

Robert Schumann



Teaching Notes

Schumann Biography Selections

The first biography selection on Robert Schumann, from *Famous Composers for Young People*, would be suitable for younger children. The second biography selection, taken from *Music Masters in Miniature*, contains a little more detail, making it suitable for slightly older elementary children. Choose the selection which works best for your students.

Selections for Study

Listen to the following selections for your Composer Study of Schumann:

- *Kinderszenen* Op. 15 (*Scenes from Childhood*)
- *Carnaval* Op. 9
- *Concerto in A for Piano* Op. 54
- *Papillons* Op. 2 and *Fantasiestücke* Op. 12
- *Symphony No. 1* Op. 38 (*Spring*)

See the website for a link with audio files, purchase or borrow CD collections of Schumann's work or consider using Spotify. Also, if you have the *Classics for Children* CD from Year One, then the first selection listed above, *Scenes from Childhood*, is already included on this CD.

Possible CD to consider: *The Best of Schumann* (Naxos)

Optional CD Suggestion: *Meet the Masters: Schumann and Grieg*

R: The Arts

ROBERT SCHUMANN

Romantic Composer

BORN 1810— DIED 1856

Robert Schumann, known as a romantic composer, was born at Zwickau, in Saxony, Germany, on June 8, 1810. His father was a bookseller and publisher, and young Schumann grew up with a love for literature nearly as great as that for music.

He was the youngest child, and it was his mother's fondest hope that he might become a lawyer. From the time that he began to study music in a casual way, however, he was determined to devote his life to it.

His father died when he was sixteen, and in order to make his mother happy, young Robert consented to enter the University of Leipzig as a law student. His heart, however, was never in his studies. Most of the time he was either practicing the piano or reading stories of mystery and imagination.

During this time, a very important meeting took place, he began to study piano with a famous teacher whose name was Friedrich Wieck. At his home, Schumann met the young daughter, Clara, who was then nine years old and an accomplished pianist. Many years later she became his wife, and we now seldom think of Robert Schumann without thinking of Clara Schumann, who helped make his music famous.

In May of that year, Schumann decided to join a friend of his at the University of Heidelberg. His restlessness was due, no doubt, to the fact that he was unhappy in his law studies. But he still wanted to please his mother.

Finally, however, he wrote to her, begging permission to devote his time entirely to music. His mother replied:

"I shall leave the decision in the hands of Herr Wieck. If he believes that you have sufficient talent, I shall not interfere."

Friedrich Wieck readily gave his approval, and at the age of twenty Schumann returned to Leipzig to live and study in the Wieck household. By this time he had composed quite a bit of music, including the first part of the famous *Papillons* or "Butterflies." In addition to his piano lessons, he studied composition with Heinrich Dorn, and began to write musical criticism.

Fired both by his own ambition and his desire not to be outdone by the brilliant playing of young Clara Wieck, Schumann practiced at the piano incessantly. To strengthen his third finger he invented a device to hold it back. But instead of strengthening it, the contrivance permanently injured his hand, so that it was impossible for him to continue his piano practicing. Imagine how unhappy he must have been!

Herr Wieck realized at once that Schumann's finger would never regain strength enough to enable him to become a concert pianist, but having noticed Schumann's talent for composition he encouraged him along those lines.

"Anyone can perform," he told the unhappy young man, "but it takes a great deal more to create."

At the same time, he became interested in changing the musical world of his time. He wanted to encourage fine honest artists in music, and reveal to the public the mistake of worshipping certain virtuosi, or showy performers. With this feeling in mind he helped organize "The David Club," and became editor and proprietor of a paper, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, meaning the *New Journal of Music*. In this paper he published the first recognition of Chopin and of the French composer, Berlioz, and he generously praised Mendelssohn's music.

During this time he also composed a sonata and many other pieces, including the first part of *Carnaval*.

In 1836 he declared his love for Clara Wieck, but her father objected to their getting married. He liked Schumann and admired his work, but he hoped for a more brilliant marriage for his daughter. Spurred on by this refusal, Schumann worked harder than ever.

For some time he had wanted to go to Vienna, as did nearly every musician of the period. In the fall of 1838 he tried to establish his musical periodical there. It was not very well received, but while he was in Vienna, Schumann discovered many previously unknown works of Schubert and helped to get them performed and published. One of these was Schubert's *C Major Symphony*, which was played for the first time under the direction of Mendelssohn.

