

## NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

By Dr. Jannie Burdeti

### **Robert Schumann: Fantasie in C Major, Op. 17**

*Durchaus phantastisch und liedenschaftlich vorzutragen*

Robert Schumann's Fantasy in C major, Op. 17, written in 1836, was originally entitled *Obolen auf Beethovens Monument: Ruinen, Trophäen, Palmen: grosse Sonate für das Pianoforte für Beethovens Denkmal, von Florestan und Eusebius*, Op. 12 (Small Contribution to Beethoven's Monument: Ruins, Trophies, Palms: Grand Sonata for the Pianoforte for Beethoven's Memorial, by Florestan and Eusebius). This project of erecting a statue, with monetary help from Franz Liszt, the dedicatee of this piece, came to fruition in 1845. The work, in addition to being a tribute to Beethoven's life, was also a passionate declaration of love to Schumann's fiancée, Clara Wieck. He was forbidden to see Clara at this time by her father, and the work fittingly uses a quote from Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte* (To the Distant Beloved), revealed at the end of this first movement.

Schumann wrote to Clara in March 1838: "The first movement [of the Fantasie] is the most passionate I have ever composed; it is a profound lament on your account." In the beginning of the piece is a quote by Friedrich Schlegel:

Through all the sounds that sound  
In the colorful dream of earth  
A soft sound comes forth  
For the one who listens in secret.

Schumann had written to Clara, "Are you not the secret tone that runs through the work? I almost think you are." Charles Rosen writes that the "secret tone" is Schumann's quotation from the last song in Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte*. For pianist Murray Perahia, the secret tone is the note G, the opening pitch of the work, which remains a central tone throughout. However one may wish to interpret the idea of the secret tone, Schumann's quotation at the end of the first movement is a hymnic culmination after the movement's impassioned turmoil.

### **John Corigliano: Fantasia on an Ostinato**

For generations, the second movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, *Allegretto*, has cast a spell on listeners: composers, filmmakers, and people from all walks of life. It had such an immediate appeal that after the symphony's first performance, the second movement was repeated as an encore. National Public Radio host Robert Siegel once remarked that Franz Schubert became haunted for the rest of his life upon hearing it. Unsurprisingly, eleven years after witnessing the premiere, Schubert quoted the symphony in his Variations in A-flat major for Four Hands. According to Musicologist Mosco Carner, the movement also became a model for the second movement of Schubert's C-major and Mendelssohn's A-major Symphonies. A few decades later, Beethoven's *Allegretto* theme would inspire Robert Schumann to write his uncompleted Études in Variation Form on a Theme by Beethoven, WoO 31.

In 1985, the famous American composer John Corigliano received a commission from the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition to compose a piece for the twelve semifinalists. Corigliano decided on a “Fantasia on an Ostinato,” based on none other than the *Allegretto* from Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony. An ostinato is a persistent, repeated melodic or rhythmic motif, and in this piece, Corigliano delves into the genre of minimalism, creating a hypnotic meditation based on the repeated motifs found in Beethoven’s *Allegretto*.

When beginning to compose this piece, Corigliano asked himself, “What could I write that would test something the standard repertoire would not?” From the work’s very conception, Corigliano knew that he wanted to compose a piece that would challenge the imagination, creativity, and individuality of the performer, instead of writing a technical showpiece, so typical of competitions. The result was a hybrid of aleatoric and set instructions, giving freedom to the performer to decide not only the number of repetitions of certain patterns, but also how the character would be developed. Corigliano found it interesting that the performances at the 1985 Cliburn Competition spanned from seven minutes to over twenty minutes.

Corigliano writes, “The first half of my *Fantasia on an Ostinato* develops the obsessive rhythm of the Beethoven and the simple harmonies implicit in the first half of his melody. Its second part launches those interlocking repetitions and reworks the strange major-minor descending chords of the latter part of the Beethoven into a chain of harmonies over which the performer-repeated patterns grow continually more ornate. This climaxes in a return of the original rhythm and, finally, the reappearance of the theme itself.” Pianist H el ene Grimaud describes the final unveiling as giving “you the sense of something that was already there, sort of a memory of the future.”

Born in New York in 1938, John Corigliano is one of the distinguished composers of his generation. He is known best for his important symphonic works and has been a recipient of four Grammy Awards, the Pulitzer Prize, and an Academy Award (an Oscar). One of his most celebrated works is the Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, written for the film *The Red Violin*, premiered by Joshua Bell.

### **Franz Schubert: Impromptu in B-flat Major, D. 935, No. 3**

In the latter part of 1827, Franz Schubert faced both financial and health problems, and he began reaching out to different publishers in an effort to sell his music. In response, his correspondents asked that he provide smaller works that could be monetized. It was under these circumstances that Schubert composed eight short works that eventually became his two sets of Four Impromptus. Unfortunately, only two impromptus of the first set were published during his lifetime (by the Viennese publisher Haslinger); the second set, D. 935, was published posthumously by Anton Diabelli in 1838. Robert Schumann had remarked that the latter set was a sonata in disguise, but many scholars have argued otherwise, despite the fact that the set does contain complementary key relationships. In many ways, these gems show that Schubert can be seen as the first herald of the Romantic character piece.

