

Beate Perrey (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Schumann*

Beate Perrey (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Schumann* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ISBN 978-0-521-78341-5 (hardback, £50/\$90); ISBN 978-0-521-78950-9 (paperback, £19.99/\$29.99), xx + 302pp.

The Cambridge Companion to Schumann, edited by Beate Perrey, contains thirteen chapters which are presented according to the series' established headings: contexts, works and reception. The volume contains contributions from some of musicology's most prominent scholars: while Nicholas Marston, Reinhard Kapp, Linda Correll Roesner and the late John Daverio (who contributed two chapters) are mainstays of Schumann scholarship, there are also chapters by Joseph Kerman, Jonathan Dunsby and Scott Burnham. In all it is an impressive introduction to the many facets of Schumann's illustrious life and fascinating music.

Robert Schumann has bequeathed us a rich compositional legacy, a vast amount of personal documents and a seminal output of published critical writings. Moreover, his music, life and critical output seem inextricably bound together, and this triangulation is irresistible for Schumann scholars. However, if he had never written a note of music, his criticism alone would guarantee him an integral place in the history of nineteenth-century European music. If his life and music had existed only in a novel by Wackenroder he would still feature in music history as the embodiment of the archetypal romantic artist albeit as a product of the romantic literary imagination. If the romantic author had concocted Schumann's criticism, it too would be as seminal as the actual writings: his opinions of Schubert and Brahms would lose none of their power over us. This putative fictional Schumann, whose mental life would have been more real to him than his worldly self, would incarnate the tragic Shakespearean hero whose

spiritual death would foretell his physical demise. The literary conceit that would betray this life as a fiction would be the retrograde trajectory of his musical creativity: Draeske's genius ending up as a talent (25). But truth can be stranger than fiction, and, as Perrey concludes in her introductory chapter, Schumann has never been forgiven for transgressing the musico-biographical commandment of organic musical growth over the span of a natural life:

In view of the altogether still rather hesitant and reserved reception of his late work, and in view of the exceptional vehemence and passion with which one sees the value of this part of his work defended—and the mere fact that such defence is felt to be needed—we are left with the vague but insistent feeling that the 'late' Schumann as we have come to know him was perhaps not only one of the unstable or 'weak', but also one of the abused and defenceless: one of those, in other words, who may never be forgiven their suffering. (35)

This is one of the central problems to permeate Schumann studies, and it manifests itself in the most unexpected ways and places. In his otherwise superb chapter on the Lieder, Jonathan Dunsby takes an unnecessary (and distracting) poke at Plantinga's effusiveness in discussing the so-called 'Year of Song, 1840' (105).¹ Dunsby's own effusiveness leads him to use similar language to that which he finds worthy of criticism in Plantinga: while he describes Plantinga's coinages 'torrent of Lieder' and 'surge of interest [in Lieder]', as 'loaded' and 'unloaded' respectively, Dunsby himself subsequently refers to the 'outpouring' of song (105). In the context of a textbook that is intended to engage and enthuse the student, Plantinga's language is unremarkable and, at times, less 'loaded' than some of Dunsby's own coinages.² For example, he introduces 'two of the world's favourite song cycles' (Dichterliebe and Frauenliebe und -leben) by emphasizing their 'special' nature, and, in so doing, alerts the reader to the danger of 'sidelining their sheer beauty since, in the end, what is there to be said about an art that speaks for itself other than in words?' (105–6). Considering the literary nature of much of Schumann's music, aesthetics and imaginaire, this is not particularly convincing. Later we are told that 'No contemporaneous Lied composer came remotely close [my italics]...to Schumann's achievement', and that Schubert's

¹ Dunsby is referring to Leon B. Plantinga's *Romantic Music: A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Norton, 1984), 235–6.

² Compare this criticism of Plantinga with Joseph Kerman's observation (in this volume) that Plantinga had remarked that Schumann's criticism sometimes suffered from lyrical rhetoric that was 'unhelpful' (179).