Schumann was superstitious and mystical by nature. Symbols played a great part in his life. During his stay in Vienna it was natural for him to visit the graves of Schubert and Beethoven, which lie side by side. On the top of Beethoven's grave he found a rusty steel pen.

"It must have been dropped there by Schubert before his death," came to Schumann's mind. "I shall write with it — some of their spirit will pass into my music."

And he actually wrote his own *B Flat Symphony* with this pen!

In the Spring he was back in Leipzig. Not long after, he was made a Doctor of Philosophy by the University of Jena. This probably made him more acceptable as a son-in-law. At any rate, he and Clara Wieck were married on September 12, 1840.

They were a very happy couple. And during the first year of their marriage Schumann composed over one hundred songs. Many of these are as beautiful as any in the world. The next year he composed three symphonies, one of which was played at a Clara Schumann concert under the direction of Mendelssohn at the famous Leipzig concert hall, the *Gewandhaus*.

Next, he turned to composing chamber music and later to choral writing, that is, music for many voices. His most important work of this type was called *Paradise and the Peri*.

Overwork and a nature that was always beset with worry contributed to signs of a nervous breakdown, which appeared after his return from a concert tour of Russia with Clara in 1844. Meanwhile, Mendelssohn had appointed him Professor of Composition at the Leipzig Conservatory. For a time he was obliged to give up all work, and he moved to Dresden, where he became friendly with Wagner at about the time that *Tannhauser* was first produced.

Gradually his health improved and he began to compose again. The subject of Faust had always fascinated him, so he set to work on *Scenes from Goethe's Faust*. In 1850 he was made conductor at Dusseldorf. The first year in this post was a happy one. He started a chamber music society, and did some composing. But once more his health broke. His memory failed him more and more, but in spite of this he completed his "Third Symphony," known as the *Rhenish* or *Rhine Symphony*. He became fired with

enthusiasm upon meeting the young Brahms, and one of the last and finest deeds of his life was to write an article which introduced the music of Brahms to the public in 1853.

"The next year he became so sick of mind that he asked to be placed in an institution. Here he died at the end of July, 1856. He was buried at Bonn, which was the birthplace of Beethoven — the man whose music he had always loved.

Now, when we hear Schumann's music, we are carried back to his world of romance and poetry, where he expressed his thoughts and fancies in music. If we listen carefully, we can hear his message.

-From *Famous Composers for Young People* by Burch and Wolcott

Robert Schumann

From his early boyhood to the final curtain of his life in the gloom and tragedy of a madhouse, Schumann sought to invest his music with the strong, deep and true sentiment that was preeminently a part of his own nature, to impress upon his time the abhorrence of pretentiousness, vulgarity and sentimentality that equally moved him, and to be the apostle of the true romantic spirit in music. He was one of the earliest and perhaps most eminent of the great romanticists. In critical faculty also he was unsurpassed in his epoch. "Greatest critic among musicians; greatest musician among critics" was the finding of his contemporaries.

Schumann was born in Zwickau, Saxony, and was christened Robert Alexander. Of substantial family and with no musical antecedents, his childhood proceeded normally until at the age of six he gave unmistakable evidence of astonishing musical susceptibility and intelligence. Robert's father, head of a book publishing firm, was a man of advanced and liberal ideas, and, though without musical leanings of his own, seems to have been more than favorably inclined to any development of his youngest child along artistic lines. Such opposition to a musical career as existed in this instance seems indeed to have been altogether on the mother's side. At all events, the one musician of authority in the little town was organist of the Marienkirche, and from him young Schumann had his first piano lessons. This modest man, Johann Gottfried Kuntsch by name, though self-taught and with many limitations, seems to have exercised a profound influence on Schumann's entire career. It was not long before the good man acknowledged that his pupil, still scarcely more than an infant, could learn no more from him, and it became necessary to look for more advanced instruction. To this end, Robert's father sought the great master of that day, Carl Maria von Weber, then living in Dresden. It seems, however, that though Weber signified his willingness to take charge of the boy, no definite arrangement was made, and for some time Robert was left to his own devices. He had commenced to compose small pieces at the age of seven; when nine years old he had an opportunity to hear the famous virtuoso, Moscheles, and was much impressed; the desire for a pianistic career became more and more fixed in his consciousness and he took every opportunity to improve his musical knowledge. His general education up to this time had been in private schools, but in 1820, when ten years old, he entered the "Gymnasium" (a name frequently applied in Europe to a preparatory school for college), and here for the next eight years he applied himself to various studies, at the

end of that time matriculating for the university. His interest in literature also grew apace during this period, becoming second only to his musical preoccupation. The romantic flights of Johann Paul Friedrich Richter (Jean Paul) and the poetry of Byron seem especially to have seized upon his imagination, firing him to an enthusiasm which, as far as the former is concerned at least, never waned. He indulged in certain abortive poetical attempts of his own, in addition to organizing a boys' orchestra among his young friends in the Gymnasium and composing a number of short pieces which seem to have met the fate of most youthful efforts of the kind.

