

23. Schumann

Kinderscenen, Op. 15: Nos 1, 3 and 11

(For Unit 3: Developing Musical Understanding)

Background information and performance circumstances

Robert Schumann wrote *Kinderscenen* in 1838 at the age of 28. It was one of a number of imaginatively titled and unusually constructed sets of piano miniatures which he composed around that time. *Kinderscenen* (commonly translated as 'Scenes from Childhood', although more accurately as 'Children's Scenes') is a collection of 13 short pieces of which we study three (nos. 1, 3, and 11).

The Romantic period, to which Schumann and these pieces very firmly belong, was a time of fundamental change in music, of innovation and daring. There was a shift to music that looked outward and had extra-musical influences, perhaps a programmatic purpose, a poetic connection, a literary theme or a representation of national identity.

Schumann's music typifies this; in particular he had a deep love of contemporary Romantic poetry, and his music communicates a vivid poetic spirit (the final piece in *Kinderscenen*, no. 13, is even entitled, in translation, 'The Poet Speaks').

Sometimes convincing links between a composer's life experiences and his music are hard to find (for instance, some of Mozart's jolliest music was written at times of deep despair); but in Schumann's case there is plenty of evidence, even to the extent of specific titles, to prove that his music was often a reflection of his personal life.

In 1838 was deeply in love with Clara Wieck and had already unsuccessfully asked her father for her hand in marriage. A letter to Clara at this time shows his feelings when he says despairingly, 'all these nights of anguish, sleepless with the thought of you, and all this tearless grief'. Schumann eventually prevailed and married Clara in 1840.

Of course three short piano pieces cannot possibly contain all the conflicting emotions of the time, and we will never know his precise thoughts at the moment of composition, but there are perhaps hints of the combination of joy and anger, expectation and frustration which his personal life clearly contained. Even more tellingly, in the highly adventurous and individual compositional style of *Kinderscenen*, a sense of the dual personalities Schumann invented, Florestan and Eusebius (the reflective and the impetuous), emerge. There are also clear signs of Schumann's inherent instability of character, something which would eventually lead to madness and death.

Performing forces and their handling

The Early Romantic period was a time of great change in piano construction. Even in the time between Schumann's birth and the composition of *Kinderscenen* some major developments had taken place.

Two are very relevant to us here, the invention of the iron frame, and the use of felt to cover hammers rather than leather. The former allowed for greater resonance and sustaining power and the latter made the tone of the instrument mellower and less strident.

Some aspects of these three pieces reflect these changes. For instance, the gentle melodic lyricism of no. 1 and, to a lesser extent, no. 11 – as well as the vibrant sustained bass open fifths in bars 13–14 of no. 3 – would not have had the same effect on an earlier instrument.

It is also worth remembering that the present-day instrument on which we now hear these pieces is different again. The sheer power and volume of today's grand pianos would probably have seemed quite shocking (or thrilling!) to Schumann - something worth bearing in mind in any performance.

In terms of general piano writing, the following features are characteristic of the Romantic period:

- In no. 1 the two hands generate three clearly identifiable textural layers
- The importance of the sustaining pedal, especially in no. 1
- The accompaniment of no. 3 leaps in dramatic fashion between bass notes and chords – somewhat in the manner of the later jazz 'stride bass' style
- Bars 15–16 of no. 3 contain the unusual effect of a sustained chord within which a chromatic melodic ascent is placed
- No. 11 commences with both hands very close together and in treble clef
- The section in no. 11 that starts at bar 9 places the melody in the bass and has off-beat semiquaver chords as a right hand accompaniment.

General points

Before commencing an analysis of each piece in turn, and to avoid unnecessary repetition later on, it is worth listing at this point some features which relate to, and appear in, all of the pieces:

- Melody-dominated homophony
- Functional harmony and tonality

- Modulation to related keys
- Clearly defined cadences
- Mainly diatonic harmony with occasional chromatic chords
- Diatonic melodies
- Balanced phrasing
- Simple rhythms
- Use of simple duple time throughout

Any exceptions to the above will be commented on when analysing individual pieces.

No. 1 – Von fremden Ländern und Menschen

Structure

- Rounded binary form, with both sections repeated
- 'Rounded' binary form involves the return of part of the first ('A') section at the end of the second ('B') section – so the scheme here could be labelled: A :||: B A :||
- It is unusual for the *whole* of A to return as happens here
- This long repetition works because there is no modulation to the dominant key (D major) at the end of the A section. It would not make sense to have repeated the whole of an A section that ended away from the tonic key
- This short piece is therefore very repetitive – but such simplicity is appropriate in a 'children's scene'.

Tonality

- G major (without the 'expected' modulation to the dominant at the end of the A section)
- A suggestion of E minor in bars 11–12 – not a real modulation because the chord at bar 12¹ does not resolve to I in E minor (further, see 'Harmony' below).

Harmony

- Perfect cadences in bars 7–8 and 21–22
- The diminished seventh chord in bar 1² (repeated at 3², etc.) is *chromatic* – C sharp does not belong to the G major scale, but neither does it take us outside of G major
- There is an unusual progression in bars 11²–12. Instead of E minor chords II–V being followed by the expected tonic chord, the harmony shifts unexpectedly to a G major triad (chord I in G major). This initially is missing its third (B)

- There is a 4–3 suspension in the inner part writing of bar 7 (G–F sharp, both quavers).

Melody

- There is a mixture of conjunct and disjunct movement (steps and leaps)
- Note in particular the recurring rising minor 6th leap followed by stepwise descent (bar 1–2, etc.)
- There is melodic sequence in bars 9–12
- The bass line in bars 9–12 borrows features of the opening melody.

