Introduction: raising Schumann

In May 1853, Robert Schumann's concertmaster and future biographer, Wilhelm Josef von Wasielewski, visited the composer and found him reading a book about his latest obsession, 'Tischrücken' or table-tipping. Wasielewski reported:

> To my enquiry as to the subject of his book, he replied in an elevated tone, 'Oh! Don't you know anything about table-tipping?' 'Of course!' I said jokingly. Upon this, his eyes, generally half-shut and in-turned, opened wide, his pupils dilated convulsively, and with a peculiar, ghost-like look, he said, eerily and slowly, 'The tables know all'. When I saw that he was in earnest, rather than confuse him I fell into his humour, and he soon grew calm. He then called his second daughter, and began to experiment with her aid and a small table, which accented the beginning of Beethoven's C-minor symphony.[1]

The previous month, Schumann had written to Ferdinand Hiller:

> We tipped the table yesterday for the first time. Wonderful power! Just think! It delayed longer than usual with the answer: at last it began – ♪ ♪ ♪ | 𝅗𝅥 – but rather slowly at first. When I said, 'But the tempo is faster, dear table', it hastened to beat the true time. When I asked if it could tell me the number I was thinking of, it gave it correctly as three. We were all filled with wonder.[2]

Schumann's enthusiasm was such that he wrote an essay on the topic, now lost. He conducted séances with his friends, his children and guests, including visitors from out of town (one of which, later in the year, was Johannes Brahms). Clara was pleased that her often depressed husband became more 'jovial [and] quite pleasantly excited' at this time, writing in her diary, 'Robert is quite enchanted by these marvellous powers and promised [the table] a new dress (i.e. a new tablecloth).'[3]

Schumann's sudden interest in table-tipping poses some invigorating problems for commentators. Part of the challenge is the age-old conflict between those who believe in the supernatural and those who put their faith in more rational explanations.[4] Many of Schumann's contemporaries were sceptical about séances, crediting their messages to well-timed kicks on the table legs rather than to forces from the other side. Some even considered

credulity to indicate psychological instability, a judgement particularly critical for Schumann. Wasielewski and Clara's biographer Berthold Litzmann pronounced the composer's interest in the 'wonders' of the séance the first manifestation of his mental decline. More recently Peter Ostwald has explained Schumann's fascination with the occult as a means to explain his psychosis to himself. Whether we decide to take a benign view towards Schumann's involvement with séances or treat it as something more sinister, it parallels out the difficulties and ambiguities that confront one when attempting to engage with his last works.

As with the table's messages, not everybody is convinced by the late music. Some hear its repetitions, thematic allusions and fractured forms as clumsy, even impotent. Others describe the scores as being like piano reductions or organ transcriptions, encoding music to be played elsewhere. Much as Schumann listened for Beethoven's spirit in the tapped rhythm of the Fifth Symphony, we tend to filter the late music through knowledge of the composer's biography, especially our awareness of his illness – however vague and unscientific our understanding of it may be. Thus Schumann's late music is discussed in terms of mental and creative failure and exhaustion, of an inability to communicate with the outside world.

Biography's grip on Schumann reception and scholarship has been so tight that to reject it outright would be to deny its huge influence on our historical and musical understanding. It is worth stressing, though, that this is not a straightforward biography or life-and-works study of late Schumann.[5] Some biographical and historical context is given where appropriate, and there is a chronology of Schumann's last years in the Appendix. However, I do not follow the composer's life in strict chronological order or attempt to cover every aspect of it. Instead I have grouped the late pieces according to genre, with the intention that it will aid understanding of his musical style. Nor do I intend to uncritically redeem Schumann's last works. My main concern is with discussing the late pieces in a way that helps explain the music, while also interrogating the values behind its reception in the concert hall and in scholarly literature. In so doing, I hope to make clear the extent to which the negative stance towards this music results less from something inherent in the works themselves than from listeners' changing aesthetic values, particularly those to do with musical representation and form.

