

Schumann (orch. Ravel), Four Pieces from "Carnaval," Op. 9

Many concertgoers know that Ravel famously orchestrated Mussorgky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (originally for piano), but not many know that he also provided the same service for Schumann's *Carnaval* (also for solo piano). Only four of the 22 short numbers survive, and for some reason, performances today are a great rarity. Ravel orchestrated Schumann's score in 1914 for use as a ballet upon the request of Vaslav Nijinsky, the leading dancer of Diaghilev's *Ballet Russes*. In this form the world first heard it in London on March 2, 1914. Those familiar with Ravel's orchestration of *Pictures at an Exhibition* (1922) will recognize in *Carnaval* the same skill in creating brilliant sonorities, the constantly changing variety of colors, the prominence given to upper woodwinds, and even the touches of percussion. Purists may howl that this is a classic case of gilding the lily, but the world is richer for Ravel's contribution nonetheless.

Carnaval consists of musical vignettes all constructed from three tiny motifs whose notes are derived from the name of a little German town, Asch. (Today it is Aš, just over the border in the Czech Republic near Bayreuth, Germany). This was where Schumann's current flame, Ernestine von Fricken, came from. He also discovered that the four letters of Ernestine's birthplace, Asch, were also in his own. (In German terms, S=Es (E-flat), and H=B-natural.) The coincidence seemed to Schumann like fate knocking at the door, providing just the stimulus he needed to begin a new composition. *Carnaval* gives musical expression to masked revelers from the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, friends, colleagues and other characters at Carnival time (before Lent).

The "Préambule" is based not on the ASCH motif or any of its derivatives, but rather on the theme of Schubert's *Trauerwalzer*, Op. 9, No. 2 (D. 365). The "Valse allemande" (German waltz) and "Paganini" together form an A-B-A structure with "Paganini" at the center. The latter, a tribute to the famous violinist, consists of continuously and deliberately dis-synchronized left and right hand figuration in the piano, an effect Ravel does not quite capture with the orchestra. The "March of the Davidsbündler against the Philistines," the final number of *Carnaval*, portrays the struggle of Schumann's imaginary Band of David (the forward-looking elements of society's cultural fabric) against the reactionary, conservative elements, the Philistines. Into it Schumann incorporates the so-called "Grandfather's Dance," a painfully simple, seventeenth-century tune that represented to Schumann old-fashioned, outdated ideas. (It turns up also in the opening scene of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*, as the guests are about to leave the party.)

Chopin, Piano Concerto No. 2 in F Minor, Op. 21

In July of 1829, the nineteen-year-old Chopin spent three weeks in Vienna. The publisher Haslinger encouraged him to give a recital, which was so well received that a second was quickly arranged, and proved equally successful. Upon returning to Poland, Chopin realized that if he were going to pursue a career as a concert pianist (a career move he soon abandoned), he would need some major display pieces of his own in his repertory. To this

end he soon set about writing the F-minor concerto, which he premiered in Warsaw on March 17, 1830 to great acclaim. Hence, Chopin's Piano Concerto in F minor, the so-called No. 2, was actually his first, preceding the E-minor concerto by about a year. The reversal in numbering came about because the orchestral parts of the F-minor concerto were lost before it was published, and by the time they were recopied, the E-minor concerto had been published.

The enduring appeal of a Chopin concerto lies in the piano writing - sweetly lyrical melodies, a quality of intimacy, the expressive nuances of color and dynamics, the improvisatory character provided by such techniques as rubato, arpeggios and delicate ornamentation of the melodic lines.

The first movement's two main themes are stated in the opening orchestral exposition - a strongly rhythmic idea with a quasi-military flavor (a rhythm also found in so many Italian operas of the period) and a more lyrical, *bel canto* subject announced by the woodwind choir, the first of several felicitous uses of woodwind color in this concerto

The *Larghetto* is a nocturne of heavenly beauty and midnight poetry. The central episode of this ternary form (ABA) movement momentarily disturbs the placid waters, but the mood of quiet reverie is restored well before the movement ends.

The finale is a rondo imbued with the spirit and rhythm of the mazurka, a Polish country dance in triple meter with a characteristic accent on the third beat.

Ravel, Pavane Pour Une Infante Défunte (Pavane for a Dead Princess)

Throughout his compositional career, Ravel turned often to the dance as inspiration for his music: the waltz, minuet, bolero, habanera and pavane he all set twice or more, as well as the malagueña, rigaudon and forlane. One of his first successful works was the exquisite piano miniature *Pavane pour une infante défunte*, written in 1899 while the composer was still a student and dedicated to the Princess of Polignac, a noted patroness of the arts. In the composer's words, "it is not a lament for a dead child, but an evocation of the pavane which might have been danced by a tiny princess such as was painted by Velasquez at the Spanish Court." The *Pavane's* popularity increased still more when the composer orchestrated it in 1910. In Ravel's treatment of the pavane (a stately sixteenth-century Spanish court dance), we find a haunting, graceful melody set against a gently undulating rhythmic accompaniment. Strings are muted throughout, adding a touch of veiled mystery to the subtly archaic character. The small orchestra includes also a harp, an oboe, and pairs of flutes, clarinets, bassoons and horns.

