

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

By Dr. Jannie Burdeti

Robert Schumann: Kinderszenen, Op. 15

“In man, there resides a tender genius that gently opens up gateways to new worlds and creations for the eternal child, and that, unnoticed and as if by chance, leads the youth in his first love to the blossoming spring with his beloved, uniting and revealing to each other their dreams.”

—Robert Schumann (from his diary)

Throughout his life, the experience of childhood captivated the imagination of Robert Schumann, whether it was through his children, literature, or music. While he wrote some pieces explicitly for children to play, *Kinderszenen* (Scenes from Childhood), Op. 15, was meant for adult consumption, a reminiscence about life as a child. Composed in 1838, it was conceived as a set of thirty pieces to be a part of his *Novelletten*, Op. 21, but Schumann later decided on separating the sets.

The first piece, “Of Foreign Lands and Peoples,” expresses childlike wonder. Its melody opens with the notes B-G-F#-E-D, which will thenceforth appear throughout the entire cycle as a unifying motive. “A Curious Story” follows and is full of excitement, portraying an eager child listening to a story. The subsequent “Blind Man’s Bluff” was a childhood game that he played with Clara and her younger brother, Alwin, when Schumann lived at their house. It is in essence a form of tag, similar to “Marco Polo.” “Pleading Child” begins and ends the same way, on an unresolved chord, as if to ask, “Please?” The next piece answers with “Happy Enough”—perhaps the child made do with what they had. “An Important Event” asserts itself, full of pompous rhythms. The most famous piece of the whole collection is “Dreaming,” or *Träumerei*, a favorite encore of Vladimir Horowitz. It suggests a child’s inner dreamworld, possibly taking place “At the Fireside,” the following piece. The twelfth piece, “Child Falling Asleep,” is gentle, swaying, and subdued. Schumann later added the thirteenth and final piece, “The Poet Speaks,” to be included in the publication. Here, Schumann breaks the fourth wall and emerges as a grown-up for the first time in the piece, addressing the audience in the most intimate and eloquent of moments.

Ludwig van Beethoven: Piano Sonata in A-flat Major, Op. 110

Beethoven’s Sonata in A-flat Major, completed by the end of 1821, is the second in his final trilogy of sonatas, Op. 109, Op. 110, and Op. 111. At the time, he was also working on *Missa solennis*, his Ninth Symphony, and the Op. 111 Piano Sonata. That year had been a tremendously trying one physically: he had suffered an attack of rheumatic fever in January, only then to undergo jaundice in July for two months (a prequel to one of the probable causes of his death, liver cirrhosis). Moreover, by this time, he was wearing a body belt due to pain in his abdomen.

As in some of his other late works, Beethoven touches upon so many dimensions of the human experience in this sonata. He is not afraid to juxtapose spiritual heights with the utterly profane. The piece begins harmoniously, in four-part quartet writing, with a theme (falling third, rising fourth) in the right hand that will inform the entire sonata. The first movement is, by appearance, strikingly harmless, almost abnormally lyrical for something written by Beethoven. Even the

form is rather conventional. The development section is rather short, a series of sequences that unfolds with a sense of inevitability. The ending of the first movement is inconclusive, leading straight into the second movement.

The impetuous scherzo and trio comprises two themes that are identified by musicologists to be *Unsa Kätz häd Katzln ghabt* (“Our cat has had kittens”) and *Ich bin lüderlich, du bist lüderlich* (“I am a slob, you are a slob”). They were popular drinking songs of the time, and Beethoven would have identified with the second song, with its mention of “lüderlich,” one who was untidy and “not fit for polite society.” Indeed, those that knew him were aware of his crazed and ragged appearance. A record exists from 1821 (the year he composed this sonata) about a brief trip he made to prison due to his attire. Beethoven, in his reverie, took a long walk and, only when it was too late, realized that he had lost his way in Wiener Neustadt. The police, noticing an unshaven and unkempt man looking into homes (perhaps hoping to ask someone for the directions), brought him to jail. When he claimed he was Beethoven, they did not believe him and said, “You’re a tramp. Beethoven doesn’t look like this.” The composer made a racket, requesting that Herr Herzog (a local music director) come to identify him in the middle of the night. Only after Herzog’s confirmation did the mayor arrive to apologize and release him. They exclaimed, “He keeps on yelling that he is Beethoven; but he’s a ragamuffin, has no hat, an old coat . . . nothing by which he can be identified.”