The division of an artist's career into periods is always contentious. On the surface Schumann's creative life seems easier to divide than most; there is the change from solo piano pieces to song in 1840, the year of his marriage to Clara; then his declaration of a 'new way' of composing in 1845; and, finally, the move from Dresden to Düsseldorf to take up the post of Municipal

Music Director at the beginning of September 1850, now generally agreed to mark the beginning of his late period.[6] Over the next three years he wrote some fifty works, many of which received critical acclaim. As Richard Pohl pointed out long ago, Schumann would have had little inkling in 1850 that his life would end six years later, and many of the works produced around the time of his move to Düsseldorf suggest a renewed creativity.[7]

In the aftermath of the 1848–9 revolutions Schumann had been claimed as a 'democratic' composer and the rightful heir to Beethoven by his former journal, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*.[8] His status as a national institution – taking Mendelssohn's place as Germany's leading composer – seemed confirmed by the simultaneous performance of the closing scene from *Faust* in Weimar, Dresden and Leipzig as part of the Goethe centenary celebrations in 1849. There was a series of concerts devoted to Schumann's music in Leipzig in March 1852 (which included performances of *Der Rose Pilgerfahrt*, the *Manfred* Overture, the Third Symphony, the A minor Violin Sonata and the G minor Piano Trio); at the Lower Rhine Festival in 1853; and reasonably successful tours with Clara around Europe. Famous friends and colleagues such as Ferdinand Hiller, Joseph Joachim, Jenny Lind, Anton Rubinstein, and Julius Stockhausen also performed his works on tour. Throughout the 1850s there appeared articles considering his biography and reputation, including monographs on *Das Paradies und die Peri* and the *Szenen aus Goethes Faust*. As a result of his spreading reputation and the commercial success of his *Hausmusik* and works for children, such as the *Album für die Jugend*, Schumann's income from publications of his music increased. The arrival of the twenty-one-year-old Johannes Brahms at the Schumanns' home in September 1853 even provided an heir apparent.

Little of this positive biographical context is remembered on considering the late period. Instead, as mentioned, critics focus on Schumann's final illness. He suffered from depression and what might be described as manic episodes throughout his career, and was concerned from an early age that he might succumb to mental illness. The deterioration of his health in the early 1850s was probably exacerbated by stress from work. His relationship with the Düsseldorf authorities soured during his second season as he criticized the Gesangverein's commitment and the Allgemeiner Musikverein's choice of programmes. They, in turn, began to question the quality of his conducting, leading to his resignation at the end of November 1853. During a subsequent tour of the Netherlands, Schumann suffered a recurrence of the aural disturbances that had worried him during a depressive period in the autumn of the previous year. It was not only his conducting duties that were proving stressful. While he was virtually guaranteed good reviews

from his immediate circle, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* was rapidly becoming a mouthpiece for Wagnerites who were increasingly anti-Schumann. At the beginning of February 1854 Schumann discovered that 'Hoplit', author of a rebuttal of his 'Neue Bahnen' article heralding Brahms as the saviour of German music, was none other than his friend and librettist Richard Pohl.[9] News that an essay by Friedrich Hinrich that claimed Schumann's best days were over ('When we speak of Schumann, we mean the composer of the older works, approximately up until *Peri*. Since then, as can unfortunately no longer be disguised, he has declined, becoming mannered in the most melancholy sense of the word')[10] was about to be published as a separate pamphlet prompted Schumann to complain: 'Does he think that he can kill off all my post-*Peri* compositions with this pinprick? *Manfred*, the *Spanisches Liederspiel*, the three Trios, the Second Sonata for violin and piano, and the Second and Third Symphonies?'[11] A pinprick it might only have been, but that evening, 10 February 1854, Schumann's aural hallucinations returned in worsened form, over the next few days changing from sustained pitches to imagined music, including the chorale *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott* for distant wind band. On 17 February he wrote down a theme he later claimed was dictated to him by the spirit of Schubert, on which he wrote a set of variations (*Thema mit Variationen für das Pianoforte*). Although he seemed to recover from this episode, ten days later he suffered a relapse and asked, for Clara's protection, to be taken to an asylum. On the afternoon of 27 February, at the height of Carnival season, Schumann slipped out of the house and leapt from a bridge into the Rhine. Fishermen who had noticed his odd behaviour (he was wearing his dressing-gown and had offered his handkerchief as payment at the toll booth) immediately saved him and prevented him from jumping from their boat back into the water. The bedraggled composer was led back home through the Carnival crowds.

Again, Schumann demanded to be institutionalized, and at the beginning of March he was admitted to a private sanatorium in Endenich, a suburb of Bonn, run by Dr Franz Richarz. Although some of the treatments he received there now seem barbaric, Richarz's establishment was regarded as one of the more progressive and humane available. Schumann was allowed to take walks in the area, and had access to a piano and manuscript paper; he also received visitors. The one person he was not allowed to see was Clara. There has long been a tendency to vilify Clara's response to Schumann's incarceration.[12] It seems a little unfair to criticize Clara for following the doctor's recommendations and for her busy schedule; after all, she had to support her family and protect their reputation. Her decision to suppress

certain works, such as the Violin Concerto, the Third Violin Sonata and the accompaniments to Bach's Cello Suites, and later to destroy the Five Romances for Cello was taken with the guidance of Joachim and Brahms, and was doubtless driven by a belief that they did not do her husband's talent justice.