Texture

- There are three textural layers in the A sections, consisting of melody (at the top), inner quaver triplets, and an independent bass line
- Bars 9–14 (B section) differs: the melody is played mainly in thirds and the bass line acts as a countermelody.

Rhythm

- Triplet quavers are used in the middle of the accompaniment
- The melody features dotted rhythms (N.B. it is possible that Schumann intended them to sound as crotchet-plus-quaver triplet groups, in the manner of some 18th-century music).

No. 3 – Hasche-Mann

Structure

- Rounded binary form, with written-out repeat of bars 1–4, but conventional use of repeat signs and 1st- and 2nd-time bars in the second section
- The scheme here could be labelled: A A || : B A : ||

Tonality

- B minor
- Brief modulations to G major at bar 9, and...
- ...E minor at bar 11 (see also under 'Harmony')

- Lengthy dominant preparation (back in B minor) at bars 15²–16.

Harmony

- Perfect cadences in bars 4, 8 and 20
- Interrupted cadences (V⁷–VI) in bars 10²–11¹ and 12²–13¹ – where you might expect perfect cadences to clinch the G major and E minor modulations
- There are various seventh chords, mainly dominant sevenths as above. Note the II⁷–V⁷ progression in bar 10
- Striking use of a prolonged ‘Neapolitan’ chord in root position in bars 13–15¹ with dissonant harmony at 13² and 14², creating a pedal effect. (The Neapolitan chord in first inversion (usually termed the ‘Neapolitan sixth’) is IIb in a minor key, but with the root of the chord lowered by a semitone. In B minor, it is E–G–C natural rather than E–G–C sharp)
- The Neapolitan chord is approached as VI in E minor (part of an interrupted cadence)
- Appoggiaturas in bar 2 (the accented semiquavers) provide some dissonance.

Melody

- There is a mixture of conjunct and disjunct movement (steps and leaps), with much (rapid) scalar passagework
- Melodic sequence occurs in bar 2 (two sets of four semiquavers), and in bars 9–12
- The descent of a minor 7th (G–A) in bar 9 is unexpected – presumably the more ‘natural’ rise of a second (G–A) was avoided because it would take the melody rather too high.

Texture

- Generally, the right hand melody is accompanied by the ‘stride bass’ patterns in the left hand mentioned above
- Exceptions are the open 5th double pedal in bars 13²–15¹ and the sustained chord with inner ascending scale in bar 15².

Rhythm

- There is continuous semiquaver movement (remember what the title means: ‘Catch-me-if-you-can’)

- The same two-bar rhythmic pattern (beginning with a crotchet tied to a semiquaver) occurs in the melody throughout, apart from brief deviations and use of more sustained notes for contrast in bars 13-16.

No. 11 – Fürchtenmachen

Structure

- No. 11 is a rondo (A B A C A B A) with some sections repeated
- It is a kind of palindrome: the scheme shown above is the same forwards and backwards (compare words such as 'minim' and 'level').

Tonality

- E minor is suggested by initial I-Vb progression at the start, but...
- ...G major is established as the key of the piece by bar 4
- There is a modulation to E minor in bar 10, and, sequentially, to C major in bar 12
- Note suggestions of A minor in bar 22 and B minor in bar 24, and clearer moves to E minor and B minor in bars 25-28.

Harmony

- Imperfect cadences are frequent (e.g., Ic-V in bars 4 and 8) – presumably to keep the music on the move
- There are no really weighty perfect cadences – they might be too settled for a 'frightening' piece. The 'strongest' is at the end, but the effect of even this is diluted by its going from strong to weak rather than weak to strong. For other strong-to-weak perfect cadences, see bar 10 and (more dramatically) bar 24²
- The opening two bars are highly chromatic (note the descending semitones in the bass, and the (incomplete) diminished seventh chord on the second quaver of bar 2
- There is a Neapolitan sixth chord in B minor at bar 27².

Melody

- Mostly diatonic apart from chromaticism at the start
- B section (bar 9) has a very disjunct melody *in the bass*. This is treated in sequence
- The second half of the C section (bars 25-28) opens with a two-bar phrase spanning a diminished 4th. This is then treated in sequence, with the original G-F sharp minor

2nd being expanded to a whole tone (D–C). The C to A sharp is a rare interval – a diminished 3rd. This interval tends to be associated – as it is here – with movement from a Neapolitan sixth chord to chord $V^{(7)}$.

Texture

- The texture is essentially melody-dominated homophony, with the melody either at the top, as at the start of the A section, or in the bass as in bars 5–8. The melody is also in the bass in the B section, with short offbeat chords accompanying in the right hand
- To begin with the texture is three-part, with the lower two parts descending in 3rds, but mostly the texture has four parts
- At the start of the C section (bars 21–24) three contrasting textural elements alternate – rapid semiquaver movement in 6ths, single bass notes, and, off the beat, full 5-part chords (accented, *sf*)
- The melody-dominated homophony at bars 25–28 uses an accompaniment pattern broadly similar to the 'stride-like' accompaniment in no.3.

Rhythm

- Dotted rhythms (mostly dotted quaver plus semiquaver pairs) are a feature of the A section
- Elsewhere semiquavers are either used as follows: singly off the beat in the accompaniment of the B section, in pairs in the melody of the B section, or in groups of four (twice in the C section)
- Offbeat rhythms are sometimes prominent – in the B section as described in the previous bullet point, and in the C section as described under 'Texture'.