After this most earthy of movements comes the most metaphysical. When the second movement dissipates into the third movement, what ensues is an arioso coupled with a fugue, emblems of older styles of music and a juxtaposition of grief and hope for the beyond. A recitative, sobbing made audible, introduces the arioso. The theme of the arioso, in A-flat minor, is borrowed from a movement from Bach’s St. John Passion, *Es ist vollbracht* (“It is consummated”), describing when Christ gives up the mortal body. In Beethoven’s score, the description “Song of Lament” appears in both German and Italian. A sublime fugue subsequently unfolds, built upon the very same melody as the opening of the sonata. Yet it is not the end of the story, and the fugue dwindles. The arioso returns, this time in G minor, marked *Ermattet*, “exhausted.” After resonant, bell-like G-major chords are heard ringing from the lower recesses of the piano, the fugue emerges once again, phoenix-like, though this time turned upside down. It is all the more magical. Composer Vincent d’Indy remarked that the arioso is “one of the most poignant expressions of grief conceivable to man” and that the fugue is “an effort of will to shake off suffering. But the latter is the stronger . . . [its] will asserting itself against the forces of annihilation . . . the resurrection!” Indeed, the sonata concludes with boundless euphoria.

Franz Liszt: Sonata in B Minor, S. 178

Considered by many to be his magnum opus, Liszt’s Sonata in B Minor is exceptional in its content, scope, and architectural mastery. Alan Walker declares that it was “arguably one of the greatest keyboard works to come out of the nineteenth century. If Liszt had written nothing else, he would have to be ranked as a master on the strength of this work alone.” Unlike most of his other works, it does not contain programmatic descriptions, and the wide-ranging hermeneutic interpretations offered by musicians seem insignificant when listed one after the other. Be it the Faust legend, a depiction of the Garden of Eden, or an autobiographical sketch, Liszt never in fact revealed his intention programmatically. For instance, he reused the same music from his

choral cycle *Les Quatre Éléments* in *Les Préludes*, despite differing programmatic contexts.

Its appellation of “sonata” is significant structurally—the form functions as a sonata on the local level, as well as macrocosmically. Walker writes, “Not only are its four contrasting movements rolled into one, but they are themselves composed against a background of a full-scale sonata scheme—exposition, development, and recapitulation. . . . In short, Liszt has composed ‘a sonata across a sonata.’” Schubert’s *Wanderer Fantasie*, which Liszt knew intimately as a performer, arranger, and editor, would have certainly been influential on the structuring of this piece. The *Wanderer Fantasie*, too, contains four movements linked and unified by themes that undergo a change in character, otherwise known as “thematic transformation.” Liszt’s Sonata in B Minor, more than any of his other works, is the greatest of his “transformation of themes.”

While having three primary *leitmotifs* (themes that recur throughout the piece, representing a specific idea), it displays an astonishing degree of organicism. Each measure is deeply integrated with the rest of the work. In this sense, the pianist Claudio Arrau once dubbed Liszt’s Sonata in B Minor “Beethoven’s thirty-third piano sonata.”

The sonata is an eclectic amalgam of different styles, and Kenneth Hamilton writes that it ranges “from Germanic chromaticism and thematic development to Italianate lyricism, taking in elements from French grand opera and Hungarian Gypsy music along the way.” In its haunting introduction, one senses immediately the slight flavor of exoticism in the descending scalar passage (first in the Phrygian mode and then repeated as a “gypsy scale”). After a Mephistophelian outburst, the second theme, marked *Grandioso*, is everything the name implies. Hamilton observes that this portion invokes the French grand opera chorus. The slow section is the work’s emotional center. An acerbic fugue ensues and is astonishing in its role as the development of the sonata form. According to manuscripts, the composer had originally intended a loud, virtuosic ending, but later opted for a sublimated, introspective finish.

Fifteen years earlier, in 1839, Robert Schumann had dedicated his *Fantasie in C Major*, Op. 17, to Franz Liszt. Liszt was a great admirer of Schumann, and it was not until he completed the Sonata in B Minor that he felt he had composed something worthy enough to reciprocate this gesture. Unfortunately, Schumann was never to see the score, as in 1853, when the work was completed, he had already been admitted to the asylum. Clara Schumann, who received it, thoroughly disliked it. Nonetheless, Liszt’s friend Richard Wagner wrote to the composer upon hearing it: “Dearest Franz, you were with me, the sonata is beautiful beyond compare; great, sweet, deep and noble, sublime as you are yourself.”

