

## „...es ist so eine ganz eigene Stimmung darin...“<sup>1</sup>

Trying to describe Schumann's late style in his solo piano and chamber music works

During this short essay, we will try to put into concrete words some of the main characteristics of the late piano and chamber music pieces of Robert Schumann, namely opp. 126, 132 and 133 (*Sieben Klavierstücke im Fughettenform; Märchenerzählungen; Gesänge der Frühe*). With that purpose, I have decided to put into dialogue elements of more general status, with others which clearly stick out of the rule and stand as destabilizers of a theory of a broader kind, all to attempt a first draft of an aesthetic view of such works.

Starting from a clearly performative-based experience, which has been materialized mainly on a process of reading and playing the works in a domestic setting, there are several traces which right away must be remarked and which could be summed up in the following preliminary list:

- Dense textures (from densely contrapuntal moments to continuous chordal textures of up to 7 voices).
- Different approach to the instrumental language (sequences of full chords, placing of melodies in unusual textural places, constant switching of places and materials between hands, contrapuntal textures which behave in contexts bigger than the octave, etc.).
- Primacy of counterpoint over other textural models, even when apparently one faces accompanied melody or chordal textures (to be commented also later).
- Tautologic treatment of the main materials of a piece (repetitions of literal material, come backs to harmonic reference points, etc.).
- Slow metronome markings for fast-looking movements (there is much controversy on this respect, and textual, cultural and recording discussions have been going on widely in the last decades) (Struck, 2006).
- Orchestral-choral/ceremonial-mystical *topoi* (except for *Märchenerzählungen*).

Other characteristic elements which are remarkably noticeable on a first read-through of those pieces – fragmentary nature of the materials; instrumental bass as a duet companion; cyclic structures; *Jagdlies*; Songs without words, etc. – I have decided to not include them on this list, because they appear on a much more common basis in earlier pieces written for similar settings, which also remain noticeably closer to the early German romantic aesthetical project.

Some other gestures and *topoi* are included on the list, but although they have constituted *ritornelli* in Schumann's oeuvre, they are notoriously resignified. Two of them will be briefly commented.

On the one hand, the tautological quality of Schumann's time-unfolding organization is notorious and has been connected traditionally with ironic or humoristic elements (See *Nächtlicher Trauerzug*, b. 49-72, no. 1 of *Nachstücke*, op. 23, or the ending of *Herberge*, no. 6 of *Waldszenen*, op. 82). Instead, here repetition seems to be a mean of development, in which minimal variations are added to the same materials, as a means of accumulation and continuous change in apparent identity (see nos. 1 and 4 of *Gesänge der Frühe*, although different in genre implications, the repetitive element remains), which creates a sort of hypnotic time-unfolding in which contrast between materials is minimized by common

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<sup>1</sup> Written by Clara Schumann about *Gesänge der Frühe* on his personal diary.

intervallic sources, motifs are almost reduced to *ostinati* and the formal unfolding consists more of an intertwin of materials, rather than developmental means, but almost always notoriously escaping from XVIIIth and XIXth-coined formal brands and perhaps coming closer to earlier forms of material organization.

On the other hand, the pianistic tools used for such scores differ greatly from early pieces by the same composer. Textures become denser, middle registers are more widely used, switching and crossing of hands becomes a usual practise, etc. It is also interesting to note the almost complete disappearance of two characteristic elements of Schumann's early piano music: classical early XIXth Century virtuoso figuration and experimentation with idiosyncratic elements of piano construction (pedals, harmonics, etc.; See, for instance, the endings of *Pierrot* and *Paganini*, taken from the *Carnaval*, op. 9). As a hypothesis, we ask ourselves here about the possible influence which the development of the piano as an instrument during the first half of the XIXth Century might have had on this phenomenon (Dünki, without date), which will be discussed more widely on future work.

The other two remaining points (orchestral-choral/ceremonial-mystical *topoi* and contrapuntal domination of textures) might constitute a central network of *gestures*, textures and *topoi* which are characteristic of this late works. Their political implications with elements of public music (Tunbridge, 2009), earlier music reception – specially in Bach's case – (Stinton, 2020; Klassen, 1996), and Hölderlin's *Hyperion* as a literary inspiration on the particular case of *Gesänge der Frühe* will be further discussed in future inquiries.

As a second attempt of grasping a particular reception of such works, we will display a series of concrete cases which can be regarded as short-time phenomena which seek attention in the context of the pieces, because of its surprising and *strange* nature. The importance of *strangeness* as an aesthetic category in the context of romantic aesthetics has been highly discussed both by contemporary and secondary literature authors, and further analysis will have to be provided to proof or dismiss its relation to the repertoire which is being studied here. In any case, some examples will be provided in the following lines. To ease the reading of such examples, we have decided to categorise the in three conceptual boxes: Harmonical/contrapuntal, textural/formal, motivic/expressive. Let us follow with the presentation and commenting of several of them.