Certainly Clara's suppression of these pieces has been taken as confirmation that Schumann's creative powers waned, the cause of which invariably is taken to be his mental illness. Schumann's 'madness' was never considered to have increased his music's profundity or inventiveness, as was often claimed to be the case with Romantic artists, but to have resulted in a 'darkening' of mood and ultimately creative failure. Félix Clément declared the Third Symphony, Overtures and Choral Ballades as having been 'clearly conceived and created under the influence of his diseased mind' and August Reissmann attributed the formlessness and chaos he perceived in Schumann's later compositions to his illness.[13] Yet these are not the works Schumann refused to have published, but ones that had enjoyed some success when the composer was still alive. As the nature of Schumann's illness became more widely known – most obviously through the publication of biographies such as Wasielewski's – symptoms began to be heard throughout his oeuvre. The *alter egos* of Florestan and Eusebius in his criticism and piano cycles have been diagnosed as manifestations of bipolar or even multiple personality disorder; the 'inner voices' or 'voices from the distance' of the *Humoreske* and *Novelletten* are thought to portray the composer's aural disturbances; the obsessive repetitions of rhythms and motives to represent the depressive's constant rocking motion. The pattern of intense creative episodes followed by unproductive periods is considered indicative of manic depression or bipolar disorder.[14] Whether or not these diagnoses are correct, they indicate how strongly we filter our appreciation of the composer's music through knowledge of his illness: discussing *Papillons* or the *Gesänge der Frühe*, we always seem to be talking about late Schumann.

Late works themselves are often explained as untimely meditations, according to which view history had yet to catch up with the artist's achievements. The models for a late period, as Edward Said wrote, often are based on reconciliation (Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale*; Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*, Verdi's *Falstaff*) or on apotheosis (Rembrandt, Matisse, Bach, Wagner).[15] Some, such as Ibsen or Beethoven, produced more intransigent late works not appreciated by their contemporaries but now considered to be their most profound and technically far-reaching. Even Schubert's last compositions today are described as bathed in the glow of the 'golden months' before his death.[16] Schumann's late music, however,

remains on the fringes. This has to do with the nature of his illness and with his musical style.

When Joachim received from Schumann, then at the asylum in Endenich, a package of the Romances for cello, the *Gesänge der Frühe* and the Third Violin Sonata, what would he have made of this music, the first of which was subsequently destroyed by Clara and the last not published until 1956? We can only guess about the Romances, of course, while the *Gesänge der Frühe* and Third Violin Sonata are very different in their approach to musical structure and expression; the former favouring simplicity and unorthodox forms, the latter using sonata form for its first and last movements and including a great deal of virtuosic writing for the violinist. There is little sense of there being a consistent late style. Indeed, John Daverio, the most influential recent American scholar of Schumann, describes the composer's later music as recapitulating, 'in microcosm, the achievements of an entire creative life'.[17] Thus 'it embraces a broad diversity of styles'; the products, according to Daverio, 'of a varied array of personas', that range from the lyricism of lieder and the public style of symphonic works to Schumann as storyteller (oratorios, choral-orchestral ballades, and declamation ballads), ecclesiastic (Mass and Requiem, and the final song of the Lenau cycle, op. 90), collector (arrangements and collections), pedagogue (contrapuntal works and *Hausmusik* for children and adults), and Davidsbündler (esoteric style – late chamber and piano music). In fact, these 'personae' are genres or types rather than anything to do with musical style *per se*. I am not arguing here for some kind of musical style that exists only as a configuration of notes – as already mentioned, it would be impossible to disentangle attitudes to the music from knowledge of Schumann's life or, indeed, the world around him ('Just as the pearl is the oyster's affliction, so style is perhaps the discharge from a deeper wound', suggested Flaubert in a letter of 1852). Instead, I want to ask a slightly different question about the music from the 1850s; namely, beyond their chronological appearance, why do we hear one piece as late and another as early, or even mature?