At sixteen (1826), Schumann suffered the loss of his father, whose sympathetic friendship had been the mainstay of his musical aspirations, and for some years there ensued a struggle between obedience to his mother, whose heart was set on a law career for her son, and the overmastering impulse of his musical nature. It was only in 1830, after two wasted years of legal study at the University of Leipzig and in Heidelberg, that Frau Schumann, yielding to the inevitable, accepted the dictum of Friedrich Wieck, who had become Robert's friend and teacher in Leipzig, that music was the young man's career, from which it would be foolish and probably futile forcibly to restrain him.

Wieck was one of the most successful of the Leipzig pedagogues. His methods seem to have been decidedly individual, their most brilliant exponent being his own daughter Clara, who, at the time of Schumann's introduction to the Wieck household was a little girl in pigtails, nine or ten years of age. It would doubtless have surprised Schumann to have been told at that moment that eventually, after much heartburning, this child was to become his wife and helpmate through long years of struggle and ill health.

At this time, however, Schumann, with his natural flair for romance, was attracted by much more mature feminine charms. He developed an ardent attachment (wholly platonic, of course) to the wife of Professor Carus, of the University, who sang the songs he composed and otherwise encouraged him, in a manner more motherly than otherwise, to try his wings in larger flights. There is also record of a violent but fleeting infatuation with Clara Kurrer, daughter of one of his father's old friends whom he visited in Augsburg in 1828.

The social life at Friedrich Wieck's house and the musical activities entered into with his friends there gradually became the focal point of Schumann's inspiration, and

following his mother's abandonment of opposition to music he threw himself with passionate enthusiasm into both composition and preparation for a career as piano virtuoso. In the latter he tried to proceed too fast, with the usual disastrous consequences. He devised in secret a form of harness for one of his fingers, in the belief that this would be a shortcut to the overcoming of certain difficulties of technique. With this he practiced, unknown to his teacher, with the result that he suddenly found himself with a permanently crippled right hand. The finger gradually recovered in some degree its elasticity, but there could be no mistaking the fact that Schumann's prospects as a great concert pianist were ruined for all time.

There was now plainly but one road for Schumann to follow—that of composition, and to this he applied himself with all his strength. He had a modest income of his own and, though it could not permanently supply his needs, it tided him over this difficult time. He still had much studying to do, and for this he applied to Heinrich Dorn, then conductor of the Leipzig Opera, a thoroughly sound teacher and critic, from whom Schumann learned very much of value in the elements of composition. Not all of his time was spent in study, however. Among other vacations at this period was a trip through northern Italy, the romantic aspect of which seems to have filled him with keen delight. His intimacy with the Wieck family continued, his first two compositions were published—none too successfully—and his first essay at criticism (the famous declamation hailing Chopin as a genius) appeared.

The year 1832 found Schumann back in his native town of Zwickau for an extended stay. Here his earliest attempt at a symphony (apparently never published) was performed in part, with scant success. The following year he was back in Leipzig, his affairs at a loose end. Definite plans for the establishment of a periodical devoted to musical criticism, long a cherished ambition began to occupy him, and in 1834, despite an attack of nervous fever which prostrated him for weeks, the first number of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* made its appearance. The new publication, dedicated among other things to an incisive condemnation of the mawkish flattery of mediocrity in both performance and composition then prevalent in Germany, was fortunate in its editors, and seems to have succeeded from the start.

Meanwhile young Clara Wieck had been growing up—as children have a habit of doing. From a child prodigy she had developed into one of the most accomplished and famous pianists of Europe, in addition to being a young woman of exceptional personal charm. About the year 1835, it seems, Schumann began to be pleasurably

aware of this change. But father Wieck also began to make certain observations, and high as was his regard for Schumann as an artist and a friend, the latter's prospects as a son-in-law did not seem impressive, so, from this time commenced one of the strangest conflicts of its kind of which there is any record.