Winterreise is the only cycle that ‘measures up’ to Schumann’s ‘epic consistency’ (106). While this may seem like common sense, its loadedness is measurable when we contemplate the problem of Schumann’s late style. To praise the ‘Year of Song’ in such terms is to conjure up the ghost of Schumann’s ‘late manner’, to use Hanslick’s phrase. John Daverio explores this spectral problem in this volume’s final chapter, ‘Songs of dawn and dusk: coming to terms with the late music’. He states the case bluntly by quoting Adorno in his epigraph: ‘In the history of art, late works are the catastrophes’ (268). If *Dichterliebe* is the gold standard against which other Lieder ‘measure up’, then ‘to ascribe the stylistic features of Schumann’s “late manner” to a musical work was tantamount to delivering the kiss of death’ (268). However, Daverio queries the presumed certainty of biography or chronology in the ontology and epistemology of ‘late style’, when institutions and aesthetics can be as influential on both composition and reception. He suggests that there is nothing in his late style to compare with the ‘quirky outbursts’ of some of the earlier works such as *Carnaval* or *Kreisleriana* (272). Daverio’s authority and scholarship is matchless, and this chapter offers a significant challenge to received notions on style categories.

Clearly, if ever there was a need to theorize music biography it is with the case of Schumann, not only because his life permeates his music but because scholars continue to work on that assumption often without questioning the nature of that relationship. All of this returns us to Beate Perrey’s opening chapter, ‘Schumann’s lives, and afterlives: an introduction’, which is a condensed but insightful overview of his life. Biography is not an empirical science as it requires interpretive skill of a decidedly literary nature. In the end, biography is a literary genre, and music biography (as opposed to a hybrid ‘life and works’) must treat musical texts as life documents and not purely musical ones. However, there is no accepted methodology that accurately measures the life in the music. Perrey seamlessly interpolates chronological

narrative with reflective-interpretive moments, and she suggests that if we want to understand musical creativity we might have to relinquish sacred values and examine the music regardless of its perceived quality.³

Many of the themes which Perrey covers in her introduction are pursued throughout the volume. However, considering the importance of Schumann's critical writings, one sorely misses a chapter dedicated to the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (hereinafter NZfM). It is true that many of the chapters mention the critical writings to a greater or lesser extent: for example, Perrey's introduction gives a one-page overview (26–8), and Ulrich Tadday's brief chapter, 'Life and literature, poetry and philosophy: Robert Schumann's aesthetics of music', whets our appetite with a mere mention of the NZfM in the context of a cursory overview of the intellectual background to Schumann's critical thought. Reinhard Kapp's study of Schumann reception, 'Schumann in his time and since', also considers the critical writings and their impact. As a veritable map of Schumann's influence across Europe, Kapp's scholarship is breathtaking. Indeed the reader is left somewhat breathless at the rapid pace of his narrative. My only wish is that he had elaborated at least one of the many fascinating episodes which he considers: for example, if he had pursued his own footnoted suggestion that a comparative study of Schumann's and Berlioz's criticism would be 'interesting' (251).

It is with Marston's magisterial scholarship ('Schumann's heroes: Schubert, Beethoven, Bach') that the historicism at the heart of Schumann's aesthetics and music comes to light, signalled perhaps by the reverse chronology of his subtitle. Marston's easy command of both Schumann's writings and the secondary scholarship enables a broader discussion of the relationship between music criticism, canon formation and reception history.

³ Perrey's excellent introduction inevitably leads one to ponder the absence of any female figures in the Cambridge Composers series.

Daverio's other chapter in the volume concentrates on a study of genre in Schumann's piano output in the period 1827–36. Perhaps most impressive is the manner in which he investigates how Schumann's critical writings were self-reflexive and can guide us towards an understanding of the music itself. But genre is a social as well as a musical rubric, and Daverio explores the more human aspects of Schumann's music: the engagement with literary models, with kinesthesia, and with the composer's playful imagination. Daverio's uncomplicated exploration of Schumann's engagement with his contemporaries, chiefly Paganini, provides a welcome relief from the 'the anxiety of influence' that attends most discussions of inspiration and influence with respect to the Germanic tradition. Daverio does not balk at illustrating (verbally and with musical examples) those moments where Schumann is 'inspired' by Paganini, and such an unencumbered approach is likely to send us back to both Schumann's and Paganini's music with more informed and inquisitive ears.