The first performance of the *Pavane* was given by pianist Ricardo Viñes in Paris on April 5, 1902. Ravel himself recorded it in a Duo-Art piano roll in 1922. The first performance of the orchestral version was conducted by Alfredo Casella on Christmas Day, 1911. Ravel did not leave a recording of himself conducting the work, but he did undertake, in all honesty and objectivity (so he claimed!), a criticism of the premiere of the orchestral version, asserting that the piece was "old enough for the composer to abandon it to criticism." He took objection to the *Pavane's* "excessively flagrant influence of Chabrier and the impoverished

form" and claimed that its popularity (in the piano version) was due to what he considered its conservative, unimaginative character. Ravel, is, for the most part, correct in his assessment. But the *Pavane's* quaint charm, evocative mood and idyllic tranquility have endeared it to millions, and no critic, even the composer, can undo the touching effect this exquisite musical gem has on us.

Schumann, Symphony No. 3 "*Rhenish*"

On March 31, 1850, Schumann accepted the position of Municipal Music Director of Düsseldorf, opening a brilliant and exuberant, though short-lived, new chapter in his life. Upon his arrival in the city, Schumann was welcomed in grand style with a full spread of speeches, banquets and concerts. Having for the first time in his career a regular, salaried musical post and a prominent orchestra at his disposal, Schumann plunged into a renewed interest in symphonic writing, and in a feverish burst of creativity, wrote the Cello Concerto in just fifteen days in October, followed immediately by his *Rhenish* Symphony in November and December.

This symphony reflects all the optimism, joy of life and chance for a fresh start he harbored in those autumn months of 1850. Schumann immediately fell under the spell of the Rhine River (which runs through the city), the surrounding countryside, the friendly, outgoing people, and the picturesque, nearby towns. When he submitted his new symphony to the publisher Simrock, he did not affix its current subtitle *Rhenish*, but he did say that it "perhaps mirrors here and there something of Rhenish life." Schumann himself conducted the first performance in Düsseldorf on February 6, 1851.

The *Rhenish* is Schumann's only symphony to begin without a slow introduction. It is launched with precipitous energy and ebullience by a glorious theme that seems to shout for joy and exult in the thrill of new adventures. Giving additional momentum to this expansive, continuously unfolding theme is the trick Schumann plays with the listener's sense of rhythm - a tug of war between a feeling of broad quadruple (the opening bars) and a quick triple (shortly thereafter) pulse. A more relaxed, lyrical, even wistful theme in G minor is later announced by the woodwinds. Being rhythmically regular, it acts as a foil to the rhythmic instability of the first theme, which soon returns and pervades most of the movement.

The gentle flow (or powerful surge, depending on the conductor) of the Scherzo suggests the movement of the great river at Schumann's doorstep. The principal theme is supposedly based on a slow *Ländler*, a country dance with a sturdily lilting triple meter (in effect negating the heading "Scherzo").

The simple naïveté of German folksong, a subject close to Schumann's heart, is further developed in the third movement, a graceful, intermezzo-like interlude. The instrumentation is reduced (no trumpets or timpani, just two horns) and the dynamic level is subdued throughout. Three themes, each clothed in different orchestral colors, are heard: the opening motif for woodwinds, led by the clarinets; a capricious little idea initially for strings, later joined by woodwinds; and a songful, warmly flowing line for violas and bassoons.

The fourth movement has called forth more commentary than any other in this symphony. This is the "extra" movement beyond the customary four, and it is manifestly programmatic, an anomaly among Schumann's symphonic movements. Emanuel Winternitz calls it "a translation into musical terms of the mystical atmosphere of the Gothic interior of the Cologne Cathedral." And indeed it is. Shortly before writing this symphony, Schumann had made the fifty-kilometer trip on the newly-opened rail line to Cologne to observe the elevation of Archbishop von Geissel to Cardinal in Cologne's great cathedral. The splendorous ceremony deeply impressed him, as did the overwhelming majesty of the edifice itself, one of the tallest in all Europe. To underline the ecclesiastical solemnity of the event, Schumann employs, for the first time in the symphony, the trombones, instruments that in Schumann's day were still not used regularly in symphonies.

The sudden contrast between the gloom of the fourth movement's final bars in E-flat minor and the bright, vigorous finale in E-flat major has been likened to stepping from the somber atmosphere of a Gothic cathedral into the sunshine and bustle of life outdoors. We are back among the world of merry country folk, but the relationship of this movement to the one we just left is made obvious near the end of the symphony, where the noble cathedral music returns in great, glorious outbursts from the full orchestra. Along the way to its super-charged conclusion, this movement incorporates references to the first movement as well, thus bringing the composer's thoughts about the Rhineland full circle, as if to signify unity in diversity.