As an opening gun Wieck resigned from associate editorship in the *Neue Zeitschrift*. A ban on visits and correspondence followed, and was so far successful that the young people were effectually separated, and for some time estranged through a misunderstanding fostered by the father. A letter from Schumann was finally smuggled to Clara, however, which set matters right as far as the two were concerned. Schumann seems indeed to have recognized a modicum of reasonableness in Wieck's opposition at this time, as he abandoned Leipzig for a while and went to Vienna with a view to bettering his worldly prospects. It was of no use, however; Clara and Leipzig were forever drawing him back; Wieck became ever more bitter and slanderous. Finally, in 1840, Clara left her father, taking refuge with her mother, who had been divorced from Wieck for many years; Schumann, returning to Leipzig, started court proceedings, resolved upon obtaining legal determination of Wieck's right to prevent the marriage. After much heartbreaking delay and recourse to every legal expedient by Wieck, a verdict was given in favor of Schumann and Clara, and the two were married. It may be noted here that some years afterwards Wieck experienced a change of heart and sought a reconciliation with the Schumanns, which was partially effected.

Shortly before his marriage, Schumann, though not yet thirty, had been accorded the degree of Ph.D. by the University of Jena. His compositions had by this time attained respectable proportions both numerically and in importance. Now, with the responsibilities of marriage, Schumann set to work as never before. Many of his best songs date from this period; he also did his first really serious work for orchestra, three of his four symphonies being written before the end of the following year. In 1842, he composed much of the best of his chamber music, though hampered to some extent by a recurrence of his nervous trouble, which in fact from that time seems never wholly to have left him. Of his musical friendships, that with Mendelssohn, whom he met first in 1835, seems to have been the firmest, though later Brahms was to become his special enthusiasm. Liszt and Wagner, though showing themselves very friendly, appear never to have appealed strongly to him. Schubert had died in Schumann's nineteenth year, the two never meeting, but Schumann's championing of Schubert's music is one of the bright pages of musical

history; to it we owe the discovery and preservation of some of the greatest of the Schubert works.

For four years the Schumanns lived quietly in Leipzig, Clara Schumann making occasional concert tours, one extending into Russia. In 1844, they moved to Dresden; Schumann's nervous condition had become intensified and it was thought that complete change of surroundings was the one thing needful.

In a material way the change was not auspicious. In Leipzig, Schumann had been at least well known; the city moreover was, as a center of art and culture, much more important than Dresden. Wagner was having his own heartbreaks in Dresden at that time and could at least have given Schumann some good advice, but the latter remained unresponsive to Wagner's several advances. But there was no going back for Schumann and the production of his perhaps most considerable work, the *C Major Symphony*, Op. 61, shows a certain renewed impulse and interest. He also completed his one piano concerto and the opera *Genoveva*, of which the latter, in spite of beautiful music, failed as a stage work and is now almost forgotten. Several concert tours with his wife were undertaken, and seem to have been very successful, but it became increasingly evident that Schumann's health had become permanently impaired, though about 1848 there was a marked and protracted improvement, which Schumann took advantage of to compose some of the works now regarded as his best. But the nervousness and unrest with which Schumann was temperamentally beset made it impossible for him in his later days to be long satisfied in any place. In 1850, he removed to Düsseldorf, where he had made arrangements to conduct the local symphony orchestra for a series of subscription concerts, and it was in this engagement that the one real failure of his life occurred. He resigned the appointment within a short time.

It is not impossible that his failure as a conductor was a contributing factor in Schumann's final catastrophe. In 1853, he became subject to hallucinations which profoundly alarmed his family and friends, though he recovered sufficiently to launch the career of Johannes Brahms, then a youngster of twenty, with a eulogistic article contributed to his old paper, the *Neue Zeitschrift*. During the following year a complete nervous breakdown occurred, in the course of which he one day evaded his attendants and threw himself into the Rhine. From that time confinement in an asylum in the town of Endenich became necessary; his life ended there on July 29, 1856.

Schumann's compositions cover practically every field of musical writing. In song composition only Schubert may be said to have surpassed him, and Brahms, Robert Franz, Hugo Wolf and Richard Strauss to be seriously estimable as approaching him in creative power. His contributions to orchestral literature are of great and enduring worth, as are also the concerto, sonatas and superb *Etudes Symphoniques* for piano.

-From *Music Masters in Miniature* by George C. Jell