bass note)-C-F-B (-E expected but avoided).

No. 3 – Hasche-Mann

- Plagal progression (I-IV-I) is the first harmonic movement.
- Perfect cadences, e.g. bar 20.
- Appoggiaturas e.g. in bar 2 (the accented semi-quavers).
- Use of 7th chords, mainly dominant 7ths but II7-V7 progression in G major is used in bar 10.
- Striking use of a prolonged 'Neapolitan' chord in root position in bars 13-15¹. This is an example of an eighteenth-century progression reinterpreted in a Romantic context. The Neapolitan flat supertonic (C major) is approached via an interrupted cadence in E minor

(bars 12²-13). The music lurches into tonic and dominant harmony in C major over an accented double pedal for two bars (bars 13-14). Because the Neapolitan chord is, unlike its eighteenth-century usage, in root position, the expected move to the dominant 7th in bar 16 involves a leap of a tritone in the bass, which Schumann emphasises with his *sforzando*.

No. 11 – Fürchtenmachen

- The rhythmic placing of cadences every four bars may seem somewhat mechanical, but they appear in varied forms. Traditionally placed root position, perfect cadences are avoided in favour of less conclusive kinds. Even at the final cadence, the effect is softened by feminine cadence treatment.
- Perfect cadences close at the half bar in bars 10 and 12 and, even more dramatically, on the last quaver of bar 24.
- Imperfect cadences are frequent – e.g. I-V in G major in bars 4 and 8 (again with feminine treatment).
- Chromatic harmony – the opening two bars are highly chromatic and include parallel diminished chords on 2nd and 4th quavers of bar 2 (the former notated as a 7th).

Melody

Rudolf Reti, in *The Thematic Process in Music*, has demonstrated how many of the melodies of *Kinderscenen* are derived from the first piece in the set. The rising 6th followed by a group of four descending conjunct notes (page 9 Example 1) can be traced through the various pieces, often at their original pitches.

In No. 3, the crotchet B natural has been detached from the four descending notes and the space filled with a similarly-shaped phrase one note higher (Example 2).

No. 11 also begins on B. The four note descent is immediately heard in the alto on the principal beats, filled in with chromatic passing notes. It reappears conspicuously at its original pitch in the second phrase of the melody (see Example 3, which also makes Schumann's consecutive octaves very apparent).



Example 1

Example 2



Example 3

In the second episode, bar 21 is an obvious diminution of the upper notes of bars 9-11 of No. 1.

No. 1 – Von fremden Ländern und Menschen

- Thematic feature of rising minor 6th leap followed by stepwise descent in bars 1-2 and elsewhere.
- Bass melody in bars 9-12 borrows features of the opening bars.
- Melodic sequence in bars 9-12.

No. 3 – Hasche-Mann

- Melody is almost entirely conjunct, with leaps onto accented notes such as the appoggiaturas in bar 2 and the *sforzando* dominant seventh in bar 15.
- Thematic use of the figure of four conjunct semiquavers, ascending or descending. Appears as a sequence in bar 2.
- Unusual descent of a minor 7th in bar 9. This is generated by the octave transposition of the semiquaver phrase in the second half of the bar. The high position of the G major chord at the start of bar 9 is close to the hand position of the previous bar. The overall shape of the melody from bar 9 is a descent, emphasised by accents at bars 9 and 11, and culminating with the Neapolitan chord at bar 13 (the lowest melody note in the piece).

No. 11 – Fürchtenmachen

- Mostly diatonic apart from chromaticism in the 2nd bar of the A section.
- Modified version of opening melody appears in the bass in bars 5-8, below a new phrase in the topmost melody.
- B section (bar 9) has a very disjunct bass melody with octave leaps which is treated in sequence.
- The second half of the C section (bars 25-28) has a 2-bar phrase with semitone movement which spans a diminished 4th and is then treated in sequence.

Texture

No. 1 – Von fremden Ländern und Menschen

- Three textural layers in A section consisting of upper melody, inner quaver triplets and an independent bass line.
- In B section (bars 9-14) the sound of the three layers continues, but the treatment and notation are different: the upper melody is thickened with thirds whilst triplets are associated with the bass line as it adapts the melody of bars 1-8.

No. 3 – Hasche-Mann

- Again, the texture is essentially 3-part, with the most active part usually at the top, the bass line firmly on the main beats and an accompaniment of offbeat chords – the bass and accompaniment both played by a very active left hand in the ‘stride’ manner already mentioned.

- The exceptions to this are the open 5th double pedal in bars 13²-15¹ (emphasised by the rest in the bass line, bar 13) and the sustained chord with inner ascending scale in bars 15²-16.

No. 11 – Fürchtenmachen

- While the harmony and counterpoint training of the nineteenth century still involved strict part-writing, pianist-composers were able to treat this with great freedom. In this piece, whilst there is obviously a basic 3- and 4-part texture, Schumann adapts the part-writing to the needs of the moment. A particular effect can be noted in bars 25-27, where the left-hand thumb, at the top of the accompanying chords, repeats the melody notes an octave lower. The variations in texture and dynamics, some gradual and some sudden, are an expressive feature obviously related to the title of the piece.
- The opening is effectively a melody supported by the two lower parts descending in thirds.
- By bar 3 four-part harmony can be heard, involving some rhythmic independence between the component lines.
- In bar 5, the texture of the opening is inverted with the tune in the lowest part, while the accompanying material, now expanded to three-part chords, is in the right hand.
- The B section (bars 9-12) has a bass tune with short offbeat chords accompanying above.
- At the start of the C section (bars 21-24) three contrasting textural elements alternate – rapid semiquaver movement in 6ths, single bass notes and full 5 or 6-part chords.
- The melody-dominated homophony texture at bars 25-28 uses a stride-like accompaniment pattern reminiscent of No.3.

Rhythm

In the Classical style of the late eighteenth century, rhythmic variety and contrast played a great part in shaping both small-scale and large-scale structure. Look, for example, at the Allegro of Beethoven's Septet (NAM 17), where six different rhythms appear in the first ten bars of the first subject and five more in the transition. In contrast, Romantic composers often base a piece on a single rhythmic and expressive idea, which embraces both the melody and the accompanying parts. Of course, Beethoven's movement is on a different scale from Schumann's miniatures, but this also is significant. The reconciliation of contrasts inherent in sonata form allowed, or even required, composers to write at some length; Schumann's habit – lingering over a mood captured in a single phrase – leads naturally to shorter pieces.

No. 1 – Von fremden Ländern und Menschen

- Is this piece in simple or in compound time? Although the time signature is simple duple, the triplet rhythm continues throughout.
- Melody features dotted rhythms. In contemporary notation, a dotted rhythm against a triplet could be played in a variety of ways. It might be equivalent to a triplet divided into crotchet-quaver (in which case the semiquaver would be written directly above the third note of the triplet); it might be intended exactly as written, or as half of the third note of the triplet:



- Schumann's '*rit.*' and '*ritardando*' to a pause are typical of the rhythmic nuances that he adds to harmonic and structural corners. He appears to intend them only to apply where they are written, as he often fails to indicate an *a tempo*.

No. 3 – Hasche-Mann

- Semiquavers are continuous.
- Each 2-bar phrase of the melody starts with a crotchet, perhaps giving the idea of a child pausing before running in a new direction. To keep the momentum going, the inner part maintains the semiquaver movement as an arpeggio.
- A broad rhythm of *sforzandi* runs through the piece every two bars, interrupted only in bars 13-16.

No. 11 – Fürchtenmachen

Only the idea of a spooky atmosphere of 'things that go bump in the night', coupled with the rondo form, could hold together these very diverse and briefly stated ideas.

- Dotted rhythms push the music forward in alternate bars of the A section.
- Each episode has its own characteristic rhythm, with semiquavers in pairs (B section) or in groups of four (C section).
- Offbeat rhythms feature in the accompaniment of the B section and aggressively on alternate quavers in the C section.