### Harmonical/contrapuntal examples<sup>2</sup>

- a) A good trace of the contrapuntal primacy in textures is the following recurrent examples, in which the textures become bigger than an octave and, instead of finding pianistic solutions to those problems, the texture remains as initially conceived, committing to the better conduction of the voices, instead than to more comfortable solutions suited to the instrument:



Gesänge der Frühe, IV.

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<sup>2</sup> In this essay we will use the editions revised by Clara Schumann and published by Breitkopf and Hartel, because of their open access nature in Internet. We are well aware of the differences with earlier and first editions and with manuscripts and engraver's copies, but since the purpose of the essay doesn't fit with philological problematics, we have decided to use them.



earlier music, poses a field of dissonance which Schumann will push further. In addition, it finishes with a 9-8 appoggiatura which is followed by the inclusion of the 6-5 set of notes, giving to it an almost modal taste. Such a subject could be used in its still tonal/consonant context, but instead Schumann uses to reinforce the dissonant nature of it, as it is the case of the absolute prohibited series of unresolved 7<sup>th</sup> from the second example, which again could be very well explained tonally, but it surprises us aurally, reinforced not only by delayed resolutions, but also by rhythmical and textural features.

- c) Passages which, although having a clear tonal plan, are fully explained by voice conduction, resulting in new-coined chordal sonorities and dissonant elements which seem to contradict tonal directions:



Gesänge der Frühe, III.



Gesänge der Frühe, V.

- d) Experimental chordal sonorities in tonal contexts:



Gesänge der Frühe, IV.

In this particular case, the fact of using the previous E# as a sensible towards the tonic and the resolution on a 6 chord of D major, somehow weakens the actual implications of the first chord as an augmented dominant.

### Textural/formal examples:

- a) Cadences in avoidance of the previous V<sup>th</sup> degree – with or without seventh – start to be pretty common from the end of the XVIIIth Century, but in this particular case a recurring tool is being used repeatedly, namely: the usage of cadences in which the previous 6/4 is not resolved, but instead is being used as a certain kind of pre-resolution chord:

Musical score for 'Gesänge der Frühe, II.' in G major, 3/4 time. The score consists of two staves: a treble staff with a vocal line and a bass staff with piano accompaniment. The piece begins with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature of 3/4. The melody is characterized by a mix of eighth and quarter notes, often beamed together. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line and chords in the right hand.

Gesänge der Frühe, II.

Musical score for 'Gesänge der Frühe, IV.' in G major, 3/4 time. The score consists of two staves: a treble staff with a vocal line and a bass staff with piano accompaniment. The piece begins with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature of 3/4. The melody is characterized by a mix of eighth and quarter notes, often beamed together. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line and chords in the right hand.

Gesänge der Frühe, IV.

- b) Doble resolutive processes: there are several instances in which after completion of a retransitional process, the pieces comes back to the starting point of departure towards the resolution and does it for a second time. Several examples are shown:

Musical score for 'Gesänge der Frühe, II.' in G major, 3/4 time, illustrating double resolutive processes. The score consists of two staves: a treble staff with a vocal line and a bass staff with piano accompaniment. The piece begins with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature of 3/4. The melody is characterized by a mix of eighth and quarter notes, often beamed together. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line and chords in the right hand. The score is divided into two sections: 'Resolution 1.' and 'Resolution 2.'. 'Resolution 1.' shows a retransitional process where the music returns to the starting point of departure towards the resolution and does it for a second time. 'Resolution 2.' shows a similar process. The score ends with a double bar line and a fermata over the final chord.

Gesänge der Frühe, II.

Musical score for "Gesänge der Frühe, III." in G major, 3/4 time. The score consists of five systems of piano and bass staves. The first system shows a complex rhythmic pattern with eighth and sixteenth notes. The second system includes a green label "Resolution 1." above the piano staff. The third system features a long, sweeping melodic line in the piano staff. The fourth system includes a green label "Resolution 2." above the piano staff and dynamic markings "dim." and "pp." in the bass staff. The fifth system concludes the piece with a final chord.

Gesänge der Frühe, III.

Musical score for "Märchenerzählungen, I." in G major, 3/4 time. The score consists of six systems of piano and bass staves. The first system shows a complex rhythmic pattern with eighth and sixteenth notes. The second system includes a red label "Resolution 1." above the piano staff. The third system features a long, sweeping melodic line in the piano staff. The fourth system includes a red label "Resolution 2." above the piano staff and dynamic markings "dim." and "pp." in the bass staff. The fifth system includes a red label "Resolution 3." above the piano staff. The sixth system concludes the piece with a final chord.

Märchenerzählungen, I.