Equally engaging is Laura Tunbridge's consideration of the later piano works. Not for the first time in this volume does Schumann's presence make itself felt in the very act of criticism, and her illuminating analysis is conducted in an engaging literary style. Perhaps the most self-consciously poetic of all the chapters is Scott Burnham's 'Novel symphonies and dramatic overtures'. With characteristic North-American brio, Burnham's prose bounds along in a style that is deliberately mimetic of the music he is describing: the lightning bolts and sonic booms of Schumann's 'Spring' and its echoes of Beethoven's sublime works. I can just imagine a student taking delight in having so much summarized so succinctly, and, with descriptions of the music that are so apt, one almost hears it. If Daverio and Tunbridge send us back to the music with informed ears, perhaps Burnham's hermeneutics is over-determined. One has to question the need for the following negative statement which addresses the pacing of Schumann's thematic processes: 'One does not hear a steadily

flowing (Baroque) texture that runs through cadences and renewed entrances like a waterway changing and diversifying its course, nor an articulated and pressurized (Beethovenian) flow that moves in waves, gathering energy for decisive arrivals.’ (152)

To return (in a decidedly more positive spirit this time) to Jonathan Dunsby’s discussion of the Lieder, the rest of his chapter is a masterful consideration of Schumann’s impulse to compose songs. He offers a sensitive critique of the music itself in the context of a detailed and balanced reading of the secondary literature. With a keen sense of pacing, he directs his discussion towards an analysis of ‘Du bist wie eine Blume’. While other chapters in the volume present snippets of analysis of many pieces, Dunsby’s decision to treat one work in detail is both exemplary and welcome in a volume such as this. Again, with a student readership in mind, it enables the type of analysis of Lieder that addresses the symbiotic relationship between the semantic and musical aspects of the genre. Moreover, he exemplifies the purely human intuition that even the least initiated listener might experience when listening to Schumann’s ‘special’ form of magic.

Equally impressive is Joseph Kerman’s chapter on Schumann’s concertos wherein he considers issues concerning the genre, the composer’s relationship with his contemporaries and predecessors, and how all this affected his critical writings and, indeed, his own concerted works.⁴

Linda Correll Roesner explores the tonal strategies at the heart of Schumann’s chamber music. The composer’s dialogue with his classical forbears takes the form of a tonal narrative that cuts across the three quartets Op. 41 Nos. 1–3: the putative meaning of that narrative is

⁴ Unfortunately, there are consistent referencing problems in Kerman’s chapter with regard to the use of short titles and abbreviations. See notes 2, 3, 5, 7, 17, 18 and 24 on pp. 193–4 for absence of full reference.

suggested by moments of thematic intertextuality that permeates many of his more famous works. Her analysis of the sonata in D minor for violin and piano Op. 121 suggests that Schumann's engagement with the intellectual tradition of chamber music remained undiminished during the onset of his final illness. While her analysis is revealing, a contextualized discussion of nineteenth-century chamber genres would have been welcome.

Considering Schumann's fascination with musical fragments, coupled with his penchant for quotation and intertextuality, it is perhaps not surprising that composers in a postmodern age would seek out Schumann's music for its playful creativity and sheer humanity, particularly his madness. Jörn Peter Hiekel's fascinating chapter discusses works by mid to late twentieth-century composers (Wolfgang Rihm, György Kurtág, Luigi Nono, Heinz Holliger, Mauricio Kagel, Luciano Berio and Henri Pousseur) that have engaged with romanticism by referencing Schumann. My only quibble with this chapter is the absence of musical examples which would have made the discussion more concrete. On that note, as it were, it is necessary to point out that there are too many problems with the musical examples to go unnoticed: namely faded type, low resolution and small note-size (see pp. 155 and 190): contrast these with the large and clear examples on pp. 135–44 to see the diversity of font that obtains in the volume. However, some of the larger examples suffer from overcrowded notes and accidentals. It is reasonable to expect a high standard of musical notation (comparable to the quality of the illustrations that appear in the first chapter) from a leading academic publishing house.

Schumann's international reputation was established in 1843 with his dramatic oratorio, *Das Paradies und die Peri*. As Elizabeth Paley reminds us in her excellent chapter, 'Dramatic stage and choral works', it was second only to his 'Spring' Symphony in frequency of

performance during his lifetime (196). Paley balances an exposition of the genesis and reception of the dramatic works with analysis of the musico-dramatic relationships. Her conclusion illustrates that Schumann reception is informed not only by musico-biographical categories, but that generic imperatives are also at work:

Posterity has cast Schumann primarily as a composer of piano music and songs, a ‘born lyrical’ composer who supposedly lacked the technical skills and epic vision necessary to compose for larger forces. Yet Liszt’s inventory [in the *NZfM*, of Schumann’s works in order of generic importance viz. cantatas and oratorios, instrumental music, Lieder] reminds us of the contrary, for Schumann’s large-scale choral works rank among the literary musician’s most expressive achievements. (216)

Not for the first time in this volume have we been challenged to re-evaluate Schumann by engaging in a dialogue with his own time and place.

Michael Murphy

Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick