

## **Friends on different paths: Schumann and Brahms**

Did you ever ask yourself, what determines a friendship? Living close to each other? Common achievements? Or the years spent together? If the latter was the case this friendship would not be relevant: Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms had less than three years time for their friendship. Only 34 months had passed after September 30, 1853 – when the young Johannes Brahms met Clara and Robert Schumann in Düsseldorf – until July 28, 1856, the day before Robert Schumann's early death, when Brahms saw him for the last time. Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms were friends only for a relatively short time in their lives accompanying each other on their individual paths. A path with the same goal?

The beginning of their artistic and personal lives was totally different due to their age difference of 23 years. Brahms starts his artistic career at a time, when Schumann, being of the older generation, is already well on his way – but has met quite some difficulties too. Romantic music has existed already for 25 years, also due to Schumann, when Brahms enters the scene. And Schumann is sure Brahms is giving music history a new direction. Robert is so enthusiastic, when Brahms visits the Schumanns in Düsseldorf with the recommendation of violinist Joseph Joachim, a common friend, that a few days later he writes in an article titled „NEW WAYS“ in the „New Magazine for Music“: “ Even his appearance showed us: he has a vocation“. And he praises him: „Sitting at the piano he began to unveil wonderful realms. We were drawn into greater and greater magic circles. And his brilliant play turning the piano into an orchestra of wailing and loudly rejoicing voices!“ Then he goes on: „If he places his magic wand where the powers of the masses, choir and orchestra, lend him their strength, we can expect wonderful insights into the secrets of the spirit world.(...) His companions greet him on his first walk through the world, where wounds may await him, but also laurels and palm leaves; we welcome him as a strong fighter.“ Schumann paints an almost messianic picture of his young colleague – thereby putting a lot of pressure on him. “He comes as if he was sent by God“, Clara Schumann writes in her diary- and it isn't unthinkable that they told him their opinion with exactly the same words. Being called „sent by God“ creates great expectations, which Brahms could fulfil only years later, when Schumann was no longer alive. And now we know: he was absolutely right. May be this unerring feeling told him that he had found a kindred spirit?

There are many parallels in their creative lives. For both, Schumann and Brahms, the piano was the starting point for their composing. It is the instrument they are most familiar with – for other instruments they compose only later and initially with hesitation. Both approach the symphonic form indirectly and feel much more comfortable with a smaller cast than with a big orchestra. And at the end of their creative lives, both return to the more intimate form of chamber music. A withdrawal? Possible. It is a fact that Schumann - obviously because of his inner emigration due to the circumstances of spending his last years in a mental institution – as well as Brahms meet the audience at least with wariness if not avoid it completely. Especially Schumann uses his art without thinking of success with the audience, or at least it is secondary. Also Brahms retreats in order to compose and always speaks about his news with irony, even derogatory. Only with trusted friends they share their process of composing their works - if at all. But the greatest difference between these companions becomes evident in their need to communicate: for Schumann, being a talented composer and author, literature is the connecting factor for his art. He finds his inspiration in poetry and

lyricism. Thoughtful, poetic ideas, parables, literary doubles – they are present in his musical works, which at the same time cannot be considered a programmatic copy.

„The poet is speaking“ is the title of one of Schumann's miniatures in „Scenes from Childhood“. This title is in a way programmatic for his entire piano work. Schumann doesn't hide the fact that different, often times conflicting literary personalities are behind his work: „Florestan the wild“ and „Eusebius the mild“ are the names of the two imaginary characters, which oftentimes discuss controversially in his texts and compositions.

He generally likes visionaries – especially eccentric ones. No wonder that he is inspired by the wondrous „Kapellmeister Kreisler“. E.T.A. Hoffmann used this literary alter ego also in order to comment on the music of his time. In the years 1810 to 1814 he publishes a kind of biography of his fictitious figure in twelve more or less unrelated texts: Kreisler symbolises like not other character the sufferings and contradictions of a changing time, criticises the modern art world and the lack of freedom of the artists being caught therein and striving for individuality. Inner conflict, contradictions, tragedy, striving for freedom – all that is expressed in the eight parts of the cycle, which Schumann connects to Hoffmann's „Kreisleriana“. He is obviously impressed by Hoffmann's phantasies, shady, grotesque.

Schumann composes with words and music, Brahms, however, definitely not with his work. Brahms clearly does not want to tell stories like Schumann. With poetry and lyricism Schumann finds a way out of the dilemma of the form, which his time had inherited with symphony and sonata from classicism. Even his great symphonic and concertante works are based on the smaller form, which has more character. Brahms also moves from small to big and his sonatas, symphonies and concerts often arise out of the smallest, motive based cells. But he is interested in the musical material and much less in the poetic content. Also his writings of literary statements on music inspired by Schumann, which Brahms issues during their common day in Düsseldorf, have no influence on his music. Brahms is interested only in the music material, not in literary material. His starting point are the forms and genres of classicism, not the poetic approach of his older friend.

The Rondo respectively the Sonatas are also related to both Rhapsodies op.79, which Brahms composes in Pörtschach at the Wörther Lake in summer 1879. The term Rhapsody suggests formal freedom, which Brahms, however, doesn't want to allow himself. But his publisher Fritz Simrock demands a more sales promoting title just like for the three Intermezzi op.117. Simrock publishes the two Intermezzi composed in 1892 together with the piano pieces op.118 and 119, but he is not sure. He asks Brahms, if he wouldn't prepare it also for a large orchestra – but Brahms vehemently contradicts him. And what about poetic titles at least, is another repeatedly asked question of the businessman. Brahms rejects that too „I cannot call this monologues or improvisations, no way. It has to be 'Piano Pieces!'“ Obviously irritated he also calls it: „Phantasy pieces – and I might also call it Character pieces etc., absolutely impossible.“ If there is something Brahms clearly wants to avoid, it is the sense of program music. „Regarding your question“, he answers the insisting publisher, „you know that I prefer the meaningless word „Pianos Pieces“, because it doesn't mean anything“.