Several parameters are thoroughly involved in this double processes: rhythmic displacements (as the resolution on a 2<sup>nd</sup> beat when exposing back the main motif of the 1<sup>st</sup> movement of the *Märchenerzählungen*), time expectation (as the completely expected root chord which is supposed come at the first beat of the last stave of the example from the 2<sup>nd</sup> movement of *Gesänge der Frühe*), etc. But it seems that it is definitely a recurrent mean of form-unfolding structuration.

In relation to this, and perhaps under the same epigram, we could also expose the case of the huge coda – in relation to the movement – of the 3<sup>rd</sup> movement of the *Märchenerzählungen*, in which cadential processes are almost over elongated, without using chromatic counterpoint of tonal excursions, as again trying to create an hypnotic circular feeling on the same harmonies and harmonic sequences, which somehow

contributes to a weaker sense of phrasal declamation and functionality, again accentuating ambiguity as a constructive principle.

- c) Tautology on harmonies and central points, being perhaps the most attention-seeking example the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> movement of *Gesänge der Frühe*, in which a constant comeback to a basic dominant A seems to be the pivotal point of the whole first section:

The pivotal point is presented in quite a raw fashion and it sometimes almost feels imposed, as if the music was meant to take other paths, but it is not allowed by a constant comeback of a omnipresent A which, in fact, doesn't never really resolve until much later.

- d) In this particular example, the already widely used strategy of using a tonic chord with minor seventh when resolving is somehow twisted through a rhythmical and harmonical weakening: one the one hand, the imitation at the 4<sup>th</sup> – and therefore on the tonic chord – comes on the 2<sup>nd</sup> beat, and furthermore we don't hear as a chordal event the resolution on D major, but it instead "happens" as the counterpoint moves towards D major with the imitative strategy:

Gesänge der Frühe, I.

**Motivic/expressive:**

- a) The famous *Verhallend nach und nach* poses in our opinion an interesting and paradoxical example: while the rhetoric implications of such an instruction seem to be clear, the actual writing on the score doesn't really seem to approach it in a literal way. Instead, it acts more as supra-instruction imposed on a certain gesture, being that the instruction used is such a concrete and unusual one, as opposed to much more radical examples which we find in earlier Schumann's music, in which the writing seems to literally disappear:





Gesänge der Frühe, V.



Nachtstücke, I.

The apparent contradiction between the radicality of the textual instruction and the convention of the writing, poses us the question of an inner sense-creating logic, which could be explained through a double-layered aesthetic construction: on the first hand, the piece poses a dramaturgy of intricate harmonies and dissonant intervals, as well as venturesome modulations, which create dialectical conflicts which have to be resolved, as they are in the *Verhallend* section. On the other hand, Schumann doesn't turn back to Romantic aesthetics, and is well aware that *an ending is never and ending*, meaning that a finished piece is nothing else than a piece of a reality continuum, a *fragment*. Thus, *Verhallend*: the only possibility is to disappear and keep existing, since all conflicts have been solved.

- b) Motifs of unusual appearance, by its fragmentary shape, because of its obsessive inner rhythm or because of its lack of connexion with the musical ongoing context:



Märchenerzählungen, I.



Gesänge der Frühe, V.

- c) In the next examples, the main motif seems to be displaced rhythmically, since its climatic feature comes on a weak beat, although that displacement doesn't seem openly clear to us. Furthermore, the 4-bars phrase seem to be overtaken by the next instrument repeating the melody – tautology/variation principle as a structuring element, again –, all framed in a very carefully notated contrapuntal process of going from and to unisons as starting or closing points, which altogether create a remarkable sense of ambiguity:



I.

Composit 033.

Clarinete in B.

Viola.

Pianoforte.

Lebhaft, nicht zu schnell.  $\text{♩} = 96$ .

Märchenerzählungen, I.

As stated before, the only clear feature seems to be the paradoxical amount of vectors in which different processes follow their paths inside the umbrella of a new sounding complexity which, because of the *topoi* involved, but also because of certain compositional strategies which seem to be either new or newly-oriented, we hear as a particular form of music different to that which Schumann had been previously writing, let us call it provisionally a *late style*. In general, there seems to be in this *late style* a revisitation of antique techniques, formal unfolding, texts (both from its meaning and its construction) and genres, always reinterpreted from contemporary perspectives, which has led me to use the term *neoclassical* in different instances of this text, being a term which poses many historical and conceptual questions which will have to be further looked at. In any case, as stated before, there seems to be still a variety of vectors in which some techniques seem to approach new horizons through classical models, as contrapuntal treatment; some others seem to take a more moderate path, as instrumental experimentation; while other sound genuinely germinated for such works, as some of the structural strategies commented previously. The task of delimiting its sources and its goals will be one of the main tasks of future work.

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