Schubert’s Impromptu in B-flat major is a theme and five variations, based on a melody that he used in his incidental music for Helmina von Ch ezy’s play *Rosamunde, Princess of Cyprus* and his own String Quartet in A minor, D. 804. The charming theme is here presented as a *lied* or song. The origin of the *Rosamunde* theme as ballet music is brought forth in the second and fifth

variations, represented by the staccato bass note followed by a syncopated quarter note. The middle variation is the stormiest, in the parallel key of B-flat minor. Next follows the most blissful of them all, the serene fourth variation in G-flat major. The concluding variation is a sparkling display of color and delight.

Larry Weng writes, “The rhythmic motive of [this] work is a dactylic rhythm that closely resembles the theme of the second movement of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony, which is the quote that Corigliano uses in his *Fantasia*. In fact, the dactylic rhythm can be heard throughout his works, especially following the year of the Symphony’s composition (think *Death and the Maiden* by Schubert). No matter how much it was intentional, [Beethoven] cast a long shadow on not only his contemporaries such as Schubert, but the later Romantic composers such as Schumann and Brahms.”

### **Johannes Brahms: Piano Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, Op. 5**

*Allegro maestoso*

*Andante espressivo*

*Scherzo: Allegro energico*

*Intermezzo (Rückblick): Andante molto*

*Finale: Allegro moderato ma rubato*

The year 1853 was a momentous one for the twenty-year-old Johannes Brahms. Until then, he lived a somewhat uneventful life, teaching untalented students, playing accompanying gigs, and studying piano and composition with his teacher, Eduard Marxsen. He did not wish to be a virtuoso pianist, but he also had doubts about making a livelihood only composing. It was not until 1853 that Providence answered him and events snowballed. In April, his violin partner, Eduard Reményi, asked him to go on a performance tour with him. During this tour, he visited more of Germany than he had ever seen before and met one of Reményi’s former classmates, twenty-two-year-old Joseph Joachim, who was already a famous virtuoso violinist. Joachim was so utterly impressed by Brahms’s music that he sent introductory letters and created contacts on behalf of the composer. Through Joachim, Brahms came into contact with Franz Liszt, George V (king of Hanover), and ultimately, Robert and Clara Schumann. On the fateful day of September 30, 1853, the young Brahms rang the doorbell of their house. Upon hearing Brahms play, Robert and Clara Schumann were so taken by his talent that they welcomed him with open arms and promised their friendship to the young composer. Schumann wrote in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (New Journal for Music): “It seemed to me that there would and indeed must suddenly appear one man who would be singled out to articulate and give the ideal expression to the tendencies of our time, one man who would show us his mastery, not through a gradual process, but, like Athena, spring fully armed from the head of Zeus. And he has come, a young man over whose cradle Graces and Heroes stood guard. His name is *Johannes Brahms*.” The young composer had started his tour in April as an unknown accompanist; by October, he had become the new Messiah of German music.

It was during this extremely eventful year that Brahms wrote his third and last sonata for the piano, an epic five-movement mammoth. Brahms had learned from Marxsen the hallowed traditions and craft of Beethoven. This sonata demonstrates Brahms’s complete mastery of Marxsen’s lessons on motivic development and formal logic, balancing it with a Romantic ardor borne of his youthful passion. All three piano sonatas are extraordinarily orchestral—texturally, in scope,

and in concept. Robert Schumann aptly described them as “veiled symphonies.” As with all three piano sonatas, Op. 5 launches with a striving, heroic gesture that reaches across the range of the piano. A somber chorale ensues, under which a timpani-like motif is heard, borrowed from the “fate motif” from Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. The dichotomy of the lyrical and the dramatic continues to unfold throughout the development. The next movement, *Andante espressivo*, is a song without words, based on the poem “Junge Liebe” (Young Love) by C. O. Sternau (pseudonym of Otto Inkermann).

Twilight falls, the moonlight shines,  
Two Hearts are united in love,  
And keep themselves in bliss enclosed.

It contains some of the most sublime music ever written and makes audible the tender bliss between the two young lovers. The central *Scherzo* movement is uninhibited Florestan writing, opening with a quotation from the last movement of Mendelssohn’s Piano Trio in C minor. The placid middle *Trio* section contains the ominous fate motif heard in the opening of the sonata. The unusual added movement, an *Intermezzo* titled *Rückblick* (“Remembrance”), is used to recall the music of the second movement. However, no longer is the theme paradisiacal; rather, it is in minor mode, embedded with an eerie, funereal timpani that again sounds the fate motif. Musicologists have surmised that the music may have been inspired by a poem that Brahms entered into his notebook at that time, also by the poet Sternau, with the words:

If ye knew how soon  
How soon the trees are withered,  
And the wood is bare,  
How soon comes the dreary day  
When the heart’s beat is dumb.

The final movement unleashes a fiery rondo, which is symphonic in its contrasting use of registration. The first episode after the main theme contains a cryptogram using the notes F-A-E to represent “*frei aber einsam*” (“free but lonely”), a motto Brahms shared with his friend Joachim. This virtuosic movement ends the F-minor work in a triumphant and jubilant F major, not unlike the trajectory of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony from darkness to light.



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