To talk about a composer's late style these days inevitably raises the spectre of the philosopher Theodor W. Adorno, whose writings on Beethoven's late style are fast becoming the model for an artist's final period.[18] Adorno's thoughts will surface throughout this book, but never unproblematically, for Schumann's late style seems to have been conceived in almost entirely different terms. According to Said's interpretation of Adorno, in his third period Beethoven 'abandons communication with the established social order of which he is part and achieves a contradictory, alienated relationship with

it', expressed through 'a peculiar amalgam of subjectivity and convention'.[19] Beethoven's late music is like a fractured landscape, torn apart in time: 'In the history of art', Adorno concludes, 'late works are the catastrophes'.[20] On the surface, Schumann's late works have a contradictory, alienated relationship with society; the composer is often described as having 'withdrawn' from the world, and his music is accused of expressive emptiness. As will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters, conceptions of subjectivity and the relationship to convention in the late music are key. However, Schumann's late works seem not to be catastrophes in Adorno's sense. They do not convey such a drastic sense of ending, of the artist as commentator on the disastrous present. Rather, Schumann's untimeliness is generally thought to result from an inability to engage with the present sufficiently to critique it. That lack of engagement results not in a meaningful fragmentation of musical discourse, as Adorno finds in Beethoven, but in creative failure.

But perhaps we can turn this around and say that it is not Schumann who fails, but that the modernist model for late style that Adorno proposes through the example of Beethoven fails him. While many elements of late Schumann can be compared to his more 'progressive' contemporaries (such as Wagner) and some harmonic and thematic traits prefigure the musical language of later generations (most obviously that of Brahms and Hugo Wolf, but also French composers at the *fin de siècle*), the challenge of late Schumann is in many ways its simplicity and, at times, its sentimentality. These are not aspects that are easily theorized. They also defy attempts to align narratives of historical progress with increasing artistic complexity. However, by sometimes writing 'simple' music in the 1850s, Schumann was not being untimely but rather participating in the culture around him; a world of choral societies, music festivals, and nationalist *Volkstümlichkeit*. In part this book hopes to show that examining the late works as products of their time and as they were judged by their time is as useful as the application of any redemptive post-Adornian theory. It might make the music's evaluation more problematic, by taking away the safety net of posthumous apologies, but also helps explain not only something about Schumann but also about the people – performers, composers, critics and audiences – around him.

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As mentioned, this book considers Schumann's music from the 1850s primarily by genre; thus the first chapter discusses the songs and the second choral ballades. The third chapter is concerned with the composer's collecting habits, as they are manifest in the editions and collections he prepared of his own works and that of other composers and writers. The final three

chapters concentrate on instrumental works: number four examines the orchestral music (including concertos), number five chamber music, and number six pieces for piano. There are cross-references between chapters, but they are not necessarily to be read in order or all together.

A brief overview of the chapters' topics and themes beyond their grouping by genre, though, might be helpful here. Inevitably Schumann's works from the 1850s recall and continue his earlier interests. Just prior to leaving Dresden for Düsseldorf in the summer of 1850, Schumann composed a number of lieder, a flurry of composition that resembles that of the famous 'year of song' in 1840. The later lieder may not enjoy the popularity of *Dichterliebe*, *Frauenliebe und Leben* and the *Eichendorff Liederkreis*, but they do revisit some of their poetic themes, and provide a useful starting point for consideration of how we might formulate the difference between Schumann early and late. In the settings of Nikolaus Lenau, the emotional darkness of the poems is matched by a declamatory style of vocal writing and some startling harmonic and expressive moments. The slightly later treatments of poems by Elisabeth Kulmann and Maria Stuart are more contained; the cycles explore a much smaller harmonic range, and the piano's motivic vocabulary is more limited, almost as if accompanying recitative.

The Kulmann and Maria Stuart lieder bring to the fore questions about Schumann's choice of poets; their texts are far more sentimental than those he had once chosen from Heine or Eichendorff. They are closer in spirit to Chamisso or Kerner and, in a similar manner to recent discussions of *Frauenliebe und Leben*, are perhaps best served by being considered in the context of contemporary social relations and the fashion for sentimental literature. It also seems necessary to explain Schumann's choral music in historical context; the reason for the relative obscurity of pieces such as the oratorio *Der Rose Pilgerfahrt* or the four choral ballades is partly because local choral societies tend to perform a different repertoire. In many ways, Schumann's choral works from the 1850s were written specifically for the community he served as Music Director in Düsseldorf. This was a time of nation building, particularly in the Rhineland, and while the composer's personal commitment to the ideals of the 1848–9 uprisings has sometimes been questioned (unlike Wagner, he did not fight on the barricades but retreated to the country), recent scholars such as Reinhard Kapp have argued that revolutionary political sympathies can be detected in the music and in his decision to set text by poets such as Ludwig Uhland.[21] While Kapp claims that Schumann was a 'political author' whose later works provide a running commentary on the 1848–9 revolutions, Daverio warns against the 'blanket politicization' of Schumann's compositional

output between 1848–53, saying that it 'only clouds what ideally should stand out in bold relief'.[22] It is fair to say, however, that Schumann was deeply invested in creating specifically German art, as is apparent from his interest in literature to the *volkstümlich* aspects of pieces as diverse as the Third Symphony and the projected Luther oratorio to the chamber music, and even, arguably, to the theme of redemption that recurs in his choral works, from the *Szenen aus Goethes Faust* to, of course, the Mass and Requiem.[23]

National historical consciousness is an issue that also is crucial to consideration of Schumann's collecting habits. Around 1850 Schumann began to put his library and compositions in order, and edited some of his earlier works, a process that reveals much about his evolving style and also about his historical and educational concerns. Further projects from around this time include the continuation of the *Dichtergarten* project, a collection of passages on music by his favourite authors: Goethe, Jean Paul, and Shakespeare. Schumann also completed piano accompaniments for Bach's Sonatas and Partitas and Cello Suites, and continued his engagement with Baroque harmony and counterpoint through various fugal exercises. Finally, he brought together some of his earlier piano works to create the *Albumblätter* and *Bunte Blätter*, *Hausmusik* complemented by a series of piano works for children.

The music for children was pedagogical in intent, which goes some way to explain its simplicity. Yet aspects of its form and content are shared with pieces for more high-minded aesthetic consumption, making an intriguing connection between late style and the naïveté of youth. A further, more complex evocation of childish realms is found in the chamber music based on ideas of fairy-tales, the *Märchenerzählungen* and *Märchenbilder*.

Not all of the late music is simple, of course – and that which is cannot always easily be understood. Throughout this book mention is made of the different historical ideologies behind the interpretation of Schumann's final works; in other words, whether they are thought Romantic, classical, or even – guided by late Beethoven – modernist. As discussed further in Chapter 4, Schumann declared that he changed his compositional method in the mid-1840s; he began to sketch and plan, rather than letting music pour out from poetic inspiration. This 'new manner', together with his turn to large-scale symphonic forms, has been characterized as a more 'objective' and classical approach, in contrast to the 'subjective' and Romantic attitude of before.

Whether or not these binaries hold true, it is striking that in comparison to the earlier music, for which many experimental Romantic literary models have been suggested – from E. T. A. Hoffmann to Friedrich Schlegel

and, of course, Jean Paul – few have been offered for the late works. At various points in the book I speculate why this might be, in part by experimenting with some possible candidates, such as Friedrich Hölderlin in the discussion of the chamber music, and Adalbert Stifter with regard to Schumann's collecting habits. I also consider whether we need to use different musical models in order to comprehend late Schumann, elements of which seem close to the oeuvre of composers such as Niels Gade. A further influence might have been one surprisingly overlooked: that of Brahms. Schumann's encouragement and influence over the younger composer has long been acknowledged, but rarely in terms of the late works and not often as a reciprocal process. While I argue in the following pages that Daverio's tendency to focus on the integrity of motivic working in, say, the Third Symphony, is primarily a means by which he tries to 'redeem' the late style through its implicit association with Brahmsian developing variation, there is something to be said for the approach, for it highlights aspects of Schumann's music that we do not find so much in his earlier works.

However dismissive Brahms might have been about Schumann's influence over him, it is apparent that his music made an impact on him artistically and personally. The E flat major piano theme with variations completed just before Schumann's suicide attempt was the source for a set of variations for Brahms (for piano duet, op. 23), who also reworked the first of the *Gesänge der Frühe* for unaccompanied choir. The music for Byron's *Manfred* – which was written in 1848 but that in many ways was strongly associated with the composer's illness – was recalled in Brahms's First Symphony. The way in which Schumann's music haunts Brahms's suggests that his spirit could be raised, much as he had tried to do with Beethoven at the séance. The question of Schumann's spirit is primary for the understanding of his late works for both listeners and performers – behind most reviews of performances of the late works lies the question whether they have accessed or raised the spirit of Schumann. A few days after his suicide attempt, on 6 March 1854, Clara and Joachim performed the Third Violin Sonata at a friend's house in Düsseldorf. Clara commented:

> We played Robert's Third Sonata in A-minor, and today we both played it just with the spirit it requires. I had already made it a part of me but Joachim could not really get into its spirit last time in Hanover. Today he was enthusiastic and I too. – This is the only thing that can soothe me – his music!

We might not all find consolation in the Third Violin Sonata and, actually, Clara later decided the work should not be published, suggesting that, if